**ORIGINAL RESEARCH**

# The Differential Impact of Religion on Political Activity and Community Engagement

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## Abstract

Many religions have an ethos of community betterment that can spur their members to contribute to society in meaningful ways. Yet much of the literature on religion and politics tends to focus on how places of worship increase explicitly partisan activities like voting or donating to a political campaign. Does religion affect community engagement in the same ways that it does political participation? A unique research design executed in Little Rock, Arkansas, USA brings together religious data on individual beliefs and behaviors, clergy messaging, and congregation culture to examine religion's effects on both political activity and community engagement. The results demonstrate that religion influences both types of behaviors, but not always in the same ways. For instance, it appears as though many congregations tend to develop cultures that encourage either community engagement or political activity, rather than both, with Black Protestant churches as an exception. Additionally, individuals that hold providential religious beliefs tend to have higher levels of community engagement but lower levels of political activity. These findings indicate that religion influences different types of participation differently.

**Keywords** Political participation · Religion · Community engagement · Providential · Political activity

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 may be unpopular, many congregants do hear about social justice issues, community problems, or volunteer opportunities at their place worship (Brewer et al. 2003), a trend that had increased over the years as more congregations have started providing social services and fewer are politically active (Fulton 2016). Data from the National Congregations Study demonstrates that congregations are much more likely to have small

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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).

Yet, much of the literature on the political influence of religion and congregations focuses on explicitly partisan or electoral political activities. By doing so, scholars may miss much of the politically-consequential work that congregations and individuals do. Religious organizations are often at the heart of communities and are engaged in solving community problems. Eighty-three percent of congregations provide services to help people outside their membership (Chaves and Eagle 2016) and many play long-standing roles in community systems (Chaves and Wineburg 2010). Many places of worship engage in activities benefit their local communities—like feeding the homeless, providing backpacks for needy school children, and helping people re-enter society after spending time in prison.

We know from existing literature that religion can influence traditional political activities like voting or donating to a campaign, but what about activities that center on community engagement? Talking with friends and family about community problems or attending neighborhood meetings, for instance, are activities that matter for society and democracy (Putnam et al. 1994; Andrews and Turner 2006; Williams and Schoonvelde 2018; Nalbandian 1999), but we do not know if religion influences them in different ways than conventional political activities.

While there are reasons to expect that religion will influence political and community activities 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; Fulton 2016). Community engagement may be viewed by congregants and clergy as more neutral, or even religiously-appropriate, ground. As many religious traditions uphold an ethic of community and of treating one's neighbors well (Wattles 1996; Ammerman 2005; Cnaan et al. 2002), religion may well exert a stronger influence over community-engaged activities.

A unique dataset of nearly 1500 congregants in 18 Little Rock congregations makes it possible to look closely at the complex ways that religion—as experienced through individual religious beliefs and behaviors, messages received from clergy leaders, and the unique dynamics of specific congregations—influence both political activities and community engagement.

## Religion's Influence on Political and Community Activities

People do not experience religion in a vacuum. Indeed, the congregation is often the locus of religious activity (Schwadel 2005; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Greenberg 2000) and is the heart of the analysis here. One's place of worship can influence

one's political and community activities in a number of different, and potentially overlapping, ways. Here, we look at the influences possible through attendance and participation, through hearing clergy messages, and through the particular culture of one's place of worship.

First, worship service 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; Liu et al. 2009) and with participation in civic and community organizations (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Lewis et al. 2013). Wald et al. (1988) argue that churches maintain and transmit social norms. They provide a space where frequent social interactions, information exchanges, and similar message exposure can lead congregation members to align their political views and behaviors (Mangum 2008; Stroope and Baker 2014).

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; Brown and Brown 2003), with consequences that matter for community, and not just political, engagement.

In addition to just attending religious services, the literature also indicates that being active in small groups, additional congregational activities, or even leadership at one's place of worship further encourage political and community engagement (Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Polson 2016; Sinha et al. 2011; Sarkissian 2012), although research indicates some variation by ethnicity (Djupe and Neiheisel 2012). Additionally, 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 attenders also have higher levels of community involvement (Robyn L. Driskell et al. 2008a, b; 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).

