Religious Identity-Inconsistent Attending: Its Correlates and Political Implications

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The foundation of religious measurement in surveys presumes that individual religious affiliation ("What is your present religion, if any?") accurately describes the religious community in which respondents are involved. But what if it doesn't? In a recent survey of 4,000 Americans, we asked whether their current congregation matches their religious identity and about a fifth of Americans indicated that it does not. We document the degree of this inconsistency, its correlates, and its implications, focusing primarily on the politics that congregants are exposed to from clergy and the attitudes they hold about salient political matters. The identity-inconsistent attenders often vary significantly from identity-consistent attenders, which serves to introduce considerable measurement error in the use of a religious tradition measure to depict American religion. The results suggest that salient disagreement induces a sizable population to migrate to a congregation outside their religious identity.

Keywords: political disagreement, religious identity, religious tradition, religious switching, worship attendance.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists rely heavily on religious classification as a key variable in research, yet accurate measurement of religious affiliation is fraught with inaccuracy and, as we will show, may not be a measure of affiliation at all for some. The dominant strategy for religious classification in social science scholarship utilizes responses from large, cross-sectional surveys (e.g., the American National Election Study [ANES] and the General Social Survey [GSS]) that capture self-reported denominational affiliation. Several classification schemes use these denominational indicators to sort respondents into larger, meaningful categories (e.g., Smith 1990; Steensland et al. 2000) along with schemes used to target smaller, yet important cleavages within religious traditions (e.g., Garneau and Schwadel 2013; Shelton and Cobb 2018).

While widely used in social science scholarship, this denominational assignment strategy is mired with methodological issues. Some of these schemes drop respondents who do not fit neatly in established categories (see Burge and Djupe 2021). Additionally, survey respondents often do not know their exact denominational affiliation—in part, because religious literacy is markedly low among Americans (Prothero 2007). Furthermore, asking survey-takers about their

religious affiliations in different ways can elicit disparate responses (McCourt and Taylor 1976; Smith 1990).

We believe that these measurement difficulties stem from a fundamental theoretical problem—the assumption that large-order religious bodies are more or less coherent and homogeneous in their makeup, that we can understand American religion by careful classification. As we discuss below, this may have been true at one point in U.S. history when ethnocultural boundaries hemmed in religious belonging. However, a variety of forces including mobility (Sherkat 2014), the extent of denominational disagreement (e.g., the recent schism in the United Methodist Church), and the rise in nondenominational (Burge 2022a), undercut assumptions about coherent religious organizations and have allowed religious affiliation and identity to drift apart for some. Is the reltrad scheme reaching the end of its usefulness?

That is, the onerous task of religious classification is exacerbated by the fact that religious mobility is common among Americans (Loveland 2003; Sherkat 1991; Sherkat 2001). Theoretical work in the sociology of religion posits that the decentralized nature of religion in the United States leads to a great deal of sorting and switching where congregants use individual tastes to match with congregations in a larger "religious economy" (Finke and Stark 2005; Stark and Finke 2000). Potential sources for religious mobility stem from historical/structural factors (Bibby 1997; Wuthnow 1988), changes in social networks (Musick and Wilson 1995; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Stark and Bainbridge 1985), and both theological and political incongruence (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018; Hout and Fisher 2002; Hout and Greely 1987). While the preponderance of literature on mobility focuses on denominational movement, other research shows that congregational mobility is more common with 15–20 percent leaving their congregation every 3–6 months (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). Moreover, the research on congregational mobility suggests that many congregants are drawing on personal preferences to "church shop" in an open religious market, which may or may not align with the religious affiliation that they end up reporting in surveys (e.g., Wuthnow 2007).

Given the stated difficulties in religious measurement and the prevalence of religious mobility, we ask an essential question: To what extent is reported religious/denominational affiliation on surveys inconsistent with the affiliation of the congregation people primarily attend? Much of the research employing common religious measurement schemes operates under a fundamental assumption that there is congruence between reported religious affiliation individuals indicate on surveys and the affiliation of the congregation they attend. In this article, we challenge this fundamental premise and suggest that, in some cases, what is widely regarded as a religious affiliation measure (religious tradition or "reltrad") is actually capturing religious identity. That is, if the denominational/reltrad measure is inconsistent with the affiliation of the congregation they attend, then the denominational/reltrad measure is capturing an identity since it exists independent of affiliation with an organization. To put it in another way, typical denominational/reltrad measures are only measures of affiliation when they are consistent with the congregation's affiliation. We refer to this potential as religious identity-inconsistent attending.

Drawing on survey data from more than 4,000 Americans gathered in February, 2022 and 2,300 in March, 2023, we examine the prevalence of those who report inconsistency between their personal religious identity and the religious affiliation of their congregation and explore correlates between this inconsistency and a variety of factors. Furthermore, as one way to demonstrate its importance, we investigate political dimensions of inconsistent attendees, focusing on what kinds of political messages they frequently encounter during services as well as their individual attitudes on a variety of issues.

The results demonstrate a notable degree of identity-inconsistent attending. A full one-fifth of Americans indicate that their current congregation's affiliation does not match the religious identity they report for themselves (18 percent in the second survey). Consistent with work on religious mobility, various factors including age, geographical mobility, religiously diverse networks, and dissatisfaction with the congregation significantly correlate with this inconsistency.

Interestingly, results for political factors indicate that the inconsistent hold distinctive attitudes in many religious traditions and report hearing different issues addressed by their clergy. We conclude with a discussion of the larger implications of religious identity-inconsistency when considering the arduous task of advancing the state of religious measurement.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS (MIS)CLASSIFICATION

Social science has been struggling with how to measure and classify religion in the United States for at least 60 years. In his 1955 landmark study of tolerance among Americans, sociologist Samuel Stouffer realized that including all Protestants in a single category was an unwise methodological choice, but he only had crude tools to subdivide Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans. Using the survey questions that he had, he created two categories – northern and southern Protestants – as a way to approximate the differences that existed between what we now label mainline and evangelical Protestants, respectively (Stouffer 1955). Stouffer's hunch that Protestants are not all the same was built upon by Glock and Stark (1965) and further codified with the advent of the GSS in the early 1970s.

