RESEARCH STATEMENT

Spencer Kiesel, Political Science Department, *University of California Davis*

My research falls into three areas with the common focus on group-based animosities. My primary research interest is the underrepresentation of nonreligious Americans and the effects of this group's exclusion on US politics. My second area of research investigates the effects that partisans' affective evaluations have on their perceptions and decisions. My third area of research examines the interactions between partisanship, vaccination in core social networks, and Covid-19 vaccine attitudes. The thread linking my work is an interest in social identity and the effects that group identities have on individuals' animosities.

I have been published in *American Politics Research*, have three papers under review, and eight ongoing projects utilizing state of the arts methods such as conjoint analysis, machine learning, and multidimensional scaling. As an early career scholar, I aim to publish further articles on the nonreligious as a political group and package them into a book on the group's exclusion from representation.

The work outlined below demonstrates my robust research agenda and the pipeline of work I have for future publications. My rigorous methods training at UC Davis has given me the skillset to contribute to a broad range of literatures. I endeavor to use this foundation to further my development as an early career scholar and beyond.

NONRELIGIOUS REPRESENTATION

The nonreligious—atheists, agnostics, and nones—comprise between 20 and 25 percent of the US population.[1] They are the second-largest religious group, behind Christians. This large and rapidly growing group emerged in the 1990s as Christian identification plummeted and Church attendance collapsed. However, this enormous and stable increase in the number of nonreligious identifiers has not translated into any meaningful political representation. The nonreligious have not achieved meaningful descriptive representation, despite steady growth and comprising a large share of the electorate for decades. Further, the nonreligious are almost totally excluded from government in the US. Only one sitting elected official at the Federal level explicitly identifies as nonreligious.[2] While nearly one quarter of the population is nonreligious only 1/535 of Congress is nonreligious. In contrast, every significant religious group is overrepresented.

Here, a paradigm contrary to the core tenets of our society exists. In a democratic nation that often prides itself on representing diverse constituencies descriptively, a large and rapidly growing religious group is underrepresented *by a factor exceeding 100.* Were this occurring with a racial group or even a non-Christian minority religious group, such glaring underrepresentation would result in condemnation and panicked attempts to elect descriptive representatives. However, no such concern exists for the unrepresented nonreligious masses of America; the issue is barely known about or studied.

Scholars seemed to have omitted the nonreligious from study until very recently. To remedy the deficit in research I provide a starting point for understanding the exclusion of the nonreligious from government. The normative contribution is to provide an understanding of the exclusion of the nonreligious from government that may serve as a basis for gains in representation. I seek to

[1] Defined as persons who answer "none" when prompted for their religious identification on a survey. They are distinct from those answering none of the above, which would indicate religious status, nones are indicating that they have no religious affiliation but are choosing not to identify as atheists or agnostics.
[2] Jared Huffman, U.S. House of Representatives (D-CA-2nd).

answer three main questions: 1) are the religious a politically relevant group; 2) what is the basis of bias against the nonreligious in general and nonreligious candidates specifically; and 3) why are the nonreligious vastly underrepresented in government.

Are the nonreligious a politically relevant group?

In my first chapter, I answer descriptive questions about the nonreligious as a political group. In order to dispel a widespread justification for the group's exclusion from government—that the nonreligious do not constitute a politically relevant or cohesive group—I apply machine learning to existing datasets. I demonstrate that the nonreligious are, in fact, a distinct group with coherent political beliefs to rally around.

What is the basis of bias against the nonreligious in general and against nonreligious candidates specifically?

In my second chapter, I build a rich descriptive picture of how the religious perceive the nonreligious through quantitative analysis of respondent rated one-word answers and a qualitative analysis of open-ended answers. I find that bias against the nonreligious is primarily rooted in fear of both the group's members and their effects on political outcomes. Religious Americans see the nonreligious as a dangerous "other" that does not fit into the traditional image of the nation.

Why are the nonreligious vastly underrepresented in government?

In my third chapter I demonstrate how bias against the nonreligious, specifically nonreligious candidates for political offices, drives underrepresentation. I find in a conjoint candidate choice experiment that nonreligious identity reduces support among the religious and does not coincide with ingroup support from nonreligious respondents. I conclude that, because of their religious identity, nonreligious candidates are likely to lose votes from religious voters and are not able to reliably gain additional nonreligious votes. Consequently, nonreligious candidates concealing their identity, choosing not to run, or losing to religious opponents explains the existing lack of nonreligious representatives. Finally, I address whether the underrepresentation of the nonreligious is likely to change. I ask respondents to choose between local level candidates who are early in the pipeline to higher office. By showing that bias is present for the offices where nonreligious candidates are likely to start political careers, I argue that large scale representation is unlikely to emerge.

I plan on combining these three articles within the next two years and then expanding on them with further work towards a book project. This furthering of my work on nonreligious populations will bring together the above work examining the groups exclusion from representative government with a broad study of the effects this exclusion has had on American politics and policy.