Norms and social contagion may lead to some degree of homogeneity in a congregation, but religion is deeply personal and diversity in theological beliefs exist within religious traditions and within congregations (Dougherty et al. 2009). A second path of religion's influence is through individual belief. One way to look at the impact of religious beliefs on political and community behavior is to look at the extent to which one believes God is involved in human affairs. Research on religious beliefs by Robyn Driskell et al. (2008a, b) 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. On the other hand, in a study that measures theological perceptions of God differently, 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). However powerful the influence of the congregation and its culture, any analysis of the impact of religion must leave room for an individual's beliefs, which can also be powerfully influential.

Worship services are also the places where congregants are likely to be exposed to the third major way that religion might influence their political and community behaviors: through the religious messages clergy leaders deliver. Clergy can play important roles as purveyors of political information and opinion leaders (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010), often linking for congregants the abstract world of religion and their own lived experiences (Glazier 2015), without which the connection would be lacking (Ellis and Stimson 2012). 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 2003, 2004; Calfano 2009; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Mattis 2001).

Speaking specifically of her ethnographic work in mainly Black 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). 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), clergy pronouncements do carry a lot of weight. Because most religious traditions tend to care about the community, clergy messages in this regard may carry more weight. Clergy have spoken out at key times in history to urge social justice on a broad scale, from the civil rights movement (Hadden 1970; Williams 2002), to nuclear weapons (Goldzwig and Cheney 1984; Russett 2015), to environmental issues (Lieberman 2004; Baugh 2016). Clergy almost certainly do so on a local scale at least periodically and their messages may similarly mobilize members to community action.

The characteristics and the culture of a place of worship can also have a significant impact on both political participation and community engagement, representing a fourth potential path of influence. Places of worship can be social and community centers (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Min 1992; Greenberg 2000; Ellison and George 1994; Jamal 2005) and, as members attend, social relationships and norms form the culture of a place of worship. Some research indicates that a culturally homogenous environment can impact the development of politically-relevant civic skills, like those useful for leading meetings (Djupe and Gilbert

2006), whereas other research indicates that a culturally diverse congregation is more likely to be engaged in community service (Polson 2016).

Polson (2016) argues that the context of a congregation makes an important difference in how it might engage with the community. In Indonesia, for instance, Lussier (2019) finds that mosques offer fewer prospects for their worshippers to develop civic skills than do churches. The structure of worship services, size of the congregation, degree of hierarchical autonomy, and even the management style can affect the culture of a congregation (see also Cavendish 2000). If a congregation has an ethos of helping the community, attenders are more likely to be involved in a local community service group or in a political advocacy group (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 worship service attendance and friendships. In another example, Johnson et al. (2013) compare the type and frequency of volunteering among Mormons, Catholics, and non-Catholic Christians. They find that, because Mormon congregations focus on family and serving within those congregations, respondents who internalize those values were significantly more likely to volunteer within their own congregation.

In short, the culture of a congregation matters. Particular religious traditions may be affiliated with particular political and social attitudes and even community organizations (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Loveland et al. 2008). 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), whereas a social gospel emphasis might lead to more community participation (McClure 2014; Barnes 2011). The specific historical-political experiences and worship practices of a church may also lead to different political activities, as a great deal of literature focused on Black Protestant churches has found (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, and within individuals who identifying as belonging to those traditions, but the culture of a religious tradition and of a specific congregation can influence the political activity and/or community engagement of its members.

The question remains: is this influence consistent across political and community behaviors? Does religion more strongly influence political action, perhaps because it is less often connected to partisan politics? Or is religion more likely to influence community action, which may be more likely to be viewed as within religion's wheelhouse? Findings from the existing literature lead to the following four hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 1:* attendance at religious services will have a positive impact on both political activity and community engagement.
- *Hypothesis 2:* providential religious beliefs will have a negative impact on political activity and a positive impact on community engagement.
- *Hypothesis 3:* clergy messages will have a significant impact on both political activity and community engagement.
  - *H3a*: clergy messages about voting will have a positive impact on political activity.
  - *H3b*: clergy messages about political topics will have a positive impact on political activity.
  - *H3c*: clergy messages about volunteering will have a positive impact on community engagement.
- *Hypothesis 4:* congregational culture will have a significant impact on both political activity and community engagement.
  - *H4a*: those who attend a congregation with a strong political culture will have higher levels of political activity.
  - *H4b*: those who attend a congregation with a strong community culture will have higher levels of community engagement.

