The Differential Impact of Religion on Traditional and Community-engaged Political Activity

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Abstract: Many places of worship engage in activities that most political scientists would consider political—like feeding the homeless, providing backpacks for needy school children, and helping people re-enter society after spending time in prison. Yet much of the literature on religion and politics focuses only on explicitly partisan activities like voting or donating to a political campaign. Many religions have an ethos of community betterment. Does religion affect community-engaged political activity in the same ways that it does traditional political participation? A unique research design executed in [location redacted] brings together religious data on individual beliefs and behaviors, clergy messaging, and congregation culture to examine religion’s effects on both traditional and community-engaged political activity. The results demonstrate that religious variables from all three categories influence both types of political activity, although sometimes in different directions. For instance, holding providential religious beliefs is associated with greater community-engaged political activity but lower traditional political activity. These findings indicate that religion influences different types of political participation differently.

Keywords: political participation, religion, community engagement, providential

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Many congregants don’t like to hear partisan political messages at their places of worship—66% of Americans say that religious leaders should not endorse political candidates (Pew Research Center 2016). Although direct politics at worship services may be unpopular, many congregants do encounter what most political scientists would consider political content (Brewer et al. 2003). This content is rarely partisan calls to action, but may be messages about community problems, information about non-profit partnerships, or volunteer opportunities. Data from the National Congregations Study demonstrates that congregations are much more likely to have small groups working to address community problems (56.7%) than they are to have small groups discussing politics (5.8%). Whereas only 11% of congregations have voter registration efforts, over 90% of congregations use time during worship services to provide information about opportunities to volunteer and assist people outside the congregation who are in need (Chaves and Anderson 2014).

By focusing on a narrow definition of political behavior limited to partisan or electoral political activities, scholars may miss much of the politically-consequential work that religious organizations and individuals do. Religious organizations are often at the heart of communities and are engaged in solving community problems. More than half of congregations currently provide some health or human services (Clerkin and Gronbjerg 2007) and many play longstanding roles in community systems (Chaves and Wineburg 2010).

We know from existing literature that religion can influence traditional political activities like voting or donating to a campaign, but what about political activities that center on community engagement? Community engagement is just another type of political participation. Talking with friends and family about community problems or attending neighborhood meetings, for instance, are political activities, but we do not know if religion affects them differently than more conventional political activities. As many religious traditions uphold an ethic of community and of
treating one’s neighbors well (Wattles 1996), religion may well exert a stronger influence over community-engaged political activities.

A unique dataset of nearly 1,500 congregants in 18 [location redacted] congregations makes it possible to look closely at religion and political activity to ask: does religion influence different types of political activity differently? The research brings together explanations based in individual religious behaviors and beliefs, explanations based in clergy messages, and explanations based in congregation-level characteristics to present a complex view of how these three channels of religious influence affect both traditional and community-engaged forms of political participation.

**Religion’s Influence on Political Activity**

Religion is an important consideration for people around the world and in the United States. Approximately 90% of people in the United States say that they believe in God (Lugo et al. 2013) and 53% say that religion is very important to them (Pew Research Center 2014). Intuitively, such beliefs may influence people in all kinds of ways, not the least of which is politically.

Religion can influence political attitudes and behaviors through a number of means—from the personal to the communal. We can organize these potential paths of influence into three general categories: the personal religious beliefs and experiences of the individual, the messages an individual hears at worship services, and the characteristics of the congregation where an individual worships. Literature in the field of political science has mostly focused on the relationship between individual religion and partisan measures of political activity, like voting or donating to a campaign, although some research on community-focused political activities is available.

While there are reasons to expect that religion will influence all political activity similarly, in some areas, differential influence may be more likely. About half of US adults say that churches and other houses of worship “should keep out of political matters” (Pew Research Center 2016). For clergy, who risk alienating their congregants or losing their legitimacy if they are seen as
inappropriately political (Olson 2009, p. 372), politics can be risky (Calfano et al. 2014; Calfano 2010; Glazier 2018). Community engagement is much more common in places of worship, compared to partisan political messages (Chaves and Anderson 2014). Community engagement may be viewed by congregants and clergy as more neutral, or even religiously-appropriate, ground. Specific expectations for all three categories of potential influence—individual, clergy, and congregation—are presented in the following three sections.

**Individual Religious Beliefs and Behaviors**

One of the most prominent and studied means of religious influence is church attendance. Church attendance is strongly associated with political participation (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Norris 2013; Macaluso and Wanat 1979; Hougland Jr. and Christenson 1983; Brady et al. 1995; Harris 1994; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001) and with participation in civic and community organizations (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Lewis et al. 2013).

Foundational research by Verba et al. (1995) indicates that church attendance contributes to increased political participation through helping attenders develop civic skills (see also Hougland Jr. and Christenson 1983; Wald 1997). Putnam (2000) and Cassel (1999) argue that religious organizations also build important social capital—increasing trust and helping people make connections with their fellow citizens (see also Putnam and Campbell 2012; Wuthnow 2002; Ammerman 1997), with consequences that matter for community, and not just civic, engagement.

