



How Pornography Use Reduces Participation in Congregational Leadership: A Research Note

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Received: 5 July 2018 / Accepted: 15 October 2018 / Published online: 24 October 2018
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Abstract

Research on the link between religion and pornography suggests that more frequent pornography viewing can lead to declines in individuals' religious commitment, likely stemming from the guilt, shame, and dissonance adherents experience for violating sacralized moral values. No research, however, has considered the implications of this phenomenon for religious organizations. The current study addresses this gap by examining how pornography use contributes to potential congregational problems by discouraging individuals from participating in lay leadership. Multivariate analyses of panel data from the 2006–2012 Portraits of American Life Study reveal that the more frequently respondents viewed pornography at wave 1 the less likely they were to hold a leadership position or serve on a committee in their congregation within the following 6 years. This effect was robust to controls for religious commitment, tradition, and other correlates of lay leadership participation. Interactions with religious tradition and gender suggest that participation in leadership is more negatively tied to porn use for conservative Protestants and Catholics compared to mainline Protestants and women compared to men. Findings ultimately suggest that increasingly pervasive pornography consumption among adherents could portend a potential dearth of volunteer leadership for congregations.

Keywords Pornography · Church · Congregations · Leadership · Gender

The author is a current member of the Religious Research Association.

Data for this study are freely available for download from The ARDA. Coding specifications are available from the author upon request.

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Introduction

Owing largely to the greater anonymity, accessibility, and affordability provided by the Internet and smartphones, pornography¹ use has become increasingly common throughout the developed world (Doring 2009; Ogas and Gaddam 2011). In the United States in particular, studies show that Americans are more likely to access pornography at younger ages and continue using pornography later into their adult years than ever before (Price et al. 2016). And while religious Americans are among the most ardent opponents of pornography's dissemination and use, there is some evidence that pornography has become more prevalent within their communities as well. Focusing on evangelical Protestants, for example, Thomas (2013) shows how the dominant narrative of evangelical leaders regarding pornography has transitioned over time as pornography use within their congregations has become more pervasive (see also Burke 2016). And in his recent study of religion and trends in pornography consumption using the 1984–2016 General Social Surveys, Perry and Schleifer (2018a) find that, all else being equal, evangelicals are both indistinguishable from non-evangelicals in their likelihood of viewing pornography and were increasing in their porn viewership at rates that were virtually identical to other Americans.

For religious communities, and particularly those in conservative Christian traditions, pornography use is highly problematic morally, and thus, it is unsurprising that pornography use is often associated with considerable shame and guilt that religious Americans experience for violating deeply-held and sacralized values around chastity (Grubbs and Perry 2018; Grubbs et al. 2018; see also Baltazar et al. 2010; Grubbs et al. 2015). One potential consequence of this internal conflict surrounding pornography is that it can be corrosive to individual religious faith itself. Recent longitudinal and qualitative studies, for example, show that more frequent pornography use can contribute to significant spiritual struggles and even declines in various measures of religious commitment over time, for both adults (Baltazar et al. 2010; Grubbs et al. 2015; Perry 2017, 2019) and adolescents (Perry and Hayward 2017). Yet while this research points to a directional effect of pornography use on measures of one's *personal* religious life (e.g., feeling close to God, prayer frequency, religious doubts, importance of religion), no studies have considered whether more frequent pornography use at one time may hold consequences for explicitly social and organizational aspects of individual religiosity, ones that directly influence congregational life.

Drawing on nationally representative panel data from the 2006–2012 Portraits of American Life Study, this research note examines how pornography use may contribute to potential congregational problems by diminishing the likelihood that individuals will participate in volunteer congregational leadership at various capacities.

¹ Because “pornography” is both difficult to define and often freighted with moral connotations, some studies opt to use other terminology like “sexually explicit media.” Here I have retained the term “pornography” because it is used in the data for analysis. For the purposes of this study, “pornography” or “porn” refers to sexually explicit media (Internet videos, movies, magazines) that is made and consumed with the intent of arousing the viewer.

The implications of this study, I argue, go beyond understanding pornography's influence on individual religious life. To the extent that pornography use is increasing among religious Americans, and to the extent that pornography use can discourage churchgoers from participating in volunteer congregational leadership, scholars of religion would need to consider how increasingly pervasive pornography use may erode the organizational efficacy and strength of congregations themselves.