## Data and Methods

Do the same kinds of religion variables that lead to higher levels of political activity also lead to higher levels of community engagement? There may be important similarities and differences across these different types participation, but no research yet directly compares individual-level religion variables and congregational influence within the same study population. Here, I examine the political and community participation of a large and diverse sample of church-attending survey respondents, who participated in the Little Rock Congregations Study.

The Little Rock Congregations Study is an ongoing research project examining the impact of community engagement by congregations within the city limits of Little Rock. Little Rock is an urban state capital in the Southern United States. The South as a region tends to be more religious (Putnam and Campbell 2012), with the Black Church in particular even thought of as a "semi-voluntary" institution in some areas of the South (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Little Rock is a racially divided city with about 50% of the population ethnically non-Hispanic white and about 42% of the city ethnically Black or African-American (U.S. Census Bureau 2017),

containing affluent suburbs, rural areas, and poor, urban areas where religion tends to thrive (McRoberts 2005). This unique and diverse profile makes Little Rock a fascinating place to examine the influence of religion on political and community engagement.

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 Little Rock, for a response rate of 22.4%).

The 18 congregations (with the percentage of the sample they make up in parentheses) represent four Evangelical (18.62%), four Black Protestant (26.37%), three Catholic (29.06%), and three Mainline Protestant congregations (16.84%).[1] One congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon, 2.40%), one Jewish temple (1.03%), one Muslim mosque (2.87%), and one congregation of the Unitarian Universalist church (2.81%) were also included in the sample. Little Rock 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 5318 congregant surveys were distributed and 1440 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 21.4%.[2] In the analyses that follow, the majority of the data used come from these congregant surveys. In additional to the individual-level data, congregation averages and clergy responses regarding congregation characteristics are used to create variables at the congregation level. A full description of all variables, along with descriptive statistics, is presented in Table 1.

Because the dependent variables are counts and not normally distributed, Poisson models are most appropriate. Clustered standard errors are used to account for the interdependence of the 1440 responses clustered by 18 congregations (Primo et al. 2007), a widely used strategy for correcting for violations of nonindependence (Musca et al. 2011; Huang 2016). An alternative modeling strategy would have been to use a multi-level model (MLM), which is intended to account for dependence present in nested data (i.e., individuals nested in congregations) and result in more accurate standard errors (Snijders and Bosker 1999), but using a Poisson regression and clustering standard errors is a more appropriate modeling strategy here for two reasons. First, because some congregations are quite small, with only a few dozen respondents, clustering is a better option (Thomas et al. 2005; Thomas and Heck 2001; Coyne et al. 2010). Second, while MLM is a powerful modeling technique,

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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 resulting estimates (King et al. 2001). I used the "ice" package created by Patrick Royston (2005a, b, 2009) to generate 10 imputed datasets for analysis.