Attendance at religious services also leads to more connections and friendships (Schwadel et al. 2016), and people who have more friends at their places of worship are more likely to engage in both religious and secular civic activity (see also Lewis et al. 2013; McClure 2015). Regular church attenders also have higher levels of community involvement (Robyn L. Driskell et al. 2008; McClure 2017). Relationships built at one’s place of worship convey behavioral norms through social contagion (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Wald 1997; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), potentially
influencing the extent to which attendees find it appropriate to mix religion and politics, and 
lowering the costs of acquiring political information (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

The established relationship between religious attendance and political activity leads to the 
expectation of Hypothesis 1: religious attendance will have a positive impact on both traditional and 
community-engaged political activities.

In addition to specific behaviors like church attendance, there are important factors that may 
influence behavior prior to the decision to attend or participate in religious services (McKenzie 
2001). The specific content of religious beliefs may also influence political activity, either through 
the mechanism of increased church attendance (McKenzie 2001) or directly.

Research on religious beliefs by Robyn Driskell et al. (2008) consistently finds an inverse 
relationship between belief in an involved God and political participation, indicating that if believers 
see God as in control, they are less likely to participate themselves. Recent research by Glazier 
(2017) finds that such “providential believers” may default to less political activity, living their 
personal lives as best they can to align with God’s plan, and only engaging in politics when they see a 
clear connection between religious admonitions and political conditions.

There are good reasons to expect that personal religious beliefs can impact community 
engagement. For instance, Mencken and Fitz (2013) find that those who hold a more judgmental 
image of God are less likely to volunteer in the community. Einolf (2011) finds that people who 
consider their religion an important part of their identity and whose religious beliefs inspire their 
service of others are more likely to volunteer (p. 447). As service to others is a core component of 
many religious traditions, providential beliefs may lead to more community engagement.

Thus, Hypothesis 2 proposes that individual religious beliefs will affect traditional and 
community-engaged political activities differently. Specifically, religious beliefs will exert a greater 
influence on community-engaged political activities.
Clergy Messages

Clergy can play important roles as purveyors of political information and opinion leaders (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010, 115), often linking for congregants the abstract world of religion and their own lived experiences (Glazier 2015). When a congregation leader talks about a traditionally political topic during a Sunday sermon, he or she provides congregants with a religious lens through which to see the issue (Smidt 2004; Smidt 2003; Calfano 2009; Djupe and Gilbert 2003).

Speaking specifically of her ethnographic work in Protestant churches in Chicago, Greenberg (2000) notes that “religious instruction takes on political significance when leaders make the linkage between living a Christian life and political goals” (p. 381). Looking at the political activity of religious minorities in Europe, Sobolewska et al. (2015) find that “hearing a political message in a place of worship increases the probability of participation by ten percentage points.” (p. 283). Thus, clergy messages can politically mobilize church members (Guth et al. 2003). These messages may not only be delivered via sermons, but also through political meetings, where they can significantly boost political participation (Djupe and Grant 2001; Calhoun-Brown 1996). Generally speaking, clergy have less credibility when they communicate political rather than religious messages (Djupe and Calfano 2009; Kohut et al. 2000), but, as “professional arbiters of values and absolute truths” (Olson 2009, 375), clergy pronouncements do carry a lot of weight.

Hypothesis 3 expects clergy to have a significant impact on both the traditional and the community-engaged political activities of their congregants. Specifically, congregants who report hearing clergy messages about partisan politics will be more active on traditional measures of political participation, whereas congregants who report hearing clergy messages about community engagement will be active on community-engaged measures of political participation.

Congregation Culture
Finally, the culture of a place of worship can have a significant impact on both political participation and community engagement. People do not experience religion in a vacuum; the congregation is the locus of religious activity (Schwadel 2005). Wald et al. (1988) argue that churches maintain and transmit social norms, providing a space where members exchange political information and align their beliefs and behaviors with one another. These social relationships and norms form the culture of a place of worship. Frequent social interactions and similar message exposure can lead congregation members to align their political views and behaviors (Mangum 2008) and a culturally homogenous environment can impact the development of civic skills (Djupe and Gilbert 2006). Clergy also play a role in creating the culture of the congregations they lead and influencing the political engagement of the congregation (Guth et al. 2003).

Polson (2016) argues that the context of each specific congregation makes an important difference in how they might encourage community engagement. If a congregation has an ethos of helping the community, attenders are more likely to be politically active (Polson 2016). McClure (2017) similarly finds that participating in congregation-sponsored community activities positively predicts pro-social behaviors like civic involvement and volunteering, even when accounting for the influence of church attendance and friendships. In short, the political culture of a church matters. If there is direct encouragement to vote and a culture of voting within a congregation, political participation tends to be higher among the congregants (Sobolewska et al. 2015). Similarly, if a place of worship emphasizes civic duty, its members may be more likely to vote (Macaluso and Wanat 1979).