While surveys up until that point typically only asked one broad question about religious tradition (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, and Jew), Glock and Stark, followed by the GSS, employed a branching scheme where if one indicated that they were a Protestant, they were then prompted to choose from a menu of denomination-like groupings such as Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian. These questions were then used to create a much more nuanced scheme of religious classification that was developed by Green et al. (1996) and codified as reltrad in 2000 (Steensland et al. 2000).

However, just because the GSS began asking whether someone was a Southern Baptist or an American Baptist does not mean that social scientists were now able to easily sort Americans into clearly delineated religious traditions. In fact, it may have induced even more uncertainty. For instance, if a respondent generally had a sense that they were Methodists but did not know if they were a member of a United or Free Methodist Church, they were placed in the "Methodist, Don't Know Which" category, which makes classification difficult. In the 2018 GSS, for instance, 122 of those taking the survey said that they were southern Baptists, but 144 indicated that they were Baptists but could not pin down the specific type of Baptist church they attended.

There are additional factors that may muddy our understanding of religious classification and its cause. For instance, a simple question-wording change from "what is your current religion" to "what is your religious preference" can affect an American's ability to describe their religious affiliation to survey administrators (McCourt and Taylor 1976; Smith 1990). Moreover, surveyors must assume that respondents have a basic grasp of the wording that is employed both in the question as well as the response option—an assumption that is becoming more tenuous each year. This is likely due to the fact that religious literacy is incredibly low in the United States, with a majority of Americans having no concept of historical events like the Protestant Reformation (Prothero 2007).

Likely because of this illiteracy, scholars have cast serious doubts on using such a basic term as "Protestant" as a response option on surveys. Smith and Kim found that, "even among Protestants, Protestantism is not most people's primary religious identification" (2005:213). When offered the choice of an open-ended response to a question about religious affiliation, many Americans will describe their denomination (Episcopalian, Methodist, and Baptist) before they indicate that they are a Protestant Christian.

This lack of understanding of basic American religious terminology comes into sharper focus with recent work that concluded that Americans are much more likely to prefer the term "Christian" compared to "Protestant." Based on recent survey data, Burge (2022b) found that 21 percent of respondents choose "Christian", while only 18 percent said that they were "Protestant." This divide between Christians and Protestants grew even larger among the youngest Americans. For

instance, among 20-year olds, just 3 percent said that they were Protestants, while 20 percent described themselves as Christians. Even when accounting for factors such as race and education, the gap between choosing Christian and Protestant did not narrow significantly among survey respondents under 45 years old (Burge 2022a).

Moreover, there is also mounting evidence that the widely used reltrad scheme contains serious flaws when it comes to sorting out nondenominational Protestants. In its original conception, nondenominationals who attended at least once a month were sorted into the evangelical category. However, if they attended less than that threshold, they were left unclassified and omitted from analysis. This is a growing concern as the share of "unclassifieds" has risen to over 6 percent in more recent waves of the GSS (Burge and Djupe 2021). Thus, quantitative analyses of religious traditions using reltrad have been dropping, needlessly in Burge and Djupe's view, hundreds of respondents in recent GSS waves.

Finally, there has been renewed attention to using self-identification as the primary measurement tool for sorting survey respondents into the evangelical category (Burge and Lewis 2018; Lewis and De Bernardo 2010; Margolis 2022; see also Smith et al. 2018). However, recent analysis concludes that evangelicalism as a measurement concept no longer has the pure theological connotations that researchers often assumed it had—instead it seems to denote a political or cultural marker for some who describe themselves as "born again" or evangelical (Burge 2021).

IDENTITY-INCONSISTENT ATTENDING

Taken together, there is clear evidence from a variety of data sources and across several decades that the average American has a rather weak grasp on their current religious affiliation. Our current project takes a different tack and focuses on what respondents can know with at least some certainty: Does the house of worship they currently attend match their reported religious (denominational) affiliation? This idea of identity-inconsistent attending has only been briefly touched on by social scientists. Using data from 1978 in a brief note, Roof (1980) found that the share of Protestants who affiliated with a different denomination than their reported preference ranged from 9 percent among Presbyterians to 24 percent among the United Church of Christ.

Attending an identity-inconsistent congregation is not considered likely in more contemporary measurement strategies. For instance, the question Pew begins with (adopted by the CES) is "What is your present religion, if any?" Similarly, the GSS asks, "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?" Each then tacitly assumes that the worship attendance question is asking about a congregation with the label provided by the religion question. That is, the religion question governs the religiosity questions.

We believe there are good reasons to suspect that the denominational/reltrad measures do not govern religious involvement, at least for some. And if that number is large enough, then the field ought to consider alternate measurement schemes that allow variation and ensure a tighter fit or at least document the inconsistency. Before exploring that evidence, we consider some reasons why attendance may be identity-inconsistent, including the decline of religious boundaries and brand loyalty, the degree to which disagreement over politics is encouraging people to migrate, and that shopping and switching rates have been very high for some time. Of course, these forces are quite likely to be linked.

Through successive waves of immigration, the ethnocultural model of American religion reigned (e.g., Kleppner 1970; McCormick 1974). In this view, religion was synonymous with community, helping to maintain ethnic group distinctiveness and to help preserve cultural heritages. Though they may not always take on explicit ethnic labels, the vitality of the national churches (e.g., Norwegian Lutheran Church of America) throughout Christianity, Protestant, and Catholic alike, attests to the power of the ethnocultural model during earlier periods of American

history. However, that has faded, as ethnic enclaves disintegrated and ethnic/national churches merged out of their distinctiveness.