Background

Who Participates in Lay Congregational Leadership?

Surprisingly little research exists on what social factors predict participation in volunteer congregational leadership explicitly. Drawing on 2001 US Congregational Life data with a single measure indicating whether a person participated in church leadership at some capacity, Ferguson (2018a) finds that lay leaders are more likely to be those who attend that church frequently and for a longer duration, older, more educated, white, male, and married. Other studies using these same data affirm that participation in core congregational activities (though not necessarily leadership *per se*) tend to be older, married, childless, more educated, members at their congregation, white, and highly religious (Martinez and Dougherty 2013; Dougherty and Whitehead 2011). Martinez and Dougherty (2013) also find that those congregants who are more socially embedded and active participants tend to be homophilous with other church members in terms of race (see also Christerson and Emerson 2003). And Stroepe (2012) using 2007 Baylor Religion Survey data finds that people more involved in church activities tended to be more highly educated, Southern, evangelical, attended their congregation longer, and were more socially embedded in their congregation.

Taken together, these studies suggest that those persons who either participate in lay leadership or are otherwise at the core of congregational activity tend to be characterized by high religious commitment, dense friendship networks within the congregation, and social homophily with those at the core of the congregation. Following from this, it is likely that a social behavior that might reduce individuals' religious commitment, create distance between or strain relationships with fellow congregants, and make them socially dissimilar (or marked or stigmatized) in a moral sense would lower the likelihood that individuals will serve in congregational leadership, either through self-selectin or community sanctions. Research suggests that sexual violations, and pornography use in particular, may accomplish all this.

Theorizing Pornography's Influence on Participation in Congregational Leadership

The majority of studies that have examined the association between religion and pornography have treated religion as the independent variable, most often serving to reduce pornography consumption through social control or internalized moral

values (e.g., Carroll et al. 2008; Hardy et al. 2013; Perry 2019; Perry and Schleifer 2018a; Rasmussen and Bierman 2017). A number of recent studies, however, have shown that the association is bi-directional; pornography use can also influence religion. Because pornography use is unequivocally rejected for religious Americans, and particularly for committed Christians, studies have found that religious individuals who use pornography often feel considerable guilt and shame that can cause them to distance themselves from religious others whom they feel may judge them (Short et al. 2015). Importantly, this incongruence between religious individuals' value of sexual purity and their sexual behavior can lead them to discouragement or even to changing their religious values altogether, consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Nelson et al. 2010; Short et al. 2015; Uecker et al. 2007).

Supporting this idea, Baltazar et al. (2010: 36) organized open-ended responses to questions about the effects of pornography use in college students' lives and found that 43 percent of men and 20 percent of women in their sample said that pornography "worsened my relationship with God/Christ." And following earlier longitudinal research suggesting that engaging in premarital sex or cohabitation could lessen religious commitment and belief over time through the mechanism of cognitive dissonance (e.g., Regnerus and Uecker 2006; Thornton and Camburn 1989; Uecker et al. 2007), recent longitudinal studies have shown that earlier pornography use predicts spiritual struggles and declines in individual religious commitment over time (Perry 2017; Perry and Hayward 2017). Drawing on panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, for example, Perry and Hayward (2017) show that more frequent pornography use at earlier waves decreased young Americans' frequency of prayer, perceived closeness to God, and importance of religion, while also increasing their religious doubts.

Importantly, Perry and Hayward (2017) also found that earlier pornography use predicted a decline in religious service attendance over time. This suggests that pornography use might dampen not only personal religious commitment, but may also reduce more social aspects of religion. This might be especially likely to occur if pornography users feel they will be confronted, judged, or sanctioned by their faith community. To the extent that pornography use can lower religious commitment and discourage participation in church life by making individuals feel dissonance or shame, it is expected that more frequent pornography use would lead to a much lower likelihood of participating in volunteer congregational leadership over time.

Importantly, this potential influence of pornography use on participation in leadership may not be the same for all religious tradition. Because they are the largest three traditions in the sample, I will focus on conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics in particular. While all three traditions reject pornography morally, Catholics and conservative Protestants have a history of anti-pornography activism (Thomas 2013) and today much of the fear about the harmful effects of pornography use in believers' lives is concentrated within these traditions (Perry 2018, 2019). Because the tendency to retreat from religious commitment and participation is theorized to stem from social guilt and shame for violating sacred sexual values, it is expected that the leadership participation of conservative Protestants and Catholics would be more connected to their pornography use than that of more liberal mainline Protestants who might not be as bothered by pornography.