**Table 1** Question Wording and Descriptive Statistics

| Variable name | Question wording | Descriptive statistics |
|---|---|---|
| **Dependent variables** | | |
| Political activity | In the past year, have you: 11 activities listed. Response options for each are: No (1), Yes, once or twice (2), Yes, a few times (3), or Yes, many times (4).<br><br>Activities<br>Tried to persuade someone to vote<br>Donated money to a political candidate or campaign<br>Worked as a volunteer for a political candidate or campaign<br>Attended a political rally<br>Stuck a campaign bumper sticker on your car or window<br>Participated in a local political or community group<br>Participated in a national political group<br>Contact public officials on a political or social issue<br>Wrote a letter to a newspaper editor about a political issue<br>Posted or shared something political through social media (like Facebook or Twitter) | Range: 10 to 40<br>Mean = 12.25<br>S.D. = 4.67<br>Cronbach's alpha: 0.82 |
| Community engagement | 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).<br><br>I do things to make the community a better place<br>I am aware of important needs in the community<br>Becoming involved in political or social issues is a good way to improve the community<br>I rarely talk with my friends and/or family about community problems (reversed) | Range: 4 to 20<br>Mean = 16.62<br>S.D. = 2.49<br>Cronbach's alpha: 0.74 |
| **Independent variables** | | |
| *Individual religious beliefs and behaviors* | | |
| Attendance | How often do you attend religious services? Scale from Occasionally (1) to Multiple times a week (5) | Range: 1 to 5<br>Mean = 3.97<br>S.D. = 0.89 |
| Involvement | I often participate in activities and groups in this congregation. Likert agreement scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) | Range: 1 to 5<br>Mean = 1.94<br>S.D. = 1.00 |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Variable name | Question wording | Descriptive statistics |
|---|---|---|
| Scripture reading + prayer | 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) | Range: 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) | Range: 2 to 10 Mean = 7.94 S.D. = 1.47 |
| *Clergy messages* | | |
| Political activity | 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? | Range: 3 to 9 Mean = 5.32 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 | Range: 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 |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Variable name | Question wording | Descriptive statistics |
|---|---|---|
| *Congregation culture* | | |
| Congregation size | From a question asked on a survey 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 |
| Political views similar to congregation | 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 |
| Mean congregation 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 engagement | 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 |
| 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%) |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Variable name | Question wording | Descriptive statistics |
|---|---|---|
| *Individual controls* | | |
| Cares about election | 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) | Range: 1 to 5 Mean = 4.54 S.D. = 0.86 |
| Political efficacy | Combination of two questions, both with a Likert agreement scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) Government is too complicated for me to understand (reverse coded) I believe I can personally make a difference in my community | Range: 2 to 10 Mean = 7.78 S.D. = 1.58 |
| Nonwhite | What is your race/ethnicity? Response options: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Other. All responses that are not White are coded nonwhite | N = 462 (33.5%) |
| Male gender | What is your gender? Male (1) Female (0) | N = 530 (38.2%) |
| Age | Year 2016 minus response to the question: In what year were you born? | Range 18 to 100 Mean = 54.85 S.D. = 16.95 |
| Education | What is the highest year in school/degree you have received? Five response options from Less than High School (1) to Post-graduate (5) | Range: 1 to 5 Mean = 3.97 S.D. = 0.95 |
| Ideology | 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) | Range: 1 to 5 Mean = 3.22 S.D. = 1.15 |

clustering standard errors allows researchers to more simply address the heterogeneity between the observations in nested data (Huang 2016).

## Dependent Variables

There are two dependent variables of interest examined in the models that follow: political activity and community engagement. Political activity 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 political participation (Cronbach's alpha: 0.82). The second major dependent variable is community engagement, 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. Responses to these four questions are summed into a composite measure of community engagement (Cronbach's alpha: 0.74).

These two dependent variables are different in important ways. The political participation battery contains more questions and has greater variance (see summary statistics in Table 1). The questions in the community engagement battery are less directly focused on specific activities. Unlike other research on the influence of religion on civic engagement, which measures specific acts of volunteerism or leadership in civic or community organizations (e.g., Robyn L. Driskell et al. 2008a, b), the dependent variable here is a broader measure of both one's actions in the community (i.e., doing things to make the community a better place) and one's feelings about community involvement (i.e., being involved is a good way to improve the community). The two dependent variables may be interrelated and influence one another, although they are only correlated at 0.16. 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 ways which religion might influence the political and community-engaged behaviors of congregation members discussed in the literature above, including 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 four measures of this category of influence. The first two, used to assess Hypothesis 1, are frequency of attendance at worship services, and the related measure of participation in activities and groups at one's place of worship, representing congregational activity beyond attendance. Third is a measure of devotional religious 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 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 providential religious belief, which gets at the idea that God is in control with a divine plan that individuals can help bring about by seeking God's guidance (Glazier 2017). This belief is measured through a combination of two questions: one agreement question about God's plan that they have a part to play in, and one about the extent to which religion provides guidance in the respondent's daily life.