Wuthnow (1988) catches the next step in this history, describing a decline of denominationalism, in which people are no longer bound cradle-to-grave to a particular federated religious body. There are a number of forces that encouraged the permeability of religious boundaries but mobility and suburbanization post World War II were especially powerful. Aside from migration and suburbanization, sources of religious mobility are widespread and include factors such as greater geographic mobility (Bibby 1997), having religiously diverse social networks (Stark and Bainbridge 1985), marrying outside of one's religion (Hadaway and Marler 1993; Musick and Wilson 1995; Sherkat 1991), seeking high-status congregations (Sherkat and Ellison 1999), trying to reconcile religious differences with a current congregation (Hout and Greely 1987), and affiliation with more liberal rather than conservative denominations (Hadaway and Marler 1993), to name a few.

If people are free to join, they are free to leave, and all manner of disagreement and ill fit could serve as impetus to do so. A number of pieces over the last 20 years have documented the close connection between the rise of conservative politics, among other considerations (Vargas 2012) and leaving religion entirely. The power of political disagreement specifically in driving up the rate of the religious "nones" has been well documented (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger 2018; Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Margolis 2018; Putnam and Campbell 2010). But political disagreement also plays a role in leaving specific congregations, especially among marginal attenders (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018; Higgins and Djupe 2022). If people are emphasizing nonreligious considerations in their congregational affiliation decisions, it stands to reason that they could use such reasons to attend congregations affiliated with religious bodies that do not match their reported religious affiliation.

At the very least, there is considerable grist for the mill as switching rates demonstrate "considerable dynamism in American religion" (Sherkat 2014:50). In the neighborhood of 40 percent changed religious identities in their lifetime in the 1980s (Sherkat 1991), a result that did not change much by the 2000s when Pew (2009) reported 44 percent had changed their religious affiliation since age 16. But this is a very particular form of switching at a highly abstracted level—the denominational or even religious traditional levels (e.g., Pew 2015). Americans are switching congregations at much higher rates. Over short periods (3–6 months) in several panel datasets, 15–20 percent say they have left a congregation (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). It is not clear whether they have crossed a denominational or traditional boundary, but that still represents considerable churn in the religious economy. Moreover, shifting a religious identity is a wholly-owned subsidiary of leaving a congregation—it does not happen in reverse, at least in the datasets researchers have examined (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018:172). That is, people make congregational decisions before they update their much stickier religious identity—their reported religious affiliation. It is this identity-stickiness that creates space for identity-inconsistent attending.

This process of trying out new congregations has long been referred to as "church shopping" and now, also, as "church hopping" (e.g., Wuthnow 2007). Large portions of Americans report switching their religious affiliation across their lifespans, which is indicative of a switching process that is now most often described in economic terms, rather than using the older religious term apostasy (e.g., Bromley 1988). In the literature, shopping *is* switching (Wuthnow 2007), though it is possible to parse the two. Higgins and Djupe (2022) report that congregational shopping was perhaps a third higher during the pandemic, and shopping is not coincident with leaving. Those motivated to try out other congregations (mostly online during the pandemic) were often the *most* involved in their own congregation. In the end, shoppers who faced political disagreement in their own congregation were most likely to leave.

Taken together, a religious identity is probably the last thing to move as individuals begin a religious migration, which suggests that the affiliation of the congregation people are attending,

is unlikely to match the reported religious affiliation for some nontrivial portion of the religious population.

To be sure, there are numerous ways in which people construct an understanding and practice of religion that departs from what is considered normal or orthodox within a religious body. That reality has fueled the "lived religion" approach that some call a field of study (Ammerman 2016). American religion is replete with interesting combinations of identities, practices, and beliefs that defy religious logics (e.g., Burge 2021 notes "evangelical Muslims," for instance) but may be quite meaningful for the adherent. This is to say that there are multiple dimensions of life with which we may catalog the implications of identity-inconsistent attending.

We care about this mismatch of identity and attending for its implications for religious classification as well as its political implications. Grouping individuals into religious traditions, e.g., evangelical Protestantism, is surely the most widely used measure of religion in use today in and outside of academia. As we have discussed, it presumes that the answers to "What is your religion?" govern the attendance and other religious questions. Our data suggest that it does not for a sizable portion of people who attend a congregation.

Second, we care about the political implications of identity-inconsistent attending. Religious affiliation has been argued to be the building block of religious influence, capturing the "specific communities to which individuals typically belong" (e.g., Kellstedt et al. 1996:176) that instill beliefs and values that aggregate into worldviews. Those worldviews, in turn, are thought to shape the political orientations and attitudes of people exposed to them (for a range of connections, see the varied contributions in Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009). Steensland et al. (2000), who built from Kellstedt et al. (1996), have over 1,800 citations at the time of writing attests to the place of this approach in the social sciences and to the study of religious influences on political attitudes in particular.

We have no quibble about the role of religious affiliation in providing a basis to sustain opinions (e.g., Wilcox, Jelen, and Leege 1993), but believe that we need to rethink the appropriate unit of analysis. Congregations are sources of idiosyncratic information from multiple sources, including fellow congregants and clergy (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Olson 2000; Quinley 1974), that can shape political and other attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Gilbert 1993; Jelen 1992; Schwadel 2005; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). That is, capturing the particular congregational information sources may be more accurate and impactful than making assumptions from denominational identification, which as we show, may be inconsistent with the congregation individuals attend.

DATA AND DESIGN

The data we use were gathered for other purposes in February, 2022 and March, 2023. The samples were acquired through Qualtrics Panels. In February, 2022, the sample consisted of 4,050 American adults, 59 percent of which were churched, 41 percent dechurched, and filtered out the "forever nones"—those who were raised nonreligious and maintain that nonreligious affiliation into adulthood.[1] The churched are current attenders at some rate above seldom (so, a few times a year or more often), and the dechurched once attended somewhat regularly but now attend seldom or never. In March, 2023, we used Qualtrics Panels to supply 2,300 American adults (18+ years) meeting age, gender, and region quotas as defined by census estimates (we used raking weights to correct for other imbalances).