Additionally, the specific historical-political experience and worship practices of a church may lead to different political activities, a finding that has been particularly strong for Black Protestant churches (Barnes 2005; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Harris 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Pattillo-McCoy 1998). For instance, Pattillo-McCoy (1998) conducted ethnographic research in
Black neighborhoods in Chicago and finds that Black Church culture provides a “tool kit” that invigorates activism through specific practices like call and response. Work by Barnes (2005) demonstrates statistically that cultural elements in the Black Church, like prayer groups and gospel music, have a consistent, direct, and positive impact on various forms of community action.

Historically, some Evangelical churches have had the reputation of steering clear of “worldly” matters like politics and focusing on “otherworldly” concerns like saving souls (Iannaccone 1988; Leege and Kellstedt 1993), although this dichotomy certainly has its limitations (McRoberts 2003). This perception shifted with the culture wars beginning in the 1980s (Wilcox 1996, 1989), and more recently has shifted again as some evangelicals have begun to be more socially- and community-minded (Steensland and Goff 2013). Differences certainly exist within religious traditions, providing ample basis to suspect that the specific theological beliefs and practices of a place of worship can influence the culture of the congregation and, consequently, political and community engagement.

Hypothesis 4 proposes that the culture of a congregation will have an influence on the political activities of its congregants. Specifically, congregations with a strong political culture will have congregants with higher levels of traditional political participation, whereas congregations with a strong community engagement culture will have congregants with higher levels of community-engaged political participation.

Data and Methods

Do the same kinds of religious variables that lead to higher levels of traditional political activity also lead to higher levels of community-engaged political activity? There may be important similarities and differences across these different types of political participation, but no research yet directly
compares religion’s influence on them within the same study population. Here, I examine religion’s influence on the political participation of a large and diverse sample of church-attending survey respondents, who participated in the [study name redacted].

The [study name redacted] is an ongoing research project examining the impact of community engagement by congregations within the city limits of [location redacted]. In 2016, congregants in 18 places of worship received surveys with questions about religion, politics, and community engagement while at worship services the weekend before the 2016 election. These 18 congregations were purposefully sampled from among the 88 who returned a clergy survey in 2016 (392 clergy surveys were mailed to all places of worship in [location redacted], for a response rate of 22.4%).

The 18 congregations represent four Evangelical, four Black Protestant, three Catholic, and three Mainline Protestant congregations. One congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), one Jewish temple, one Muslim mosque, and one congregation of the Unitarian Universalist church were also included in the sample. [location redacted] congregations are dominated numerically by three religious traditions: Black Protestant (about 31%), Evangelical Protestant (about 43%), and Mainline Protestant (about 18%). The congregations that participated in the study over-represent minority religious traditions in the city, but still include major samples of the dominant religious traditions.

A total of 5,318 congregant surveys were distributed and 1,440 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 21.4%. In the analyses that follow, the majority of the data used come from these

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1 Religious tradition is categorized according to the method established by Steensland et al. (2000).
2 In the analyses that follow, missing data were dealt with using multiple imputation. Multiple imputation generates more than one estimate for each missing value and is the best available technique for dealing with missing data (Horton and Lipsitz 2001; Penn 2007). Listwise deletion would have left a smaller dataset (the exact number depending on the model specifications), but multiple imputation allows for the retention of these cases and for greater confidence in the
congregant surveys. The individual-level data are supplemented with congregation averages and clergy responses regarding congregation characteristics. A full description of all variables, along with descriptive statistics, is presented in Table 1. In the OLS regression models that follow, clustered standard errors are used to account for the interdependence of the 1,440 responses clustered by 18 congregations (Primo et al. 2007).

**Dependent Variables**

There are two dependent variables of interest examined in the models that follow: traditional political participation and community-engaged political participation. Traditional political participation is measured through frequency of participation in 11 different political activities, from persuading someone to vote to displaying a campaign sticker. Responses to each of the 11 activities were summed into a composite measure of traditional participation. The second major dependent variable is community-engaged political participation, which sums agreement with four questions: I do things to make the community a better place, I am aware of important needs in the community, I rarely talk with my friends and/or family about community problems (reversed) and Becoming involved in political or social issues is a good way to improve the community. The community-engaged participation variable also includes two measures of service—provided inside and outside of the place of worship. Responses to these six questions are summed into a composite measure of community-engaged political participation.

[Table 1 about here].