In terms of clergy messages, there are three types of messages included in the models. For each of these messages, the variable measures the respondent's perception of the frequency of the clergy message.[3] 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; McClendon 2019; Welch et al. 1993).

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.

When it comes to measuring the culture of a congregation, the models include a number of different variables. First, from the clergy survey, is a categorical variable for the size of the congregation. Second, because civic skills may be best developed in homogenous religious environments (Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Whitehead and Stroope 2015), and because political homogeneity tends to decreases political activity (Djupe and Gilbert 2009), the models include a measure of the respondent's perceived political similarity to the rest of the congregation. Third, are five binary control variables for Evangelical, Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim religious traditions (leaving Mainline Protestants as the reference category).

Fourth, is a measure of the political culture of the congregation, through the mean political activity score of the congregation, excluding the respondent. Fifth and similarly, is a measure of the community engagement culture of the congregation, through the mean community engagement 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.

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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.

With so many religion variables in the models, collinearity is a natural concern, and some variables are correlated with one another. For instance, attendance at religious services is correlated with participation in activities and groups at − 0.408 and with scripture reading and prayer at 0.411. And scripture reading and prayer are correlated with providentiality at 0.442, the highest correlation in the models. Yet, there are important theoretical reasons, supported by the literature presented above, for believing that these distinct measures will independently influence the variables of interest and should thus be included. No other correlations are above 0.299, indicating that, despite the high number of religion variables in the models, collinearity is not a major concern.

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, political activity (in the community engagement model only), and community engagement (in the political activity model only).

## Results

The results of the Poisson models run on the political activity and community engagement 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 11 religious variables and six religious tradition controls, only one—clergy sermons encouraging political activity—influences both political activity and community-engagement significantly and in the same direction. In fact, two of the religion independent variables predict significant and different directions of influence for the two dependent variables, nine are significant for one but not the other, and five have no significant influence on either type of activity.

Looking at each of the independent variables in turn, religion clearly affects both political activity and community engagement, but in very different ways. Attendance at religious services is positively associated with political activity, a finding consistent with the expectations of H1, but it has no significant effect on community engagement. Congregational participation beyond attendance, things like participating in choir practice or small group discussions, on the other hand, has no significant effect on political activity and actually has a negative impact on community engagement. 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.

Devotional religious behaviors of scripture reading and prayer have a consistently insignificant effect on both dependent variables. Providential religious beliefs, on the other hand, have a differential effect on political activity and community engagement, consistent with the expectations of Hypothesis 2. 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 politics but more likely to get involved in

**Table 2** Poisson models of political activity and community engagement

|  | Political activity | Community engagement |
|---|---|---|
| *Individual religious belief and behavior* | | |
| Worship service attendance | 0.027*** (0.009) | − 0.004 (0.003) |
| Congregational participation | − 0.001 (0.009) | − 0.024*** (0.004) |
| Scripture reading + prayer | 0.007 (0.007) | 0.008 (0.001) |
| Providentiality | − 0.039*** (0.010) | 0.016*** (0.003) |
| *Clergy messages* | | |
| Political activity sermons | 0.017*** (0.005) | 0.005*** (0.001) |
| Political topics sermons | 0.013*** (0.004) | − 0.003 (0.001) |
| Community sermons | 0.003 (0.007) | − 0.004 (0.002) |
| *Congregation culture* | | |
| Congregation size | 0.002 (0.011) | 0.010** (0.003) |
| Political views similar to congregation | − 0.033** (0.013) | 0.003 (0.004) |
| Politically active culture | 0.045*** (0.009) | 0.001 (0.003) |
| Community-engaged culture | − 0.029 (0.015) | 0.017*** (0.004) |
| Evangelical tradition | 0.018 (0.026) | − 0.007 (0.010) |
| Black protestant tradition | 0.020 (0.039) | − 0.007 (0.015) |
| Catholic tradition | 0.006 (0.039) | 0.002 (0.013) |
| Mormon tradition | 0.064* (0.026) | 0.002 (0.009) |
| Jewish tradition | − 0.098* (0.039) | 0.040** (0.016) |
| Muslim tradition | 0.0009 (0.035) | 0.036*** (0.010) |
| *Individual controls* | | |
| Political activity | – | 0.002 (0.001) |
| Community engagement | 0.017 (0.010) | – |
| Cares about election | 0.061*** (0.012) | 0.002 (0.004) |
| Political efficacy | 0.016* (0.007) | 0.053*** (0.010) |
| Nonwhite | − 0.005 (0.040) | 0.014 (0.015) |
| Male | 0.019 (0.017) | − 0.007 (0.010) |
| Age | 0.0007 (0.0005) | 0.004 (0.002) |
| Education | 0.374*** (0.008) | − 0.009** (0.003) |
| Conservative ideology | − 0.042*** (0.012) | − 0.006* (0.003) |
| Constant | 1.787*** (0.262) | 1.896*** (0.110) |
| N | 29,703 | 29,703 |