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[1]The data collection effort had a set of quotas imposed so that the final sample resembled American adults according to the Census distributions of age, region, and gender. We also included three different attention checks where respondents were asked to choose a specific answer to indicate they were paying attention. Those who failed the checks had their interviews terminated.

Figure 1

Sizable numbers attend congregations inconsistent with their denominational affiliation [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
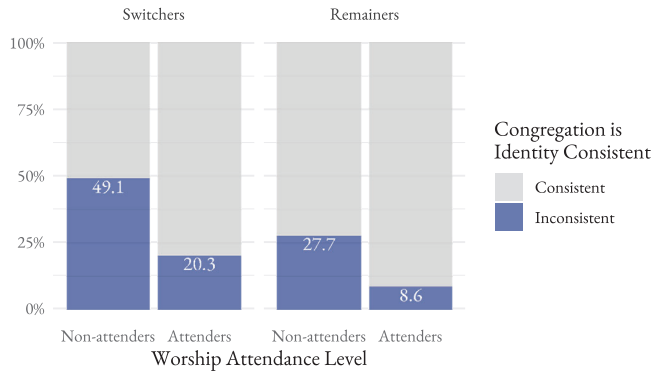
In February, 2022, the measurement of identity-inconsistent attending was simple, but followed the two tracks of the survey. After a standard denominational battery of a maximum of three questions initiated with: "What is your present religion, if any?", we asked the churched portion, "Is the current congregation you attend affiliated with the religious group you just indicated?" The dechurched portion was asked, "Is the last congregation you attended affiliated with the religious group you just indicated?" In March, 2023, we simply followed the same denominational battery as just described with: "Would you say that you attend a congregation that shares the religious affiliation that you just provided?" We omitted the portion of the sample that indicated they attend no congregation.

The surveys were otherwise ideal for investigating this question, including a number of diagnostic questions to assess whether identity-inconsistent attending makes for distinctive orientations and experiences (see the Appendix for variable coding). We focus on respondents' political attitudes, for which we have reasonably long batteries covering more or less salient issues, as well as what political issues they perceive their clergy to have addressed. The 2022 survey also includes a number of other important variables—their sentiments about the current/most recent congregation, aspects of their social networks, whether they have moved, religious beliefs, and a wide range of demographic variables—that are useful for assessing the correlates of identity-inconsistent attending.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF IDENTITY-INCONSISTENT ATTENDING

Because the 2022 survey was aimed at understanding dechurching processes, respondents were also asked whether they had ever left a congregation. Fully, a third of this sample indicated that they had never left a congregation before: "No, I've always attended my congregation." That sizable population is surely less likely to experience the inconsistency we explore. Moreover, we expect infrequent attenders to express higher rates of inconsistency. This is what Figure 1 shows.

The highest rates of identity-inconsistent attending can be found among those who have left a congregation and attend seldom or never—half of them so indicate. But they are not alone, as 28 percent of infrequent attenders who say they have never left a congregation also say their congregation does not match their religious identity. Among more frequent attenders, the rates of inconsistency are predictably lower—20 percent of switchers and 8 percent of those who have never switched. Overall, 46 percent of nonattenders (seldom or never) and 15 percent of attenders indicate their religious identity does not describe the congregation they associate with; that aggregates to 20 percent in this sample.

Figure 2

The level of identity-inconsistent attending varies by religious tradition [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
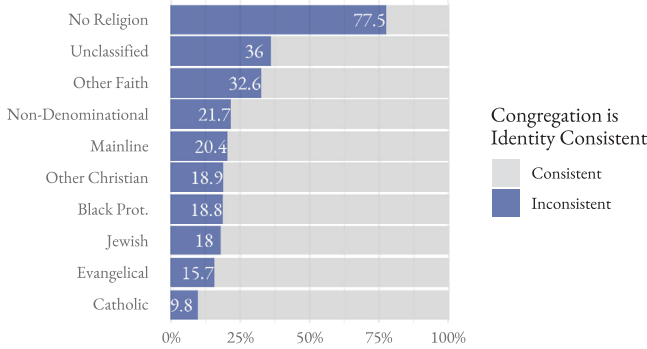
In the March, 2023 sample, of those who were attending a congregation at all, 18 percent indicated that: "No, the congregation does not match" the religious/denominational identity that they just indicated. Given how extensively the samples differed, that is a remarkably consistent estimate of the proportion of identity-inconsistent attenders.
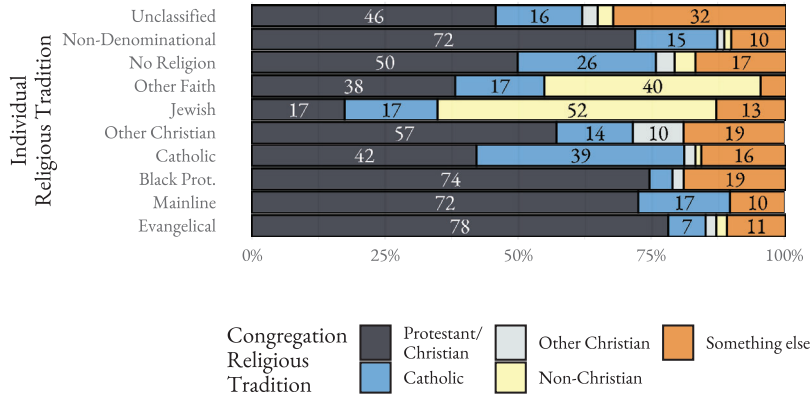
Identity-inconsistent attending varies by religious tradition, to an extent (see Figure 2). It is no surprise to see that inconsistency is the highest among the nonreligious ("nothing in particular," as well as atheists and agnostics)—any religious attendance is by definition inconsistent with their identity label. Inconsistency is also common (a third) among those who have fallen through the reltrad classifications (the "unclassifieds" – see Burge and Djupe 2021) as well as among identifiers with "other faiths." Among these world faiths, it is possible that they identify with a particular school or movement that is not represented locally. For instance, the mismatch has been on display lately as some Ukrainian Orthodox identifiers have begun to refuse to attend the more prevalent Russian Orthodox churches in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Namigadde 2022).