These two dependent variables are different in important ways. The traditional participation battery contains more questions and has greater variance (see summary statistics in Table 1). Aside from the service component, the questions in the community-engaged participation battery are less

resulting estimates (King et al. 2001). I used the “ice” package created by Patrick Royston (2005a, 2005b, 2009) to generate 10 imputed datasets for analysis.
directly focused on specific activities. These two concepts may be interrelated and influence one another, although they are only correlated at 0.23. Both concepts are included in each of the models, with each taking a turn as the dependent variable.

Independent Variables

The independent variables in the models are also presented in Table 1 and are organized according to the three categories of religious influence discussed above—individual religious beliefs and behaviors, clergy messages, and congregation culture. Table 1 also lists the individual-level control variables.

In terms of personal religiosity and belief, the models include five measures of this category of influence. First is frequency of attendance at worship services, an explanatory variable well established in the literature. Next, because attendance can sometimes be a proxy for deeper kinds of engagement with a place of worship through service activities, leadership roles, and friendship networks (Polson 2016), the models also include participation in activities and groups at one’s place of worship in order to measures congregation activity beyond attendance.

Third is a measure of devotional behavior, which combines frequency of prayer and frequency of holy scripture reading. Research by Loveland et al. (2005) indicates that both devotional and community practices matter—both prayer and church attendance encourage membership in voluntary associations. Attendance is often considered together with prayer and scripture reading in a measure of religious “behaving” (Leege and Kellstedt 1993). Here, I consider attendance on its own and combine holy scripture and prayer together in a single measure of devotional practice, the type of measure that has previously been shown to positively influence volunteerism (Paxton et al. 2014).

Fourth is a measure of how literal holy scripture is taken. The political science literature has struggled to theorize about why and how religious beliefs might influence political activity. One of
the most popular measures of belief is Biblical literalism, which has served as a kind of shorthand for theological conservatism (Leege and Kellstedt 1993). It is associated with conservative Christianity, less activity in groups outside of church (Schwadel 2005), and lower civic participation (Kanagy 1992). Additionally, the shortened sociotropic time horizon associated with a literal belief in the Bible (Barker and Bearce 2013) may lead people to disengage from politics and/or community.

Fifth and finally is a measure of providential religious belief, or the belief that God has a plan that one can help bring about (Glazier 2017). These types of beliefs tend to encourage lower political participation.

The second path of religion’s influence is through the messages delivered by clergy at worship services. Three types of clergy messages are included in the models. For each of these messages, the variable measures the respondent’s perception of the frequency of the clergy message. This is more likely to influence actions and attitudes than an objective measure of how often a subject is discussed by clergy in worship services (Glazier 2015).

The first type of clergy message measured is the respondent’s perception of how often they hear messages encouraging them to be politically active—through participating in politics on a local or national level or through voting. The second type is messages on sometimes controversial political topics: abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious liberty. The third type is messages about helping in the community through volunteering or giving to those less fortunate. These three types of clergy messages represent different kinds of cues congregants might receive when they attend worship services.

The third path through which religion might influence political activity and community engagement is the characteristics and culture of the congregation. The models include a categorical

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3 Spearman’s rho tests show that perception of clergy messages are independent of any of the individual-level religious variables. For instance, increased attendance is not correlated with increased perception of political topics sermons.
variable for the size of the congregation and binary control variables for Evangelical, Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim religious traditions (leaving Mainline Protestants as the reference category).

Djupe and Gilbert (2006) demonstrate that the most valuable civic skills are often learned in small groups (see also Whitehead and Stroope 2015) and are best developed when those groups are fairly homogenous. The respondent’s perceived political similarity to the rest of the congregation is measured through a question about whether they see themselves as politically similar to others at their place of worship.

Because the political activity and community engagement culture of a congregation may influence the political activity and community engagement of those who attend there, two variables are included to measure that culture. First, is the mean traditional political activity score of the congregation, excluding the respondent. Second, is the mean community-engaged activity score for each congregation, excluding the respondent. These two variables are calculated for each respondent, providing measures of the congregation culture as it relates to both types of political participation, at an individual level.

The models also include demographic controls for gender, age, education, and nonwhite ethnic identity, as well as political controls for ideology (higher numbers more conservative), caring about who wins the 2016 election, political efficacy, traditional political activity (in the community-engaged model only), and community-engaged political activity (in the traditional model only).

Results
The results of the OLS models run on the traditional political activity and community-engaged political activity dependent variables are presented in Table 2. The results are presented side-by-side in Table 2 to facilitate comparison of the religious influences on each.
Religion appears to influence the two types of political activity very differently. Of the 12 religious variables and six religious tradition controls, not a single one influences both traditional and community-engaged political activity significantly and in the same direction. In fact, four of the independent variables predict significant and different directions of influence for the two dependent variables, seven are significant for one but not the other, and seven have no significant influence on either type of political activity.