Clustered robust standard errors in parentheses; standard errors clustered by congregation

$*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p < 0.001$

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. In this case, it seems that the same beliefs that encourage community engagement actually discourage traditional political activity. The effect size here is small. For each additional unit of providentiality, political activity decreases by only 0.039 and community engagement increases by only 0.016. Thus,

the weakest providential believer would only score about 0.5 points lower on the 30-point political activity scale and about 0.2 points higher on the 20-point community engagement scale than the strongest providential believer.

In terms of clergy political messaging, the type of message clergy deliver matters. Specifically, congregants who report hearing clergy messages about political activities like voting will be more politically active, in support of H3a, but surprisingly, they are *also* more likely to be active in the community. Clergy messages on potentially divisive political topics like abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious liberty, on the other hand, also motivate greater political activity, but do not have the same effect on community engagement. Somewhat surprisingly, messages about helping the community through volunteering or helping those less fortunate have no effect on either dependent variable, counter to the expectation of H3c that they would increase community engagement.

Why do we see a stronger effect from the political messages delivered by clergy? It may be in part due to rarity. Messages about voting and getting involved in other 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 a greater response from those hearing them.

When it comes the characteristics of the congregations, larger congregations tend to have members that are more engaged in the community, although only marginally so. Respondents who belong to a congregation with more than 500 members have a community engagement score of only 0.04 higher on a 20-point scale than those who belong to a congregation with fewer than 100 members. 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. The data in Table 2 indicate that those who view their coreligionists as politically similar to themselves are less likely to be politically active, although there is no effect for community engagement. Substantively, this means that someone who reports that their political views are "more [liberal/conservative]" than the rest of their congregation will also report participating in one additional political activity over the past two years—anything from donating to a campaign to trying to persuade someone to vote—compared to someone who reports that their political views are "about the same" as the rest of their congregation.

Finally, the political activity and community engagement cultures of the congregations are measured with a calculation for each individual congregant, made by taking the mean political activity score and the mean community engagement scores of all other attendees in their congregation. The result is two variables that do not include the personal scores of the respondents (and thus avoid endogeneity), but do provide a sense of the activity culture of the people each respondent worships with.

H4a hypothesized that if other members of a congregation engaged in political activities, it would have a positive effect on a respondent's own political activities. Similarly, H4b hypothesized that if other members of a congregation were engaged

in the community, it would have a positive effect on a respondent's own community engagement. Both of these relationships are present and significant in Table 2, indicating that the culture in the congregation as a whole creates an atmosphere that encourages political activity or community engagement at the individual level.

Interestingly, there also appears to be a trade-off effect. A respondent surrounded by co-religionists with high political activity is more likely to participate in political activities but the culture of political action has no effect on their community engagement. Similarly, in those congregation with community-engaged cultures, the members are more likely to be engaged in the community, but there is no effect on their political activity. This finding suggests that congregations may specialize in one type of activity over another. Limited resources may necessitate such a choice (Becker and Dhingra 2001).