The rates of inconsistency are remarkably similar among the other Christian religious traditions, ranging from 22 percent among nondenominationals to 16 percent of (denominational) evangelicals. In between those narrowly spaced poles are mainliners and Black Protestants. This pattern strongly suggests that migration processes, common to all, underlie the entire religious economy, or almost. The one that stands out with a lower inconsistency rate is Catholics, with only 10 percent indicating a mismatch. Still, 10 percent of Catholic identifiers is roughly 2.4 percent of the population, about the same size as the 20 percent of mainline Protestants who are identity-inconsistent attenders.

We included a follow-up battery to assess just what religious groups they are attending, if not the ones that match their identity in the 2022 survey. While we have access to a full denominational battery, we collapsed the categories for display purposes. Those results, shown in Figure 3, highlight that many do not appear to stray far from their affiliation—roughly 75 percent of Protestants attend a congregation with another nondenominational or denominational Protestant (or "other Christian") designation.[2] Of course, that means that 25 percent of Protestant identifiers are attending a congregation in some other tradition altogether, with the most common being a Catholic parish.

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[2]In the figure, "other Christian" refers to Orthodox, LDS, and other explicitly identified Christian groups outside the other Protestant and Catholic traditions. In the text, "other Christian" refers to a survey item, most of whom went on to pick a Protestant denomination (or nondenominational body) they affiliate with.

Figure 3

The religious group affiliation of the congregation attended (bars) by individual religious tradition identity (rows) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Those with other identities often have more diverse congregational homes. Almost half of Catholic identity-inconsistents attend some form of Protestant congregation. About 40 percent of Jewish inconsistents attend a non-Jewish and non-Christian congregation. A substantial portion of congregationally involved nonreligious identifiers attend Protestant or Catholic congregations.

Who Are Identity-Inconsistent Attenders?

We have a simple expectation to explain identity-inconsistent attenders that plays out across many fields of adult life—that they are less attached and less integrated. And that is just what we see in the results, shown in Table 1. As we saw in Figure 1, they are less likely to have a lifetime connection to the congregation—they have switched congregations at some point. In the model, switchers are 7 percent more likely to be an identity-inconsistent attender. Moreover, they attend less often, are less involved beyond worship, and are generally less satisfied with their congregation. From the latter three relationships, identity-inconsistent attenders appear to occupy a liminal state that may resolve into greater involvement when they find a congregational home that coaxes identity-affiliation reconciliation.

Partisan independence is most often a detached state of connection to political life that has parallels across civic life. Though others have found that partisans are most likely to church shop (Audette and Weaver 2016), we find that independents are more likely to be identity-inconsistent attenders. This may be a function of their lack of fit and involvement in community life more broadly, perhaps in order to avoid association with partisans as found in congregations (Djupe and Gilbert 2009:46–47) and beyond (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Independents are also less educated, who are similarly more likely to be identity-inconsistent attenders.

Moving is a major disruptor of life and religious attachment, especially when it is outside the community (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994). As such, broken communal bonds due to moving should also enable people to experiment outside of their religious affiliation. And the results suggest just that. A move within the same town has no effect on identity-inconsistent attending but moves beyond the community boost identity-inconsistent attendance by about 6 percent. Related, we find that social networks full of people who do not share the respondent's religious affiliation are linked to identity-inconsistent attending—each diverse social tie boosts inconsistency by 1 percent.

Table 1: Ordinary least square (OLS) estimates of being an identity-inconsistent attender, February, 2022 data

| Independent Variables	Coefficient	p
Intercept	.51	.00
Attend same congregation (nonswitcher)	−.07	.00
Worship attendance	−.02	.00
Congregational involvement beyond worship	−.01	.00
Satisfaction with congregation	−.13	.07
Partisanship	.01	.16
Partisan strength	−.01	.04
Reference: Evangelical Protestant	-	-
Mainline Protestant	.04	.15
Black Protestant	.05	.17
Catholic	−.07	.00
Other Christian (e.g., Mormon)	−.03	.31
Jewish	−.00	.96
Other faith	.13	.00
No religion	.47	.00
Nondenominational	.04	.14
Unclassified	.11	.00
Reference: White	-	-
Black	−.00	.87
Hispanic	.05	.06
Asian	.00	.93
Other race/ethnicity	.04	.44
Women	−.02	.20
Age	−.00	.47
Age^2	.00	.27
Education	−.01	.05
Bible is a book of fables	.01	.41
Reference: Did not move	-	-
Moved in same town	−.01	.56
Moved to another part of the state or out of state	.06	.02
Network N that attends worship regularly	.00	.65
Network N that shares my religious affiliation	−.01	.00
Heterosexual	−.00	.86
Married	−.01	.66
N	3,104	
R^2	.20	

Note: The pattern of statistical significance is the same with a logit model.
Source: February 2022 Survey.