Similarly, both congregational leadership and pornography use are highly gendered. While women are among the most active participants in most religious congregations, certain religious traditions, and particularly Catholicism and conservative Protestantism put limits on the leadership roles women may occupy in congregations. Regarding pornography use, gender stereotypes surrounding men and women's sexuality, particularly within more conservative traditions, often result in men's pornography use being somewhat normalized as a "common sin" for men to "struggle" with (Burke 2016). Conversely, women in these traditions often feel additional shame and stigma for their pornography use because it is not a stereotypically "female sin" (Assad 2016). Consequently, because participation in congregational leadership is likely to decline due to shame and social distancing following pornography use, it is expected that women's participation in leadership would be more tied to their pornography use than for men.

Methods

Data

Panel data are taken from the nationally representative 2006–2012 Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). The original 2006 PALS sampling frame includes the civilian, non-institutionalized household population in the continental US who were 18 years of age or older at the time the survey was conducted. Surveys were administered in English or Spanish. From April to October 2006, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 2610 respondents in their homes. Interviewers used audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) for more sensitive questions (i.e., pornography usage). The response rate was 58 percent. The second wave of PALS was conducted from March to September 2012, with 1314 participants successfully re-interviewed. After accounting for participants from 2006 who died or were mentally incapacitated, the Wave 2 response rate is 53 percent. The second wave was administered through self-administered web survey, computer-assisted telephone interviewing, and face-to-face interviewing. The combined 2006–2012 PALS data include sampling weights that bring the PALS sample in line with the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 2005 and 2011. Weights also adjust for non-response in Wave 2. These weights were used in all analyses. The full models include 682 respondents who provided valid response to measures used.²

² The majority of missing cases came from the household income measure. Models were tested with various imputation techniques to replace missing values, as well as without the income measure, and none changed the key findings substantively or in terms of statistical significance (results available upon request). Ultimately, the decision was made to use listwise deletion in order to make replication as straightforward as possible.

Measures

Measures of Congregational Leadership

Both waves of PALS include three questions regarding whether a respondent has participated in some form of lay congregational leadership. The 2006 PALS asked respondents whether in the past 3 years they had (Q1) “held a leadership position in your congregation such as teacher, elder, deacon, small group or youth group leader, worship leader, or choir director;” (Q2) “served on committees or boards at your congregation;” and (Q3) “organized events or groups at your congregation.” Respondents could answer either yes (=1) or no (=0). The 2012 PALS asks the same three questions except that the wording now asks, “In the past 6 years...” Thus, the 2012 wave is essentially asking about whether respondents have served in these forms of congregational leadership since wave 1. My analyses predict affirmative responses to the 2012 question while controlling for their 2006 responses, and thus, I can better isolate various social influences on participating in congregational leadership while holding constant whether a respondent had already served their church in that capacity.³ I use binary logistic regression as these outcomes are all dichotomous.

Pornography Viewing

The 2006 PALS asked respondents, “In the past 12 months, how often have you viewed pornographic materials?” I coded responses from 1 = never to 8 = once a day or more. Because of smaller numbers of high-frequency porn users, later analyses also use a dummy-coded version of this variable (0 = never viewed porn, 1 = Any porn viewing) in order to decompose the effect of pornography use on leadership by gender and religious tradition.

Controls

The analyses include a variety of religion and sociodemographic controls following previous research on participation in congregational leadership (e.g., Ferguson 2018a, b). Beyond whether or not the respondent reported previously serving in congregational leadership, other controls were included to mitigate the issue of self-selection, namely, that people who view pornography more frequently would be less likely to serve in congregational leadership simply because they tend to be less religious. Analyses controlled for respondents’ religious affiliation, frequency at religious service attendance, prayer frequency, and theological conservatism. Religious

³ Because of the possibility that pornography use at wave 1 also influenced serving in congregational leadership at wave 1, thus causing pornography’s effect on later service in leadership to operate through their earlier service, I estimated models with and without controls for earlier service at wave 1. While the variance explained was tremendously reduced in each model, since earlier service in leadership is such a strong predictor of later service, the association between earlier pornography use and later service in religious leadership was substantively identical with or without that control.