Looking at each of the independent variables in turn, religion clearly affects both traditional political activity and community-engaged political activity, but in very different ways. Attendance at religious services has no significant effect on traditional political activity, a finding counter to the expectations of H1 and much of the previous literature. This is likely due to two factors. First, the surveyed population only includes people who were at religious services at the time of survey distribution. Thus, there is no non-attending population included in the analysis. Among those who attend at least some worship services, higher attendance does not lead to greater traditional political activity, at least for this sample.

Second, whereas many models of political activity include attendance at religious services as one of the only religious variables, there are many religious variables included here, providing a more accurate picture of religion’s influence. Although attendance at religious services does not significantly influence traditional political activity, it does, however, have a positive and significant effect on community-engaged political activity.

Beyond attendance, some literature has pointed to involvement in religious activities in one’s congregation—like attending choir practice or small group discussions—as more influential on political activity than attendance alone (Robyn L. Driskell et al. 2008). The results in Table 2 indicate the congregational participation does not have an influence on traditional political activities for this
sample. At the same time, it does have a significant and negative impact on community-engaged activity. The trade-off effect identified by Becker and Dhingra (2001) may be behind these findings: greater involvement in one’s congregation may leave less time for involvement in the community. Just attending may provide information and opportunities that lead to greater community involvement, but greater congregational involvement curtails community activity.

Devotional religious behaviors—scripture reading and prayer—as well as the extent to which respondents believe holy scripture is to be taken literally, all have a consistently insignificant effect on both dependent variables. Providential religious beliefs, on the other hand, have a differential effect on traditional and community-engaged political activities, a relationship consistent with H2.

Providential believers tend to leave things in God’s hands, unless they see a clear connection between their own behavior and God’s plan (Glazier 2017). In Table 2, these beliefs lead respondents to be less likely to get involved in traditional politics but more likely to get involved in their community. Perhaps serving in one’s community is more clearly connected to most providential believers’ concepts of God’s plan than is participating in more partisan political activities. The differential impact of a belief in providence supports the idea that individual religious beliefs can have important political consequences. In this case, it seems that the same beliefs that encourage community engagement actually discourage traditional political activity.

Moving to clergy political messaging, it is clear that the type of message clergy deliver matters. When respondents report hearing sermons on being politically active and voting, for instance, they are more likely to be politically active in just those areas, a finding in support of H3. Clergy messages on potentially divisive political topics like abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious liberty also motivate greater traditional political activity, but neither type of political message increases community-engaged activity. Messages about helping the community through volunteering or helping those less fortunate, on the other hand, have no effect on either dependent variable. This
finding is counter to H3, which hypothesized a positive relationship between clergy messages on community engagement and congregant-reported community-engaged political activity.

Thus, clergy who are contemplating which kinds of messages to deliver in order to have the greatest impact may find that that rarer the message, the more likely their congregants are to perk up. Messages about voting and getting involved in other traditional political activities are the least likely to be heard by congregants ($M = 5.32, SD = 1.87$), compared to political topics ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.66$), $t(30,762) = 30.839$, $p = 0.00$ and community messages ($M=7.82, SD = 1.42$), $t(30,845) = 214.52$, $p = 0.00$, which are the most common. Congregants may be so used to hearing calls for community engagement that such calls do not inspire any additional action by congregants. The less common political messages, however, lead to greater traditional political activity.

Moving on to measures of congregation characteristics, the activity culture of the congregation is calculated for each individual congregant by taking the mean traditional political activity score and the mean community-engaged activity score of all other attendees in their congregation. The result is two variables that do not include the personal political activity of the respondent (and thus avoid endogeneity), but do provide a sense of the activity culture of the people each respondent worships with.

H4 hypothesized that if other members of a congregation engaged in traditional political activities, it would have a positive effect on each respondent’s traditional political activities. Similarly, if other members of a congregation participated in community-engaged political activities, it would have a positive effect on each respondent’s community-engaged political activities. Both of these relationships are present and significant in Table 2, indicating that the political activity in the congregation as a whole creates an atmosphere that encourages political activity at the individual level.
Interestingly, there also appears to be a trade-off effect. A respondent surrounded by co-
religionists with high traditional political activity will both be more likely to participate in traditional
political activity and less likely to participate in community-engaged political activity, and visa-versa.
This finding suggests that congregations may specialize in one type of political engagement over
another. Limited resources may necessitate such a choice (Becker and Dhingra 2001).

Another measure of congregation culture is the extent to which each respondent sees the
partisan political views of others in the congregation as similar to their own. Prior research has
found that political homogeneity decreases political activity. Respondents who believe that their co-
religionists share their political views are less likely to get involved in politics, maybe because they
see less of a need for such activity (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Indeed, the data in Table 2 indicates
that those who view their coreligionists as politically similar to themselves are less likely to engage in
traditional political activities, although there is no effect for community engagement, another
indication that respondents view the latter form of political activity differently. The size of the
congregation, measured by clergy-reported categorical weekly attendance numbers, is not significant.