POLARIZATION AND PARTISAN ANIMOSITY

Polarization and inter-partisan animosity are perhaps the most pressing issues facing democratic societies. Scholars have argued that partisanship drives negative emotional evaluations of out-partisans. However, these insights are based on imperfect measures such as thermometers and candidate evaluations. These existing measures discount the sentiment attached to individuals'

negative attitudes and infer affect from items that suffer from reductionism and differential item functioning. Work I conducted with graduate student co-authors, currently under review, introduces a new measure of affect that addresses the shortcomings of existing measures. The new measure asks respondents for one-word to describe voters in their party and the opposing party. Then respondents themselves code the sentiment behind their word choice. Together, the new measure produces qualitative and quantitative measures of respondents' affect. This new self-coded, open-ended measure has strong face validity, correlates strongly with existing affect measures, and reveals a theoretically relevant dimension of affective polarization. This research has implications for the study of affective polarization because it offers scholars a window into respondents' state of mind. Future extensions of this project will go beyond proving the item's usefulness vs existing measures and apply it to other groups of interest.

The extent to which affective polarization spills over into interpersonal settings and results in partisan discrimination in decidedly nonpolitical settings is an area of interest to scholars and provides increasing opportunities for research. Instances of these spillover effects are seen as a dangerous breakdown in social relations. Scholars examining partisan animus in interpersonal settings reliably find bias and discrimination against out-party members. However, no study to date has examined the limits of affective polarization across multiple categories of social interaction. Work I conducted with graduate student co-authors, currently under review, fills this gap. This research demonstrates that there are limits to partisan discrimination and quantifies the strength of partisan animosity versus easily understandable costs partisans are willing to pay to discriminate. Furthermore, partisanship is a salient heuristic in social decision making, and the cross-pressure analysis finds limits to this heuristic. This work uses conjoint analysis to measure affective polarization across multiple types of social interaction and various characteristics salient to those social interactions while cross-pressuring respondents between partisanship and utility maximizing behavior to determine the limits of affective polarization. This work tests individuals' willingness to socialize with out-partisans across various interpersonal contexts (i.e., dating, neighborhood choice, and choosing a grocery store). Then, it assesses the limit of partisan attachment by examining the effects of cross-pressuring respondents with straightforward utility maximizing attributes. This work has significant contributions towards our understanding of the limits to partisan animosity by showing the level of economically maximining cost partisans will bear to interact with out partisans.

Moving forward, I plan to expand this research agenda by continuing to explore the implications and potential for reducing partisan animosity in three studies that are currently in progress. First, I am using a novel survey designed to assess the relative strength of partisan identity and the potential other identities have to mitigate or overcome partisan animosity. This work could have implications for both understanding and mitigating affective polarization. Second, I am developing an experimental project examining how counter-stereotypical identities effect partisans' likelihood of endorsing policies counter to their own partisan identity. Third, I am working on a paper examining the interaction between partisanship and candidates who endorse extreme, unsavory, or conspiratorial ideas to determine the degree these traits counter in party loyalty.

COVID VACCINATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

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The ubiquitous issue of our time—COVID-19—presented an exceptional opportunity to apply my interest in novel experimental research to an important context. Like most office workers I spent the pandemic working from home. Unlike most office workers, I had the training and tools to design and field an experiment that could inform me about why—despite the existence of widely available, incredibly effective, and completely safe vaccines—it took an exceedingly long time for the US population to achieve high levels of vaccination. Work I conducted with graduate student co-authors, published in *American Politics Research* and as two Monkey Cage articles in the *Washington Post,* illuminates the role that social pressure from close associates played in both inhibiting and facilitating widespread vaccination.

During the lowest levels of vaccination, I designed and fielded a novel survey to examine the role that core social networks play in individuals' likelihood of being vaccinated. This survey built egocentric social networks composed of respondents' closest associates with whom they "discuss COVID-19, vaccines, and politics." The vaccination rate of this network was highly predictive of a respondents' vaccination status. Furthermore, there is polarization in vaccination networks such that the vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals are clustered and isolated from each other. Surprisingly, these network effects are unmoderated. This work had implications for the effectiveness of vaccination campaigns and is important for understanding the public's response to future pandemics.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND CO-AUTHORSHIP

Methodologically I focus on experimental design. I find the process of building novel experiments engaging regardless of the topic. By combining my skillset of experimental design with the skills of co-authors we can produce work neither of us could on our own. My ideal position allows similar collaborations with faculty or graduate students to coauthor experimental projects that contribute to a diverse range of subjects.

I believe my work to date demonstrates a robust research agenda and pipeline of future publications. The broad and rigorous methods training I received at UC Davis has given me a foundation of exemplary methods skills. This foundation will be particularly useful in furthering my development as an early career scholar and beyond. If you'd like to learn more about my research, please visit my website: https://www.spencerkiesel.com