tradition was measured with a modified version of the RELTRAD classification scheme (Steensland et al. 2000).⁴ Categories included mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, other Protestants, Catholics, other religions, and unaffiliated, with mainline Protestants as the reference category. An important measure of institutional religious participation, religious service attendance was measured from 1 = never to 8 = three times a week or more. A more devotional measure of religious commitment, prayer frequency was measured from 1 = never to 9 more than three times a day.⁵ Lastly, theological conservatism was measured with a PALS question asking participants about whether they believed their religious text to be “fully inspired by God.” Responses included 1 = fully inspired by God to 4 = I have never heard of the religious text. The measure was dichotomized so that 1 = fully inspired by God, 0 = other. For descriptive statistics of all variables in the analyses, see Table 1.

Results

Table 2 presents odds ratios from models predicting respondents’ participation in the three measures of congregational leadership between 2006 and 2012. All predictors are from the 2006 wave in order to ensure temporal precedence. The first model predicts whether a respondent held some sort of lay leadership position (e.g., elder, deacon, teacher) and we see that more frequent pornography use is negatively associated with this outcome (OR = .731; $p < .05$). The second model predicts whether respondents served on a committee or board between 2006 and 2012 and the effect of pornography viewing in 2006 is nearly identical to the previous model (OR = .741, $p < .05$). The last model predicts whether respondents had organized events or groups at their congregation and the net effect of pornography viewing frequency is statistically insignificant. Figure 1 illustrates the associations between 2006 pornography use and the predicted probability that respondents would serve in congregational leadership at these capacities over the next 6 years. Though pornography use is not significantly associated with organizing events or groups for one’s congregation, the relationship between earlier pornography use and later service in congregational leadership appears fairly linear for all three outcomes. In other words, as wave 1 pornography use increases the likelihood that respondents would serve in lay congregational leadership over the next 6 years consistently declines.

Because pornography use was not significantly associated with organizing events or groups at one’s congregation, Table 3 focus only on holding a leadership position or serving on a committee/board as the outcomes. To test for the potential moderating role of gender and religious tradition on the link between

⁴ PALS includes an “Other Protestant” category that includes other sectarian Protestants besides those originally found in Steensland et al. (2000). I made an additional modification by combining evangelical Protestants and black Protestants into the Conservative Protestant category so as to avoid collinearity problems with the race variable. Also Jewish respondents were combined with the “other religion” category because of smaller numbers. None of these modifications substantively affect the focal outcomes.

⁵ While religious service attendance and prayer frequency are correlated, their Cronbach’s alpha indicated low reliability ($\alpha = .62$), and thus, they were included in models separately rather than as an index.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics. *Source:* 2006–2012 PALS

Variables	Coding description	Full sample		Used porn		Did not use porn	
		Mean response or %	SD	Mean response or %	SD	Mean response or %	SD
Held leadership position (W1)	In past 3 years; 0 = no, 1 = yes	23%		26%		22%	
Held leadership position (W2)	In past 6 years; 0 = no, 1 = yes	28%		23%		30%	
Served on committee (W1)	In past 3 years; 0 = no, 1 = yes	22%		20%		22%	
Served on committee (W2)	In past 6 years; 0 = no, 1 = yes	23%		20%		24%	
Organized events/groups (W1)	In past 3 years; 0 = no, 1 = yes	23%		29%		20%	
Organized events/groups (W2)	In past 6 years; 0 = no, 1 = yes	23%		22%		23%	
Pornography viewing frequency	1 = never, 8 = once a day or more	1.6 (= once or twice)	1.3	3.2 (= a few times)	1.7		
Pornography viewing at all	0 = no, 1 = yes	28%					
Male	0 = female, 1 = male	45%		72%		35%	
Age	In years from 18 to 80 or more	48	16.1	41	14.7	50	15.9
Married	0 = not married, 1 = married	61%		63%		60%	
Children living in home	0 = no children at home 1 = children at home	38%		42%		37%	
Bachelors degree or higher	0 = less than bachelors 1 = at least bachelors	35%		34%		35%	
White	0 = nonwhite, 1 = white	68%		73%		67%	
Southern residence	1 = southern residence	38%		37%		38%	
Household income	1 = less than \$5000, 19 = \$200,000 or more	8 (= \$35,000–\$39,999)	6.1	9 (= \$40,000–\$49,999)	5.6	8 (= \$35,000–\$39,999)	6.2
Mainline protestant	Reference category = 0	13%		14%		13%	
Conservative protestant	1 = Conservative Protestant	41%		42%		40%	
Other protestant	1 = Other Protestant	8%		5%		8%	
Catholic	1 = Catholic	29%		30%		29%	
Other religion	1 = Other Religion	7%		6%		7%	