The models also include six religious tradition controls, with Mainline Protestants serving as the reference category. When it comes to traditional political activity, the mid-sized Mormon
congregation (around 150 members) was significantly more active, and the small Jewish
congregation (around 50 members) was significantly less active, than the reference category. For
community-engaged political activity, the Jewish congregation is actually significantly more active,
and the only religious tradition to be significantly different from the reference category. This finding
is another indication that some religious traditions may specialize in a particular type of political
activity.

Contrary to some previous literature, Black Protestant attendees in this sample are not
significantly different from the rest of the population in terms of their political activity, when the
other variables in the model are accounted for. However, difference of means tests do reveal
significantly higher levels of traditional political activity by Black Protestant congregants \((M = 12.59, SD = 4.23)\), compared to other religious traditions \((M = 12.11, SD = 4.82)\), \(t(30,842) = -7.76, p = 0.00\), and significantly higher levels of community-engaged political activity \((M = 21.05, SD = 3.39)\), compared to other religious traditions \((M = 19.96, SD = 3.42)\), \(t(30,385) = -24.63, p = 0.00\). Here again, the large number of religious variables may take some of explanatory power that is usually afforded religious tradition.

The additional individual-level control variables included in the model provide further insight into what drives both community-engaged and traditional political activity. First, both types of political activity positively and significantly influence one another. Whereas congregations may specialize in one over the other, for individuals, engaging in one type of political activity positively influences their participation in the other.

Caring about who wins the election is only positively associated with traditional political activity and political efficacy is only positively associated with community-engaged political activity. The results here indicate that feeling like one can make a difference leads to helping out in the community, but partisan electoral concerns lead to traditional political engagement.

The demographic control variables also reveal some important differences. Those with more education are more likely to participate in traditional political activities and older people are more likely to participate in community-engaged political activities. Additionally, those who hold a conservative ideology are less likely to be active in traditional politics.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between religion and public life can be complicated. People’s personal religious beliefs, the messages they hear at worship services, and the culture of the place they worship at can all influence the ways they engage with politics and community. The data presented here examine
these disparate paths of influence on two different types of political engagement: traditional political activities like voting and writing letters to representatives, and community-engaged political activities like talking about community issues with friends and volunteering outside one’s place of worship.

The results indicate that religion influences traditional political activity and community-engaged political activity in very different ways. Indeed, not one religious variable influences both types of activity significantly and in the same direction. Of particular interest are those religious variables that have a differential influence—that influence the two types of political activity significantly and in opposite directions.

Providential religious believers—those people who believe in a divine plan that they can help bring about—are less likely to participate in traditional partisan politics and more likely to engage in community-based political activity. This likely tells us something about what congregants in this sample think they can do to further God’s plan (i.e. community service) and what they are steering clear of (i.e. partisan politics). This intriguing finding illustrates the need for a better understanding of how personal religious beliefs motivate political and community engagement. Religious belief can be messy—especially for social scientists to understand empirically—but the content of belief matters for politically important behaviors and it deserves further study.

The culture and activity of the people one worships with also have a differential impact. When others in your congregation are active in traditional politics, you are more likely to be, too—and less likely to be active in community-engaged politics. On the flip side, when others in your congregation are engaged in the community, your community-engaged political activity also tends to be higher—and your traditional political activity lower. We have long known that religions and congregations “specialize” in particular activities or causes in a competitive religious marketplace (Iannaccone 1992; Stark 2006), but these data provide a clear picture of a tradeoff between traditional political activities and community-engaged political activities. The small Jewish
congregation included in the study is a case in point; members there are both less likely to be involved in traditional political activities and more likely to be involved in community political activities.

In short, religion matters for political activity, but its influence is not uniform. Although traditional and community-engaged political activity are related, a direct comparison of both concepts on the same study population reveals that they are driven by very different religious factors. Religion matters for both types of political activity, but it matters in different ways, revealing the need for more nuanced investigations of religion’s influence on public life.
Table 1. Question Wording and Descriptive Statistics