Inconsistency and Distinctive Political Attitudes

Even though identity-inconsistent attenders appear distinctive in their lack of engagement with society, this form of inconsistency may not matter if they are indistinguishable from identity-consistent attenders in terms of their attitudes. Given our questions, we can compare the identity-inconsistent attenders with consistent attenders of two religious traditions— that matching their individual identity and that matching their new congregation's affiliation. That is, the error can

Figure 4

Comparison of climate change and abortion attitudes by identity-consistency types [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
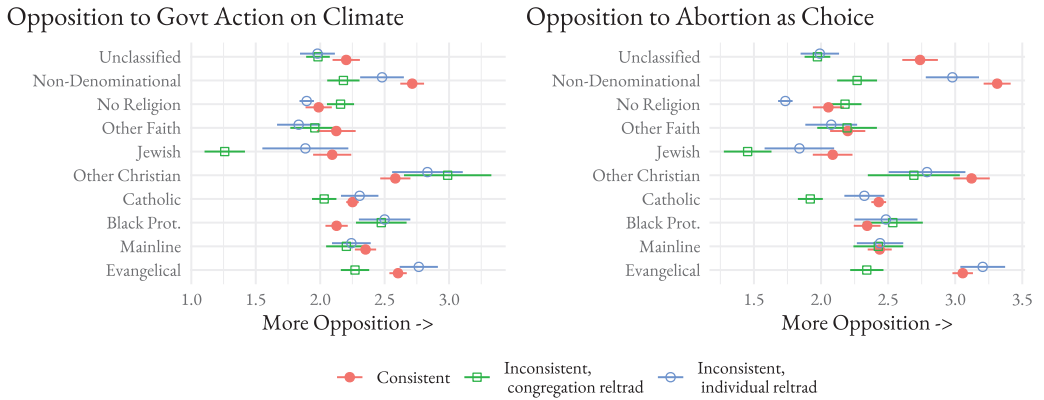

appear on either side and the identity-inconsistents can be distinctive from both. There could be many reasons to expect this, much of it suggested by the predictors of inconsistency explored above in Table 1 – they attend less often and are involved less, they are less satisfied with their congregation, have recently moved, and have a more diverse social network. They are also more likely to be partisan independents.

Keeping that in mind, Figure 4 shows averages for three groups—identity-consistent attenders for each religious tradition, identity-inconsistent attenders for each religious tradition that they *individually* identify with, and identity-inconsistent attenders for each religious tradition that their *congregation* is affiliated with. We used abortion attitudes and climate change attitudes for the first set of analyses. There does not appear to be an obvious directional pattern. In some cases, the consistents are distinctive compared to the two types of inconsistents. Nondenominational inconsistent individual identifiers are closer to consistent nondenominationals than are those who have a different individual religious tradition identity but attend a nondenominational congregation (they are also more liberal). That same pattern appears for denominational evangelicals as well, though the individual evangelical identifiers who attend somewhere else lean more conservative than consistent attenders. Another way to read their patterns is that those nonidentifiers attending a nondenominational or evangelical congregation are more moderate. Mainline Protestants and members of "other faiths" show another pattern—all three groups show effectively the same aggregate scores. Those two aside, it seems clear that inconsistent identifiers are distinctive, whether compared with their individual identity religious tradition or the religious tradition of their new congregation.

Just so the conclusions are not based on a single pair of issues, we also assess the differences across identity-consistency types on same-sex marriage (left panel) and racial attitudes (whether racial problems are rare and isolated; right panel) in Figure 5. As above, there are substantial differences between the three groups, though the nature of the differences is not quite the same across religious traditions, nor across issues. On same-sex marriage, the identity-consistent attenders are the most conservative, typically showing more opposition to same-sex marriage. This is clearly consistent with the evolution of the issue attitude (e.g., Becker 2012) and how religious affiliation and involvement decisions have been made with respect to it (Djupe and Neiheisel 2023). In most of the religious traditions (six out of 10), the inconsistents using the individual reltrad identity are in the middle of the three groups and often close to the identity-consistent attenders. In two closely related cases—nondenominationals and denominational evangelicals—the identity-inconsistent attenders using the congregation's reltrad are quite a bit different. They are much more moderate on same-sex marriage than the other two groups.

Figure 5

Comparison of same-sex marriage and racial attitudes by identity-consistency types [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
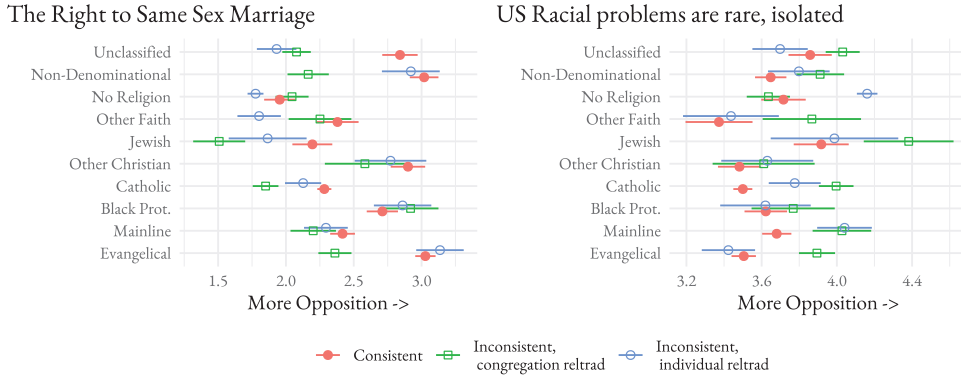
We see similar patterns when examining beliefs that racial problems are rare and isolated in the United States. Again, identity-consistent identifiers are the most conservative (in this case, greater opposition to this statement suggests a more liberal belief). As with same-sex marriage, most of the religious traditions show the inconsistent identifiers using the individual's reltrad closer to the identity-consistent attenders. And the identity-inconsistents using the congregational religious tradition are often much more liberal than the consistent attenders. There are exceptions, of course. In the case of this racial belief, mainline consistent attenders are the most conservative, while there was no difference in the case of same-sex marriage. All together, there are frequent distinguishable and substantial differences between the three groups (13 out of 30 for both issues).

Political Speech from Clergy

Identity-inconsistent attendance may also matter because they hear arguments about different issues than do identity-consistent attenders. Following a long line of research (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009; see also Brown, Brown, and Jackson 2021; Djupe 2021; Guth et al. 1997), we asked respondents, who attended more often than never, whether they "heard your clergyperson address any of the following [17] topics in your house of worship this year?"