Table 1 (continued)

Variables	Coding description	Full sample		Used porn		Did not use porn	
		Mean response or %	SD	Mean response or %	SD	Mean response or %	SD
Unaffiliated	1 = Unaffiliated	2%		1%		2%	
Attendance frequency	1 = Never, 8 = Three times a week or more	5.2 (= 2–3 times a month)	1.9	4.9 (= 2–3 times a month)	1.9	5.3 (= 2–3 times a month)	1.8
Prayer frequency	1 = Never, 9 = More than three times a day	6 (= a few times a week)	2.3	5.3 (= once a week)	2.4	6.3 (= a few times a week)	2.1
Scripture fully inspired	0 = Scripture not fully inspired, 1 = scripture is fully inspired by God	73%		63%		77%	
N		682		188		494	

Table 2 Binary logistic regression models predicting participation in congregational leadership by pornography viewing frequency. *Source:* 2006–2012 PALS (N = 682)

Predictor	Held leadership position (W2)		Served on committee (W2)		Organized events/groups (W2)	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Held leadership position (W1)	11.353***	.261				
Served on committee (W1)			7.616***	.253		
Organized events/groups (W1)					3.972***	.229
Pornography viewing frequency	.731*	.134	.741*	.133	.894	.109
Male	1.024	.259	2.305***	.255	1.178	.236
Age	.985+	.008	.996	.009	.993	.008
Married	.910	.262	.807	.270	1.091	.256
Children living in home	.691	.265	.853	.274	1.242	.247
Bachelors Degree or Higher	1.176	.245	1.362	.253	1.188	.231
White	.944	.256	.882	.265	.742	.242
Southern residence	.993	.243	1.220	.250	1.002	.228
Household income	1.041*	.020	1.026	.020	1.042*	.019
Mainline protestant (reference)						
Conservative protestant	.820	.351	.727	.350	.636	.325
Other protestant	.257**	.517	.086***	.577	.414+	.478
Catholic	.394*	.377	.368	.383	.368**	.362
Other religion	.495	.490	.142**	.577	.669	.455
Unaffiliated	.335	.832	2.191	.722	1.145	.721
Attendance frequency	1.577***	.080	1.603***	.090	1.517***	.080
Prayer frequency	1.158*	.060	1.259***	.067	1.133*	.058
Scripture fully inspired	.352***	.294	.360***	.305	.710	.282
Constant	.059	.780	.012***	.856	.013***	.780
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²	.459		.429		.312	

All predictor variables are from 2006 to establish temporal precedence

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test)

pornography use and participation in leadership, models include a binary measure of pornography use because of the relatively small numbers of high-frequency porn viewers. Though all controls are included, I only present the relevant variables to conserve space. For both outcomes, Model 1 is the main effects model; Model 2 interacts porn use by gender; and Model 3 interacts porn use by being conservative Protestant or Catholic. Gender does not significantly moderate the influence of pornography use on holding a leadership position, but it does moderate pornography's influence on serving on a committee. Figure 2 illustrates the observed pattern. While men who used pornography at wave 1 are slightly less likely to serve on a committee in the next 6 years, women who used pornography diminish significantly in their likelihood of serving on a committee.