This trade-off effect is further reinforced by the results of the religious tradition controls. The models include six religious tradition controls, with Mainline Protestants serving as the reference category. None of the six religious traditions was significantly more active in both political activity and community engagement. The mid-sized congregation (around 150 members) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) was significantly more politically active, and the small Jewish congregation (around 50 members) was significantly less politically active, than the Mainline Protestant reference category. In terms of community engagement, both the Jewish congregation and the large Muslim congregation (around 400 members) were significantly more active. For the Jewish congregation in particular, the data seems to indicate a congregation culture that has made the trade-off and prioritizes community engagement over politics. This may also be a decision of necessity for minority religious traditions in the South--community engagement is less threatening and controversial than political activity.

The additional individual-level control variables included in the models provide further insight into what drives both community engagement and political activity. Caring about who wins the election is only positively associated with traditional political activity, whereas political efficacy positively affects both political activity and community engagement, although the effect for community engagement is about five times as strong.

The demographic control variables also reveal some important differences. Those with more education are significantly more likely to participate in political activities and very slightly less likely to participate in community engagement. Additionally, those who hold a conservative ideology are less likely to be politically active and also, but only slightly, less likely to be engaged in the community.

Contrary to some previous literature, Black Protestant attendees in this sample are not significantly different from the Mainline Protestant reference category, in terms of their political activity, when the other variables in the model are accounted for. However, difference of means tests using the binary Black Protestant variable do reveal significantly higher levels of traditional political activity by Black Protestant congregants ($M = 12.59$, $SD = 4.23$), compared to all 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 all other religious traditions ($M = 19.96$, $SD = 3.42$), t(30,385) $= -24.63$, $p = 0.00$.

**Table 3** Poisson models of political activity and community engagement, Black Protestant congregations only

|                                          | Political activity | Community engagement |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| *Individual religious belief and behavior* |                    |                      |
| Worship service attendance               | 0.028^(0.016)      | 0.006 (0.006)        |
| Congregational participation             | − 0.007 (0.015)    | − 0.019*** (0.001)   |
| Scripture reading + prayer               | − 0.006 (0.007)    | 0.002 (0.002)        |
| Providentiality                          | 0.008 (0.010)      | 0.003 (0.003)        |
| *Clergy messages*                        |                    |                      |
| Political activity sermons               | 0.013 (0.010)      | 0.003 (0.003)        |
| Political topics sermons                 | 0.021*** (0.005)   | − 0.006*** (0.002)   |
| Community sermons                        | 0.004 (0.005)      | − 0.001 (0.005)      |
| *Congregation culture*                   |                    |                      |
| Congregation size                        | 0.058 (0.041)      | 0.023*** (0.007)     |
| Political views similar to congregation  | − 0.023^ (0.013)   | 0.003 (0.004)        |
| Politically active culture               | − 1.020^ (0.572)   | − 0.003 (0.119)      |
| Community-engaged culture                | 0.825^ (0.438)     | 0.031 (0.094)        |
| *Individual controls*                    |                    |                      |
| Political activity                       | –                  | 0.004*** (0.005)     |
| Community engagement                     | 0.038*** (0.004)   | –                    |
| Cares about election                     | − 0.002 (0.019)    | 0.012 (0.013)        |
| Political efficacy                       | 0.013 (0.015)      | 0.034*** (0.004)     |
| Male                                     | 0.022^ (0.012)     | − 0.014^ (0.008)     |
| Age                                      | 0.000 (0.0005)     | 0.000 (0.003)        |
| Education                                | 0.055*** (0.015)   | − 0.011*** (0.002)   |
| Conservative ideology                    | − 0.036*** (0.005) | − 0.006 (0.003)      |
| Constant                                 | − 3.404 (2.313)    | 2.191*** (0.536)     |
| N                                        | 7850               | 7850                 |

Clustered robust standard errors in parentheses; standard errors clustered by congregation

^$p < .1$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Because these data were collected in an urban center in the Southern United States, they contain a large sample of respondents from Black Protestant Churches, making it possible to dig more deeply into these data. The Black Church historically has been an institution that has bridged religion, politics, and community and played a central role in the lives of many African-Americans (Taylor et al. 2003; Billingsley 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Table 3 presents results for Poisson models of political activity and community engagement for just respondents from Black Protestant congregations. The religious tradition controls and the race/ethnicity control are dropped from these models, but the remaining variables are the same as for Table 2 and the previous model specifications.