As with attitudes, it is worth assessing whether there is variation from both sides and we used the same four issues again for analysis. Figure 6 shows comparisons by religious tradition using climate change and abortion. Comparing using the religious tradition of the congregation, the identity-inconsistent attenders are less likely to report hearing clergy on both the environment and abortion issues. Evangelicals and Black Protestant identifiers who are attending congregations in other traditions hear less about the environment but somewhat more about abortion than consistent identifiers. Again, for mainline Protestants, identity-consistency does not differentiate hearing about these political issues. In many cases, those compared by their congregation's reltrad report the lowest level of hearing their clergy address these issues, consistent identifiers have the highest reported levels, and those compared by their individual reltrad bridge the two categories. Again, there are many reasons discussed above why this may be the case, and it is clear that the experience of the identity-inconsistent attenders often varies considerably from identity-consistent attenders.

The two issues—same-sex marriage and racial justice—in Figure 7, show comparable patterns to those in Figure 6. Identity-consistent attenders report the highest frequency of hearing from their clergy. That rate is quite consistent with less than 10 percentage points separating almost all religious traditions in the case of same-sex marriage, while it varies considerably for "Black Lives Matter, racial justice, race in America"—most are within a 20-point range. And,

Figure 6

Comparison of climate change and abortion that clergy may have addressed by identity-consistency types [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
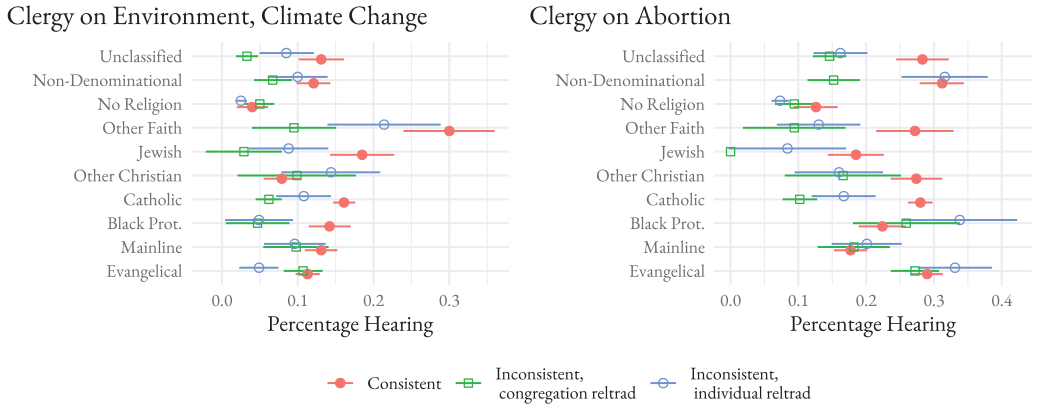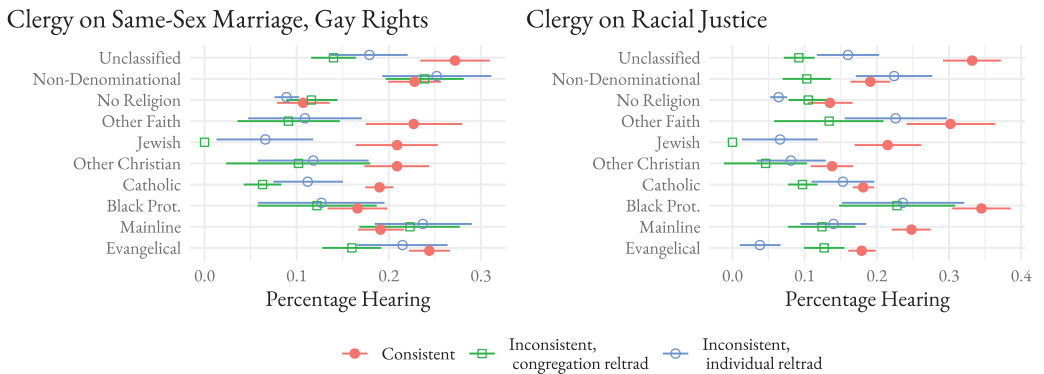

Figure 7

Comparison of same-sex marriage and racial justice that clergy may have addressed by identity-consistency types [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

as before, gaps using the congregation's religious tradition are larger than those using the individual's religious tradition identity. There are exceptions, for instance, the individual-religious tradition comparison on racial justice for evangelicals suggests a search for insulation from engagement with racial justice. For the mainline, the identity-inconsistents report hearing a bit more on same-sex marriage, though not significantly so.

CONCLUSION

As we have found in two surveys a year apart, roughly a fifth of Americans are attending worship services at a congregation that does not match their reported religious affiliation. There are multiple push and pull reasons for people to be identity-inconsistent attenders that mostly suggest shallow roots in the community—they moved, they are independent, they have diverse networks. We also see consistent evidence that identity-inconsistent attenders are occupying a liminal state—they attend worship and are involved beyond worship at lower rates, while also expressing less satisfaction with the congregation as a whole. Together, these signals suggest to us that those who are identity-inconsistent attending are migrating and have not found a religious

home. Of course, once set off on this journey, they may simply stop and conclude that the only religious home for them is "none", as so many are doing in the United States.

As but one way to document why identity-inconsistent attending may matter for the way many describe American religion, we turned to political attitudes and political communication. The identity-inconsistent were distinguishably and directionally different on a number of issue attitudes and in terms of what they report hearing from clergy. And the results suggest that the deviation exists on both dimensions, compared to the tradition matching their own reported religious affiliation as well as the one compared to their congregation's identity. This evidence should give pause to those who rely on a personal religion question to generate reltrad or a similar classification scheme.