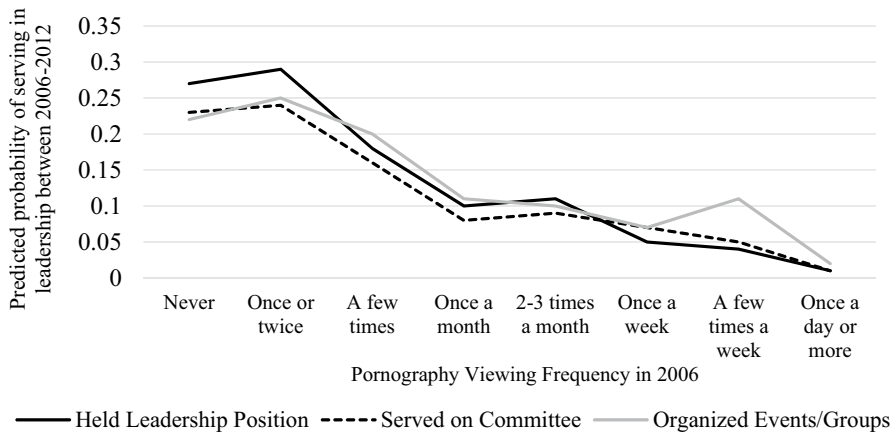


Fig. 1 Predicted probability of serving in congregational leadership at some capacity between 2006 and 2012 by how frequently someone viewed pornography in 2006

Looking at the moderating influence of religious tradition, Model 3 for both outcomes indicates that conservative Protestants and Catholics who viewed pornography are significantly less likely than mainline Protestants who view pornography to hold a leadership position later on and serve on a committee or board. Figure 3 illustrates these near-identical trends. For conservative Protestants and Catholics who viewed porn at wave 1, their likelihood of holding a leadership position or serving on a committee declines, while for mainline Protestants who used pornography, their likelihood of engaging in either of these leadership activities seems to increase.

Discussion and Conclusions

While recent studies show that more frequent pornography consumption predicts a decline in personal measures of religious commitment over time, no studies have considered whether pornography use could hold consequences for more social and organizational aspects of religion. Drawing on panel data from the 2006–2012 PALS, analyses demonstrated that more frequent pornography use at wave 1 of the study corresponds to a linear decline in the probability that a respondent will hold a leadership position or serve on a committee in their congregation within the following 6 years. Importantly, this effect was robust even when controls were included for various religious characteristics (attendance, prayer frequency, Scriptural beliefs) including whether respondents had previously served in those leadership capacities earlier on. Interaction effects also showed that pornography's negative influence on the likelihood of participating in congregational leadership is particularly pronounced for conservative Protestants and Catholics compared to mainline Protestants and women compared to men.

Before discussing the implications of this study, several data limitations should be acknowledged. First, I cannot determine precisely why persons who used

Table 3 Binary logistic regression models predicting participation in congregational leadership by any pornography use. *Source:* 2006–2012 PALS (N = 682)

Predictor	Held leadership position (W2)			Served on committee (W2)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Main model	Gender interaction	Religion interaction	Main model	Gender interaction	Religion interaction
Held leadership position (W1)	11.898*** (.262)	11.934*** (.262)	11.508*** (.267)	7.461*** (.251)	7.916*** (.256)	7.249*** (.256)
Served on committee (W1)						
Viewed pornography	.508* (.299)	.405+ (.489)	1.463 (.482)	.643 (.303)	.110** (.763)	3.119* (.506)
Male	.983 (.258)	.908 (.291)	1.017 (.259)	2.138** (.259)	1.495 (.290)	2.116** (.260)
Mainline protestant (reference)						
Conservative protestant	.772 (.349)	.775 (.350)	1.222 (.400)	.679 (.347)	.709 (.354)	1.306 (.401)
Catholic	.383* (.376)	.388* (.377)	.589 (.424)	.359** (.383)	.373* (.388)	.662 (.434)
Viewed pornography × male		1.429 (.597)			10.080** (.821)	
Viewed pornography × conservative prot.			.216* (.610)			.106*** (.629)
Viewed pornography × catholic			.199* (.809)			.108** (.833)
Controls	√	√	√	√	√	√
Constant	.038*** (.732)	.038*** (.732)	.026*** (.762)	.007*** (.811)	.007*** (.815)	.003*** (.865)

Table 3 (continued)

Predictor	Held leadership position (W2)			Served on committee (W2)		
	<i>Model 1</i> Main model	<i>Model 2</i> Gender interaction	<i>Model 3</i> Religion interaction	<i>Model 1</i> Main model	<i>Model 2</i> Gender interaction	<i>Model 3</i> Religion interaction
Nagelkerke Pseudo R ²	.458	.458	.468	.424	.440	.446

