



The consequences of religious strictness for political participation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary media portray highly religious Americans as active political conservatives. This article examines how church strictness influences political participation by churchgoers. We argue that church strictness influences aspects of a person's life that are known to influence political participation, so assessing the effect of religion on participation requires considering intermediate factors. To evaluate our theory, we analyze the 2006 Portraits of American Life Study, which focused on the role of religion in society. We develop a recursive model of political participation, using multiple imputation to address missingness in the survey. The results indicate that indirect effects of strictness—through civic involvement, income, and religious participation—mitigate the assumed direct effect of strictness upon political participation. We conclude that, although religious groups show political activism in some specific arenas, strict churches are not strong political mobilizers in general, as many media portrayals may lead one to believe.

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1. Introduction

Scholars of religion and politics in the United States have long identified the nation's robust religious marketplace and free market for religious vendors as a driving variable in the vibrancy of religiosity in the country. Yet

many popular media portrayals of religious actors who are strategic and successful in competing for parishioners characterize the same individuals and organizations as serving as unified and fervent mobilizers on behalf of conservative political causes and the Republican Party. As Campbell notes, conservative Christians are perceived as "a potent electoral force" and "from the writings of both political scientists and pundits, one might be led to believe that white evangelical Protestants are a wildly participatory religious group" (Campbell, 2004, p. 155). Over the past few decades, particularly since *Roe v. Wade* and the formation of clergy-driven interest groups such as Focus on the Family, socially conservative churches have become increasingly visible in their political appeals (Gilgoff, 1998). The churches aligned with this movement are identified by the requirements they place upon members, mandating adherence to a particular set of social norms and investment in religious activities—investments that make such religious firms comparatively strict. In reaction to this

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trend, the media often paint the picture that adherents to strict religions are strongly tied to the Republican Party and consistently can be mobilized on the party's behalf (Brindt & Abrutyn, 2010). To address this tension in portrayals, this article asks the following question: How does the strictness of an individual's religion influence his or her level of participation?

Many media portrayals of the alliance between socially conservative denominations and the Republican Party imply these churches serve as mobilizing agents for the GOP, focusing on the political messages that church leaders support regarding global warming, abortion, gay marriage, and candidates deemed appropriately devout. Political pundits regularly attribute significant power to strict and evangelical groups—particularly in shaping national elections—treating evangelical congregations that are similar in doctrine as uniform in their desire to be politically active (Hudson, 2008; Ruotsila, 2008). Dana Milbank, in a comment characteristic of several pundit portrayals of the election, characterized the Bush campaign's success in 2004 as: "It was a pure and simple play to the Republican conservative base. . . The evangelicals didn't just come on board for him: They were campaigning; they were at events; they were the poll volunteers; they were making the phone banks, the phone calls" (Milbank, 2004).

By contrast, a lot of scholarly research shows that the connection between strictness and political participation may not be as clear. In particular, we build on Campbell's (2004) work, which observes that evangelical Protestants, in a general setting, are not as participatory in politics as the rest of the public. Campbell makes the argument that the time members of evangelical Protestant denominations spend on church-related activities comes at the expense of participation in the wider community. In concluding his study, Campbell calls for an extension of research into the political participation of religious groups that are more generally strict in their nature, or denominations that impose high membership costs (2004, p. 174). We continue to focus on Christian denominations and fill this research gap by analyzing political participation with a more comprehensive religious strictness measure.

This article proceeds first by reviewing the background on religion and political participation. We follow this discussion by developing a theory of how religious strictness shapes several aspects of individuals' lives, which in turn should influence their level of political participation. Next, the article presents the data and analysis we use, followed by the empirical results. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of our findings.

2. Background on religion and political participation

Although mass news outlets often portray members of strict Christian denominations as highly participatory, academic studies are more mixed on this point. Political participation does emerge among strict adherents *under certain circumstances*, but on balance there is little evidence that strictness *generally* raises political participation levels. The streams of research that are important to consider here are: general studies of political participation, the impact of

religious strictness on parishioners' lives, the participatory impact of political issues that are clearly tied to religion, and the impact of religious threat. We consider each literature in turn.

First, the general literature on political participation has observed that religion is important to several factors that have a major impact on participation. Rosenstone & Hansen argue that participation is an inherently social process, and people are more likely to participate when directly invited to do so and when they are connected to their communities. Their empirical results show that people are more prone to participate when they have been mobilized by a political party, have lived in the community for a long time, and own their own home (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003, p. 266–290). The authors also show that religious involvement correlates with political activities such as voting (p. 282). Similarly, the types of religious behaviors that most effectively increase political involvement also create obligations for members, further tying them to the church community (McClerking & McDaniel, 2005).

Djupe and Grant, though, show that a more detailed look is important to determine which religious congregants will engage in political activities beyond voting. In particular, parishioners who are recruited to politics by coreligionists, have a clear view of the congregation's political views, and attend church-based political meetings are most likely to participate (Djupe & Grant, 2001, p. 309). Further, some of the most politically active religious members are those who already are inclined to participate in politics—either because they do not regard religion as being more important than politics or because they already possess secular skills that contribute to participation (p. 311). This also fits with Wilcox's (1992) contrast between passive supporters of the Moral Majority and the organization's activists: Activists were quite involved politically, but passive supporters did not vote any more than nonsupporters.

In an article that questions how important religion is to voluntarism, Sablosky (2014, p. 550) agrees with other scholars that churches can train people in civic-minded skills, but observes that this is not the most effective way to teach people these abilities. Schwadel more specifically makes the point that participation in a church's education and small group activities raise activity in nonchurch associations, as opposed to simply attending worship services. On average, members of religiously conservative congregations are less likely to be active in nonchurch organizations, perhaps because members of such churches have fewer social connections outside the congregation (Schwadel, 2005, p. 167–168). Similarly, membership in distinctive churches—those that are stricter and require more personal investment from their members—actually diminishes involvement in other associations (Iannaccone, 1994, p. 1194; Schwadel, 2005). This finding is important because membership in non-religious associations serves as a bigger predictor of political participation.

The understanding presented in this section of the factors that generally shape political participation is important for constructing both theoretical and empirical models of participation. This past work will help us understand which variables can mediate the effect of strictness on participation, as well as which variables need to be controlled

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