We believe the problem is great enough that the field needs to grapple with an uncomfortable truth. That is, even though we call it affiliation, the "religion question" is actually a religious identification question that does not conclusively govern religious involvement for some. Or, some individuals may perceive this question as being about belief instead of behavior or belonging. This is not a new critique. Andrew Greeley criticized social science's desire to oversimplify the religion question by turning it into a set of dichotomous variables five decades ago (1972). But the critique has taken on a new urgency as the mismatch between reported and attended affiliations is clearly great.

One way forward is to ascertain the denomination/religion of *the congregation* the individual attends. However, the identity-inconsistent are clearly not perfect matches with identity-consistent attenders in the religious tradition of their new congregations. Our evidence comparing the three groups in terms of their attitudes (Figures 4 and 5) and clergy's perceived communication (Figures 6 and 7) suggest that the three comparison groups vary in who they are, as well as, perhaps, the conditions they find themselves in.

This is another way to say that the comparisons are not quite apples to apples. We can't know from these blunt measures whether the congregations attended by identity-inconsistents are distinctive from what the identity-consistent belong to. In this way, there is no substitute for gathering more direct measures of congregations and what is communicated there (e.g., Djupe and Calfano 2019; Djupe and Neiheisel 2022; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). There are likely not types of congregations defined by identity-consistency, but people do engage with congregations and the goings-on there may matter to their life choices and behaviors.

Nor is simply capturing identity a straightforward matter. Choosing "the method for aggregating religious identities that is most appropriate for your research" (Hackett et al. 2018) is not a sufficient answer given the complex interplay of identity and affiliation. Our results highlight the stickiness of identity, since it does not appear to shift with every new affiliation. But that also means identity does not conclusively govern affiliation decisions and may simply exist downstream of affiliation decisions (see also Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). To put it differently, identity comes to have meaning in the idiosyncratic contexts of people's lives and measuring one without the other is potentially finding a fish out of water.

Therefore, at the very least, we recommend asking survey respondents if their congregation's religion/denomination matches their reported religious affiliation. Then, if the research necessitated it, the survey could ask about their congregation's religious affiliation. A greater leap, and one we lean toward, is to forego denominational classification entirely and focus on the communication, composition, and rituals of the congregations people attend, as the research dictates. There is a long line of research arguing for just this approach (for a review see Djupe and Neiheisel 2022). Affiliation is not dead, but our measures of it need to be more flexible and local to match the creative pathways of Americans through religious bodies.

It is clearly worth understanding if individuals are in this liminal state where their identity and affiliation are at odds. We suspect that doing so will illuminate patterns facing certain traditions/denominations at that time. Organizational coherence is a variable, not an assumption.

For instance, tighter investigations of particular religious traditions may be able to use identity-inconsistent attending to look for disruption of existing associations of religion and politics (see also Braunstein 2022; Graham 2022). As we expect religious migration to be a fact of modern life (e.g., Higgins and Djupe 2022; Wuthnow 2007), documenting whether there are systematic differences over time will lend greater insight into increasingly dynamic patterns of religious association and identity in the United States.

<div align="center">

APPENDIX

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Variable Coding

Age. "In what year were you born?" Age = 2020 - year born. 'Age squared' squares age.

Bible is a book of fables. "Which one of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?" 1 = The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; 2 = The Bible is the inspired word of God but <u>not</u> everything should be taken literally, word for word; 3 = The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man.

Education. "What is the highest level of education that you have completed?" 1 = Less than High School, 2 = High School or GED, 3 = Some college or trade school, 4 = 4-year college graduate, 5 = Graduate education (toward a master's or doctoral degree)

Heterosexual. "Do you consider yourself to be heterosexual/straight, homosexual/gay, bisexual, or something else?" 0 = Homosexual/gay, Bisexual, or Something else, 1 = Heterosexual/straight

Inconsistent attending. "Is the last congregation you attended affiliated with the religious group you just indicated?" or "Is the current congregation you attend affiliated with the religious group you just indicated?" 0 = Yes, 1 = No.

Married. "What is your current marital status?" 0 = Single, divorced, or widowed, 1 = Married.

Moved. "Have you moved in the past year?" 0 = No, I have not moved, 1 = Yes, within the same town/city, 2 = Yes, to another part of the state or Yes, to another state.

Network N that attends worship regularly/shares my religious identity. "Please think of the **five people** you are closest to. How many of them have the following characteristics?" (emphasis in the original) Options included "Attend a house of worship regularly" and "Shares my religious identity" and respondents could choose from 0 to 5.

Partisanship. "Generally, which of these party labels bests describes you?" 1 = Strong Democrat, 2 = Democrat, 3 = 4 = Strong Democrat/Republican, 4 = Independent, 5 = independent, but lean Republican, 6 = Republican, 7 = Strong Republican.

Partisan strength. 1 = independent, 2 = independent, lean partisan, 3 = partisan, 4 = strong partisan.

Religious switcher. "Have you ever left (stopped attending) a congregation?" 0 = No, I've always attended my congregation, 1 = Yes, I've stopped attending at least one congregation

Religious tradition. Coded using the denominational RELTRAD scheme from Steensland et al. (2000) with the adjustments from Burge and Djupe (2021).

Satisfaction with congregation. "Thinking about the current house of worship that you attend, how satisfied are you with the following aspects of the congregation?" Components listed were: Clergy preaching, Clergy's political leanings, Activities for me and my family, Volunteer opportunities, Political engagement of the congregation, My social "fit", Music and worship styles, Relevance to my life. Each was coded 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4 = satisfied, and 5 = very satisfied.

Congregational involvement beyond worship. "Beyond worship services, approximately how many congregational groups and activities have you been involved with in the past year?" 0–10.

Race. "What is your race/ethnicity? (choose as many as apply)" White; Hispanic, Black, Asian, Other.

Women. women = 1, men = 0.

Worship attendance. "Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you typically attend religious services?" 5 = More than once a week or Once a week; 4 = A few times a month; 3 = A few times a year; 2 = Seldom; 1 = Never.

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