Odds ratios with standard errors in parentheses. All predictor variables are from 2006 to establish temporal precedence. All controls are included from Table 2

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test)

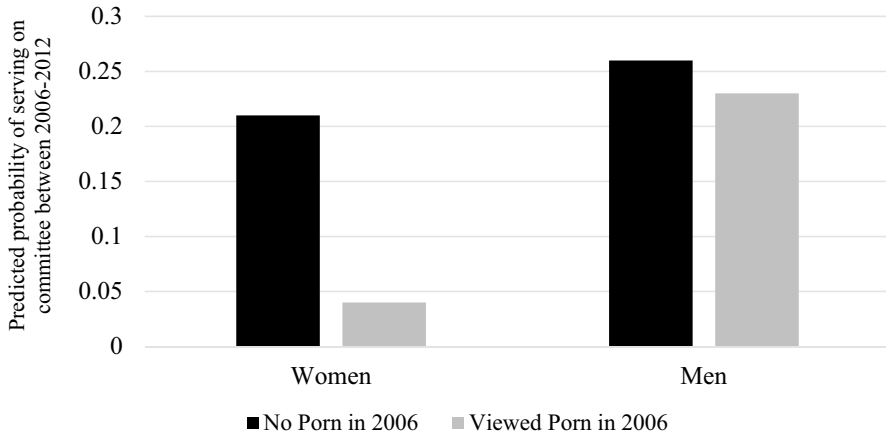
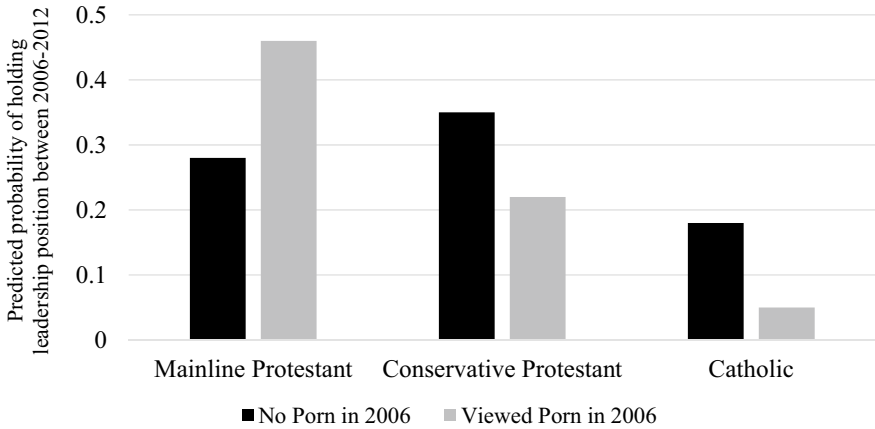


Fig. 2 Predicted probability of serving on committees or boards in one's congregation between 2006 and 2012 by whether someone viewed pornography in 2006 and gender

pornography more were less likely to serve in leadership all else being equal. While previous studies connect a decline in religious commitment to the internal dissonance, guilt, or shame stemming from moral incongruence (Grubbs and Perry 2018; Grubbs et al. 2018; Perry and Hayward 2017), it could also be that a respondent's pornography use was either confessed or “discovered” by relevant congregational leaders, and thus, the respondent was disqualified from serving in leadership because of their pornography use. Ultimately, qualitative interviews would be ideal to flesh out specific processes that connect pornography use with participation in religious leadership. An additional data limitation is that PALS only asked about pornography use at wave 1 and not wave 2, thus precluding analyses that would allow me to take into account change in pornography use over time. Perry and Schleifer (2018) found in General Social Survey panel data that the majority of Americans maintain their porn viewing habits across survey waves, and thus it is possible (if not likely) that PALS respondents who frequently used pornography at wave 1 were also regularly viewing pornography later on. However, I cannot demonstrate this definitively. Indeed it is possible that some respondents continued to use pornography between waves while others did not. In the latter case, we might expect that the likelihood of their congregational participation would be higher than the group that maintained consistent porn use patterns. But accounting for this possibility would require data tracking pornography use over two points in time.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study contribute to our understanding of (1) the extent of pornography's potential influence in peoples' lives and (2) some possible challenges facing American religious organizations and congregations due to the documented increase in pornography use among religious Americans. First, research has already shown that more frequent pornography use, likely as a consequence of internal dissonance, guilt, or shame, predicts a decline in religious commitment and belief for individuals. The findings of this study add that pornography use also seems to predict a lower likelihood of participating in what

A Probability of holding a leadership position.