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<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Question Wording</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
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<td><strong>Dependent Variables</strong></td>
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| Traditional Political Activity | In the past year, have you: 11 activities listed. Response options for each are: No (0), Yes, once or twice (1), Yes, a few times (2), or Yes, many times (3). **Activities**  
  • Tried to persuade someone to vote  
  • Donated money to a political candidate or campaign  
  • Worked as a volunteer for a political candidate or campaign  
  • Attended a political rally  
  • Stuck a campaign bumper sticker on your car or window  
  • Participated in a local political or community group  
  • Participated in a national political group  
  • Contact public officials on a political or social issue  
  • Wrote a letter to a newspaper editor about a political issue  
  • Posted or shared something political through social media (like Facebook or Twitter) | Range: 0 to 40  
  Mean=12.18  
  S.D.=4.60  
  Cronbach’s alpha: 0.82 |
| Community-engaged Political Activity | Please circle how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about community engagement: Response options on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1).  
  • I do things to make the community a better place  
  • I am aware of important needs in the community  
  • Becoming involved in political or social issues is a good way to improve the community  
  • I rarely talk with my friends and/or family about community problems (reversed)  
  In the past month, how many hours of unpaid service have you given to your congregation? Response options range from zero (1) to 15+ (5).  
  In the past month, how many hours of unpaid service have you given outside your congregation? Response options range from zero (1) to 15+ (5). | Range: 5 to 30  
  Mean=20.25  
  S.D.=3.45  
  Cronbach’s alpha: 0.53 |
| **Independent Variables**       |                                                                                  |                                 |
| Individual Religiosity         |                                                                                  |                                 |
| Attendance                     | How often do you attend religious services? Scale from Occasionally (1) to Multiple times a week (5) | Range: 0 to 5  
  Mean=3.97  
  S.D.=0.89 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Range in Scores</th>
<th>Mean and Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement</strong></td>
<td>I often participate in activities and groups in this congregation. Likert agreement scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)</td>
<td>1 to 5</td>
<td>Mean=1.94 S.D.=1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Piety**   | Combination of:  
|             | • How often do you pray? Response scale from Occasionally (0) to Several times a day (5) and  
|             | • How often do you read Holy Scripture? Response scale from Occasionally (0) to Several times a day (5) | 0 to 10         | Mean=6.94 S.D.=2.11        |
| **Providentiality** | Agreement with “God has a plan and I have a part to play in it.” Reversed so higher numbers mean more agreement. (1 to 5, Mean=3.71, S.D.=0.53) Plus “Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day life, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life?” (1 to 5, Mean 3.44, S.D. 0.67) | 2 to 10         | Mean=7.94 S.D.=1.47        |
| **Literalism** | Please circle the statement that comes closest to describing your feelings about Holy Scripture:  
|             | a. Holy Scripture is God's word and is to be taken literally, word for word (4)  
|             | b. Holy Scripture was written by people inspired by God but it contains some human errors and not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word (3)  
|             | c. Holy Scripture is good because it was written by wise people, but God had nothing to do with it (2)  
|             | d. Holy Scripture was written by people who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today (1) | 1 to 4          | Mean=3.32 S.D.=1.47        |
| **Clergy Messages** | Combination of responses to three clergy message questions, with response options Never (1), Sometimes (2), and Often (3)  
|             | In the past year, how often have you heard worship service messages by your religious leader that:  
|             | • Encouraged you to get involved in a local political cause or issue?  
|             | • Encouraged you to get involved in a national political cause or issue?  
|             | • Urged you to register to vote? | 3 to 9          | Mean=5.52 S.D.=1.88        |
| **Political Topics** | Combination of responses to three clergy message questions, with response options Never (1), Sometimes (2), and Often (3)  
|             | In the past year, how often have you heard worship service messages by your religious leader that:  
|             | • Spoke about abortion  
|             | • Spoke about same-sex marriage  
|             | • Spoke about religious freedom | 3 to 9          | Mean=5.70 S.D.=1.48        |
| Community Engagement | Combination of responses to three clergy message questions, with response options Never (1), Sometimes (2), and Often (3)  
In the past year, how often have you heard worship service messages by your religious leader that:  
• Encouraged members to serve or volunteer in the community?  
• Encouraged you to help those less fortunate in your own community?  
• Encouraged you to help those less fortunate around the world? | Range: 3 to 9  
Mean=7.84  
S.D.=1.40 |

**Congregation Culture**

| Evangelical Tradition | Attends a place of worship categorized as Evangelical according to the RelTrad measure created by Steensland et al. (2000) | N=271  
(18.37%) |
| Black Protestant Tradition | Attends a place of worship categorized as Black Protestant according to the RelTrad measure created by Steensland et al. (2000) | N=385  
(26.1%) |
| Catholic Tradition | Attends a place of worship categorized as Catholic according to the RelTrad measure created by Steensland et al. (2000) | N=441  
(29.9%) |
| Mormon Tradition | Attends a place of worship categorized as Mormon according to the RelTrad measure created by Steensland et al. (2000) | N=35  
(2.37%) |
| Jewish Tradition | Attends a place of worship categorized as Jewish according to the RelTrad measure created by Steensland et al. (2000) | N=15  
(1.02%) |
| Muslim Tradition | Attends a place of worship categorized as Muslim according to the RelTrad measure created by Steensland et al. (2000) | N=42  
(2.85%) |
| Weekly Attendance | From a question asked of clergy: What is the approximate average weekly attendance at all worship services? Categories set as: 1 if attendance is less than or equal to 100, 2 for between 101 and 250, 3 for between 251 and 500, and 4 for greater than 500 | Range: 1 to 4  
Mean=1.80  
S.D.=1.32 |
| Mean Congregation Traditional Political Activity | Average of the 11-item traditional political activity battery, excluding the respondent’s score. | Range: 8.7 to 15  
Mean=12.18  
S.D.=1.00 |
| Mean Congregation Community-engaged Political Activity | Average of the 6-item community-engaged political activity battery, excluding the respondent’s score. | Range: 17.33 to 22.23  
Mean=19.97  
S.D.=1.62 |
| Political Views Similar to Congregation | LRCS: How would you compare your views with other congregation members’ on political issues?  
1=Mine more conservative/liberal to 3=About the same | Range: 1 to 3  
Mean=2.36  
S.D.=0.78 |