The results are similar in many ways, with some key differences that illustrate how, at least for the respondents from the Black Protestant congregations in this

Southern, urban sample, the trade-off between politics and community is less clear. For instance, in the models of just Black Protestant congregants, attending with other members that are engaged in the community does not increase one's own community engagement, as it does with the full sample, and attending with politically active congregants actually decreases one's own political activity ($p = 0.075$). Additionally, unlike in the full model, being politically active is positively and significantly associated with community engagement, and the inverse is also true. Thus, for Black Protestant churches in the South, politics and community seem intertwined, but for the rest of the sample, there is more of a trade-off at play.

Even still, we do see some of the same religion variables having the same effects in Table 3—congregational participation tends to decrease community engagement, larger congregations tend to be more engaged in the community, and worship service attendance is associated with greater political participation ($p = 0.085$). There is an interesting change when it comes to clergy sermons. For the full sample, political messages about voting and participating politically were significant both in terms of encouraging political activity and in terms of encouraging community engagement. In the Black Protestant sample, political sermons on controversial topics like abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious liberty significantly increased political activity and significantly decreased community engagement, the latter effect potentially caused by message divisiveness. Here again the impact of the message may come through its rarity. Whereas the full sample heard sermons about political participation the least ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.87$), the Black Protestant congregation heard those sermons fairly often ($M = 7.15$, $SD = 1.46$), significantly more often than they heard sermons about these divisive political topics ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 2.07$), t(7957) = 58.86, $p = 0.00$. They also heard about political topics far less than they heard sermons on community topics ($M = 8.02$, $SD = 1.34$), t(7959) = 95.44, $p = 0.00$.

Thus, clergy may have the greatest effect by wielding their sermons selectively. Sermons on political activity tend to encourage both political activity and community engagement, but when they are used frequently, as in Black Protestant churches, they may tend to lose their effect on congregants. Sermons on more controversial political topics may have the effect of getting people politically active, but their potentially divisive nature may actually discourage community engagement.

## 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 where they worship can all influence the ways they engage with politics and community. The data presented here examine two different types of activities that matter in a democratic society: traditional political activities like voting and writing letters to representatives, and community-engaged political activities like talking about community issues with friends and doing things to make the community a better place. The results indicate that religion influences these two types of activities in very different ways. Indeed, only one religion variable—clergy sermons encouraging political activity—influences both types of

activity significantly and in the same direction. Of particular interest are religion variables that have a differential influence—that influence the two types of activity significantly and in opposite directions.

Providential religious believers—those people who believe God guides a divine plan that they can help bring about—are less likely to participate in traditional partisan politics and more likely to engage in the community. 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 data indicate that, at least for this sample of church attenders in a capital city in the Southern United States, the culture of the congregation can have a significant influence on the behaviors of the congregants. When others in your congregation are active in politics, you are more likely to be, too. Similarly, when others in your congregation are engaged in the community, you are more likely to be, too. 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 additional evidence that support some congregations viewing political activities and community engagement in zero sum terms. 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 the community.

In short, religion matters, but its influence is not uniform. Although political activity and community engagement are related and both have important consequences in a democratic society, a direct comparison of both concepts on the same study population reveals that they are driven by very different religious factors. For democratically-minded congregation leaders, their flocks seem to face a trade-off between focusing on politics or focusing on the community. Although this doesn't necessarily have to be the case. These data are drawn from an urban community in the Southern United States and the models of just Black Protestant congregations show a pattern of mutual influence between political activity and community engagement. Congregation culture can be fluid and context dependent. That can make it challenging to study, but its ability to influence individual behaviors make it well worth the effort. The data presented here reveal that religion matters for both political activity and community engagement, but it often matters in different ways, revealing the need for more nuanced investigations of religion's influence on public life.

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