B Probability of serving on a committee or board.

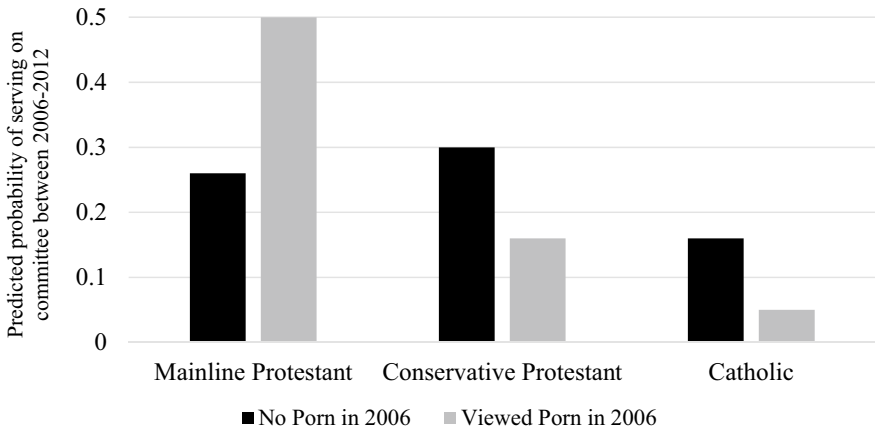


Fig. 3 Predicted Probability of serving in leadership at some capacity between 2006 and 2012 by whether someone viewed pornography in 2006 and religious tradition

are arguably the most social aspects of religious life: voluntary leadership of others. While habitual pornography use might cause guilt, discouragement, or frustration for religious Americans, resulting in a readjusting of values to deal with the internal dissonance (Grubbs and Perry 2018; Grubbs et al. 2018; Perry and Hayward 2017), my findings suggest that this pattern is also likely associated with a pulling away from situations where adherents would be responsible for the religious lives of others, as teachers, elders, or committee members. Alternatively, the lower likelihood of serving in leadership could reflect how faith communities restrict leadership opportunities to those who violate moral values surrounding sexual purity. The finding that women’s porn use was more negatively tied to serving on a committee later on could reflect both of these possibilities. Christian women in particular are more

likely to feel shame for pornography use since it is not normalized for them as for men (Assad 2016; Perry 2019), and they might also be more subject to sanctions that prevent them from leadership participation if their pornography use becomes known.

Similarly, for conservative Protestants and Catholics, traditions that have historically stigmatized pornography use and masturbation, porn viewers showed sharp declines in their likelihood of serving in religious leadership or on committees compared to mainline Protestants, for whom pornography use was actually associated with an *increase* in such activities. The latter finding is curious and at the very least reflects a comparative lack of stigma or moral concern among mainline Protestants regarding pornography compared to more conservative Christian traditions. Further, while evidence suggests conservative Christians who regularly use porn might withdraw from religious activities due to shame, pornography use may simply not register for many mainline Protestants as an activity to be much ashamed of, thus not appearing in conflict with religious participation.

Regardless of the mechanisms connecting pornography use to participation in congregational leadership, the findings of this study portend potential consequences for religious organizations and congregations. As pornography use has become increasingly available with each advance in media technology, its use has steadily increased both among the general population and among religious Americans themselves (Perry and Schleifer 2018a). This has happened even as pornography use remains strongly condemned within those religious communities (Burke 2016; Perry 2019; Thomas 2013). To the extent that pornography use—either by discouraging religious porn users or provoking censure and discipline from their faith community—leads to a lower likelihood that Americans will participate in congregational leadership, congregations could increasingly experience a dearth of lay leaders. This may be especially true for conservative Protestant or Catholic congregations who most strongly condemn pornography and whose affiliates showed declines in their likelihood of leadership participation relative to mainline Protestants. Alternatively, if much of the withdrawal from leadership comes from shame or fear of stigma, it is possible that congregations could mitigate these losses as pornography use becomes less associated with moral perversion and depravity but rather a challenge that many faithful adherents now “struggle” with (Thomas 2013).

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