



Religious involvement and group identification: The case of Hispanics in the United States



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the link between religious involvement and racial group identification among Hispanics in the United States. Relying on the multifaceted nature of religious involvement, this study focuses on five dimensions of religious involvement—church attendance, prayer, the importance one places on religion, one's belief in God's love, and religious affiliation. Using the data from the *Panel Study of American Religion and Ethnicity* (1st wave, 2006), this study employs regression analysis. The results show that, among the five dimensions of religious involvement, only church attendance has a significant effect on racial group identification; Hispanics who frequently attend church are more likely to identify with Hispanics. This study suggests that church attendance increases Hispanics' group identification for two reasons: first, because of the formation of Hispanic-oriented churches; and second, because of the intense interaction among Hispanics within their church communities.

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1. Introduction

Does religiosity increase racial group identification? This study examines that question by focusing on Hispanic groups in the United States. The consideration of this question is meaningful for the following reasons: The role of religious involvement in racial group identification has been considered from two opposing perspectives. Some, such as Lane (1959), Marx ([1843] 1977), Myrdal (1944), and Reed (1986), claim that by promoting an otherworldly orientation, religion dulls racial group identification. Others, such as Chong (1998), Ellison (1991), Mitchell (2005), and Wilcox and Gomez (1990), emphasize the ways in which religion can increase the psychological resources that enhance racial group identification. Considering the fact that there is, as yet, no clear consensus on this topic, it should be interesting to examine the link between religious involvement and group identification to see which opinion

the results of this study support. In doing so, this study will contribute to the existing literature, including the study of identity politics.

Everyone develops certain types of self-identity over time. To a large degree, the existing institutional, socio-structural, and socio-spatial contexts select what dimensions of our identity will be most important throughout our lives—whether it be gender, race, religion, or nationality (Cohen, 1989; Jenkins, 2000; Mitchell, 2005). The study of political attitudes and behaviors was originally characterized by a strong focus on the group nature of politics (Conover, 1984). Individuals' ties to various groups help to structure their political attitudes and thinking, thus influencing their behavior (Fowler, Hertzke, Olson, & Den Dulk, 2004; Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Mason, Toney, & Cho, 2011; Tajfel, 1981; Wald, Kellstedt, & Legee, 1993). Therefore, it is important to carefully examine the process through which one's social group membership takes on both psychological and political significance (Conover, 1984; Evans, Franco, Polinard, Wenzel, & Wrinkle, 2012). This study focuses mainly on the role of one's religious group in the process of identification formation, but in an

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empirical analysis, it also considers the impacts of other social groups in terms of nationality, gender, age, and income. Therefore, the results of this study will determine the social groups that influence group identification and will thereby provide meaningful insights into identity politics.

For Hispanics, the church is one of the principal centers of political and social activity. By most indicators of religious involvement, Hispanics rank high. Nearly 92% are affiliates – 68% are Catholics and 15% are Protestants¹ – and about 50% are regular churchgoers.² By exploring the variety of ways in which religious beliefs, values, and behaviors lead Hispanics to construct ideas about self and others, this study will investigate the significance of the religious involvement of Hispanic groups in forming their identification as Hispanics.

2. Theoretical framework

Religious involvement is a comprehensive term used to refer to the numerous aspects of religious activity, dedication, and belief. Some scholars note the significance of the multidimensionality of individuals' religious involvement and point out that religious involvement should be viewed as a complex concept with diverse elements (Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Brink, 1993; Hill & Hood, 1999; Legee, Wald, & Kellstedt, 1993; Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995). For example, Gunnoe and Beversluis (2009) conceptualize religion as encompassing both the institutional/formal expressions of one's relation to the sacred, as well as the more subjective aspects. Cornwall, Albrecht, Cunningham, and Pitcher (1986) identify several dimensions of religion, based on the understanding that there are at least three components to religious behavior: knowing (cognition – the mind), feeling (affect – the spirit), and doing (behavior – the body). On the other hand, King and Shafer (1992) focus on four dimensions of religion: the importance of religion, Christian rebirth, religious preference, and church attendance. For another example, in the work of Desmond and Soper (2009), religion is measured by combining two items related to the frequency of church attendance and the importance of religion. Lastly, Allen et al. (1989) identify five indicators of religious involvement: the frequency an individual reads religious books, the frequency an individual listens to religious programs, the frequency an individual prays, the frequency an individual asks someone to pray for him or her, and the degree to which an individual considers him- or herself to be religious.

Based on the existing literature, this study defines religious involvement as being actively involved with one's religion in terms of behavior and attitude, and assumes that there are multiple dimensions in religious involvement. I discuss these various dimensions via the divisions

of believing, behaving, and belonging (Green, 2007; Kohut, Green, Keeter, & Toth, 2000; Legee et al., 1993; McKenzie & Rouse, 2012; Smidt, Kellstedt, & Guth, 2009). I focus more specifically on the following five indicators: the frequency of church attendance, the frequency of prayer, the importance one places on religion, one's belief in God's love, and one's religious affiliation (evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, or Catholic). These indicators fit into the three divisions of believing, behaving, and belonging. Frequency of church attendance and frequency of prayer belong to the behaving division; the importance one places on religion and one's belief in God's love belong to the believing division. The belonging division includes religious affiliation. This does not by any means exhaust all aspects of religious involvement. However, many would agree that these five are important dimensions of religious involvement, and they have been frequently used by researchers.

Group identification often figures as the central concept in theories of both ethnic and racial mobilization. Discussions of group identification typically make reference to an individual's perceived self-location in a group (Conover, 1984). Furthermore, most treatments of the concept of group identification incorporate the idea of a psychological tie to some social group (Conover, 1984; Gurin et al., 1980; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981; Tajfel, 1981). Relying on the literature, in this paper I define group identification as self-awareness of one's objective membership in a group and a psychological sense of attachment or closeness to the group (Conover, 1984; Ellison, 1991; Kashima, Kashima, & Hardie, 2000; Miller et al., 1981; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia, & Branscombe, 2009; Weerd & Klendermans, 1999).

The role of religiosity in group identification has been considered in two opposing ways. Some scholars (Dollard, 1937; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Glenn, 1964; Lane, 1959; Marx, [1843] 1977; Myrdal, 1944; Reed, 1986; Stump, 1987) have long claimed that churches hinder the development of collective identification.³ They argue that religion embraces an otherworldly theological orientation, focusing on the idea of an afterlife as a source of solace; amelioration of suffering is to be achieved through personal piety and emotional worship styles. Moreover, they suggest that religion acts as an opiate on the collective consciousness and provides oppressed groups with no more than pacification to their subordinated status in society. Lane (1959), for example, maintains that religion offers both blacks and newly arrived immigrants an otherworldly solace for temporal ills, which discourages the formation of collective identification. Similarly, Reed (1986) argues that the church suppresses mass political awareness and the formation of group identification.

Recently, however, an increasing amount of research has contradicted the earlier views. For instance, Ellison

¹ The figure comes from the report, "Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion," which was published by the Pew Research Center in 2007.

² "Regular" consists of respondents who attend churches more than once a month.

³ An anonymous reviewer suggested that perhaps the earliest advocate of the notion that religion and faith make one less nationalistic was the Apostle Paul, and his assertion can be found in Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

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