**Individual Controls**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Range and Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cares about Election</td>
<td>Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal who wins the presidential election this fall, or that you don't care very much who wins? Response options from Don't Care (1) to A Great Deal (5).</td>
<td>Range: 1 to 5&lt;br&gt;Mean=4.54&lt;br&gt;S.D.=0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>Combination of two questions, both with a Likert agreement scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).&lt;br&gt;• Government is too complicated for me to understand (reverse coded)&lt;br&gt;• I believe I can personally make a difference in my community.</td>
<td>Range: 2 to 10&lt;br&gt;Mean=7.78&lt;br&gt;S.D.=1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>What is your race/ethnicity? Response options: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Other. All responses that are not White are coded nonwhite.</td>
<td>N=462&lt;br&gt;(33.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Gender</td>
<td>What is your gender? Male (1) Female (0)</td>
<td>N=530&lt;br&gt;(38.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Year 2016 minus response to the question: In what year were you born?</td>
<td>Range 18 to 100&lt;br&gt;Mean=54.85&lt;br&gt;S.D.=16.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>What is the highest year in school/degree you have received? Five response options from Less than High School (1) to Post-graduate (5)</td>
<td>Range: 1 to 5&lt;br&gt;Mean=3.97&lt;br&gt;S.D.=0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Many people use the terms liberal, moderate, and conservative to recognize different political opinions. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the most liberal position and 5 the most conservative, where would you rank yourself when you think of your general political views? Response options from Very Liberal (1) to Very Conservative (5)</td>
<td>Range: 1 to 5&lt;br&gt;Mean=3.22&lt;br&gt;S.D.=1.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. OLS Models of Traditional and Community-engaged Political Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Activity</th>
<th>Community-engaged Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Religiosity and Belief</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Attendance</td>
<td>0.248 (2.01)</td>
<td>0.209* (2.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregational Participation</td>
<td>0.122 (1.03)</td>
<td>-0.759*** (-13.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture Reading + Prayer</td>
<td>0.108 (1.11)</td>
<td>0.0717 (1.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture is Literal</td>
<td>-0.556 (-1.63)</td>
<td>-0.00590 (-0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providentiality</td>
<td>-0.455* (-2.72)</td>
<td>0.131* (2.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clergy Political Messages</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Activity Sermons</td>
<td>0.212** (3.43)</td>
<td>0.0708 (1.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Topics Sermons</td>
<td>0.175* (2.51)</td>
<td>-0.0872 (-1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Sermons</td>
<td>0.0168 (0.22)</td>
<td>0.0621 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregation Culture</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Congregation Traditional Political Activity (excluding respondent)</td>
<td>0.491** (3.73)</td>
<td>-0.136* (-2.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Congregation Community-engaged Activity (excluding respondent)</td>
<td>-0.493* (-2.79)</td>
<td>0.889*** (15.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Views Similar to Congregation</td>
<td>-0.393* (-2.39)</td>
<td>0.0479 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly Attendance</td>
<td>0.0802 (0.55)</td>
<td>-0.00221 (-0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Tradition</td>
<td>0.345 (0.98)</td>
<td>-0.178 (-1.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant Tradition</td>
<td>0.704 (1.71)</td>
<td>-0.194 (-1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Tradition</td>
<td>0.0781 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.206 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon Tradition</td>
<td>0.723* (2.15)</td>
<td>-0.248 (-1.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Tradition</td>
<td>-1.632** (-3.01)</td>
<td>0.989*** (5.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Tradition</td>
<td>0.365 (0.91)</td>
<td>0.325* (2.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Political Activity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.120** (3.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-engaged Activity</td>
<td>0.306*** (6.64)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares about Election</td>
<td>0.676*** (6.04)</td>
<td>0.108 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>0.155 (1.89)</td>
<td>0.689*** (17.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>-0.304 (-1.06)</td>
<td>0.117 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.181 (0.88)</td>
<td>-0.125 (-0.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.00508 (0.71)</td>
<td>0.0129** (2.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.356* (2.88)</td>
<td>0.0848 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Ideology</td>
<td>-0.488** (-2.99)</td>
<td>-0.0638 (-0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>7.871 (1.91)</td>
<td>-5.498*** (-4.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30106</td>
<td>30106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clustered robust standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
Bibliography


