

Politics is not the primary reason people are leaving churches, study suggests

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Extreme political views might be driving some people away from churches, but the actual number of departing parishioners is not that large and those who do leave the pews are mostly marginally involved with the institution, according to a new study co-authored by a University at Buffalo political scientist.

"All we're really seeing here is a little churn," says Jacob Neiheisel, an assistant professor in UB's Department of Political Science and one of the authors of the study published in the *American Journal of Political*

Science with Anand Sokhey, an associate professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and led by Paul Djupe, an associate professor at Denison University.

"We don't see [people](#) ensconced within the institutional framework leaving," Neiheisel says. "These are people at the periphery so we don't see religious sorting where people on the left are disproportionately becoming anti-religious while people on the right are doubling-down on religion."

The findings provide new evidence that the limited turnover is not contributing significantly to political polarization.

"We don't see the kind of polarization that worries us, which is so important because it links back to the broader concern we all share when we study polarization." says Neiheisel. "If we're not talking to one another on some level there's a risk of breaking off into bubbles where people hear only the echoes of their own voice. When we start doing that we worry about things like opinion extremity and loss of tolerance. These are things that drive a contentious political environment."

The researchers drew upon three sources for their study, using data from the 2012 Election Panel Study, the 2006 Franklin County Republican Primary Study and the Portraits of American Life Study – about 3,000 individuals all told.

"We trying to figure out where politics matters and where it doesn't in complex institutional environments," says Neiheisel.

There's a risk any time mismatched political beliefs surface among people involved with the same organization, a [church](#) for example. But Neiheisel says that churches and other "storehouses of democracy" are not merely places to discuss politics.

"There are many things to keep people engaged at church. People might attend for the sermons, the small group activities or the social encounters. Churches are not one dimensional," says Neiheisel. "So the people involved with their church still have access to the networks provided and the opportunities for building civic skills."

Churches, like party identity, have historically been seen as "unmoved movers" where certain attitudes and beliefs are thought to be stable. These institutions aren't themselves moved by the information environments, but rather drive attitudes and behaviors down the line.

Neiheisel says the new study's argument dispels generalized notions that connect religion with what's going on in politics, or that people would leave churches exclusively because of what's happening in political circles.

"People think about organizational connections at a much more localized level," says Neiheisel. "An issue could eventually evolve to the point where it seeps throughout the organization. We saw this during the Civil Rights Movement when conservatives left Southern churches led by clergy educated at typically liberal seminaries.

"But as a broader systematic pattern the people who are leaving today are peripheral to begin with. Politics is not the primary driver behind people leaving religion. It's demographics; it's generational; it's many other things."

And it's not contributing largely to further polarization, notes Neiheisel.

"That's important," he says. "When we hear only our own voice we start to think there's no such thing as a legitimate opposition. It reminds me of what people often heard after the 1968 presidential election: 'I know no one who voted for Richard Nixon; I don't know how he could have

won."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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