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Social Science Research

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Small groups, contexts, and civic engagement: A multilevel analysis of United States Congregational Life Survey data [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 December 2013

Revised 4 August 2014

Accepted 23 October 2014

Available online 1 November 2014

Keywords:

Civic engagement

Community

Small groups

Congregations

Social networks

Religion

ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that church-goers are more civically engaged than their non-church-going counterparts. Little is known, however, about how the popular phenomenon of small groups factors into this equation. In the present study, we examine relationships between small group participation at individual and congregation levels and civic engagement. Using multilevel modeling and national data on congregations and individuals from the U.S. Congregational Life Study ($n = 82,044$), we find that: (1) individual-level small group involvement is associated with four measures of civic engagement; (2) congregation-level small group participation is associated with both lower and higher civic engagement in the case of two outcomes; and (3) in the case of three civic outcomes, congregation-level small group participation moderates individual-level small group involvement such that small group members' civic activity more closely resembles the lower civic engagement of small group nonparticipants. In the case of one civic outcome, at high levels of overall small group participation, small group members' civic engagement drops below that of small group nonparticipants. Explanations for these findings, including a "crowding out" effect, are examined including their complex implications for debates regarding small groups, religious involvement, and civic engagement.

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1. Introduction

In *Sharing the Journey*, [Wuthnow \(1994b\)](#) argues that a new organizational form is sweeping across America—small groups. For Wuthnow, small groups seek to fill the void of social interaction and a sense of belonging that are evaporating amid the loss of community in America. Wuthnow suggests that small groups can “nudge” individuals “to play an active role in voluntary agencies,” and become civically engaged in service of the wider community ([Wuthnow, 1994b: 330](#)). In other words, small groups may do more than comfort the individual; small groups may also be an emerging engine of civic engagement.

Not everyone agrees. Scholars do not necessarily dispute the social and psychological benefits to individual small group members, but argue that small groups may not necessarily benefit the broader community ([Putnam, 2000](#)). Small groups can leave members in a social cul-de-sac, insulating them from more expanded social network contacts in the community or “bridging social capital,” the lack of which can have a variety of negative effects ([Lee and Bartkowski, 2004](#); [Tolbert et al.](#),

[☆] A portion of this research was presented at the 2011 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion annual meetings and was supported by the Henry Institute at Calvin College.

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1998). Inwardly-focused small groups bound individuals' social networks resulting in decreased engagement with broader civic opportunities and concerns, a "crowding out" effect due to increased opportunity costs (Frey, 1997a,b; Menchik and Weisbrod, 1987). Recent analyses of Wuthnow's data show that some religious small groups are linked to lower levels of civic engagement (Marcello and Perrucci, 2009). This association is somewhat puzzling given the robust links between individuals' church involvement and civic engagement in the United States (Putnam, 2000; Putnam and Campbell, 2010) and cross-nationally (Ruiter and De Graaf, 2006).

More research is needed to understand the relationship between congregation-based small group participation and civic engagement beyond the congregation. These issues are of broad concern given that religious congregations enjoy the highest levels of involvement among voluntary organizations in the United States (Putnam and Campbell, 2010:29–30) and a majority of the nation's largest congregations use small groups (Bird and Thumma, 2011).

Within this line of inquiry, recent studies highlight the role of religious contextual effects on civic engagement. A growing body of research examines the importance of religious contexts in civic engagement across national, local, and social network contexts (Borgonovi, 2008; Lim and MacGregor, 2012; Lewis et al., 2012; Ruiter and De Graaf, 2006). Recent research on commitment and voluntary behavior within religious congregations measures religious contextual effects at the organization level (Scheitle and Finke, 2008; Stroope, 2011a; Whitehead, 2010). In this literature, Whitehead (2010) finds that overall small group participation at the congregation level moderates the effects of individuals' religious characteristics on financial giving. Given this background, overall small group participation may also play a role in other forms of voluntary behavior and community engagement. The importance of congregational overall small group participation regarding the relationship between small groups and community civic engagement, however, remains unstudied.

To shed light on this gap in the literature on small groups, religion, and civic engagement, we develop and test three hypotheses concerning relationships between individual civic engagement and small group participation at the individual level, organization level, and their cross-level interplay. Four measures of civic engagement are examined in national data on 408 congregations and 83,564 members from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey using multilevel modeling techniques. Employing a multilevel "moral communities" framework and insights from organizational science, this study builds on prior contextual effects, religion, and civic engagement literature. Prior work is limited in that it (a) measures volunteering and commitment within religious congregations rather than volunteering for the community or civic engagement beyond the congregation, (b) focuses on general religious small groups instead of small groups in congregations, (c) measures the contextual effects of religion using geographic rather than organizational contexts, (d) uses data on individual measures or congregational measures but not measures at both levels simultaneously, and (e) does not use national samples of churches and individuals nested in those churches.

2. Religion and civic engagement

According to a growing body of research based on numerous data sets gathered across a variety of contexts and times, religious individuals are more civically engaged than nonreligious individuals (Lam, 2002; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). Important aspects of religious life, such as church attendance, are repeatedly found to be associated with civic engagement (Lam, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Schwadel, 2005; Wuthnow, 1996). Members of religious congregations volunteer more hours and more frequently than non-members and give away more money to both religious and secular causes (Putnam, 2000; Smidt et al., 2008). Frequency of religious behavior matters as well. Higher levels of attendance at religious worship services are associated with higher levels of volunteering and charitable giving (Brooks, 2003; Campbell and Yonish, 2003). While the relationship between religiosity and religious volunteering is clear, there is considerable evidence that religion also encourages greater levels of civic engagement through both volunteering in and charitable giving to nonreligious voluntary organizations (Brooks, 2003; Campbell and Yonish, 2003; Ruiter and De Graaf, 2006).

Two mechanisms are routinely cited to help explain the connection between religion and civic engagement. First, scholars argue that there is something important about religion itself that motivates individuals to be civically engaged (Lam, 2002; Loveland et al., 2005). Many faiths teach that adherents should care for fellow human beings. Belief in such religious teachings could lead individuals to volunteer or give of their resources (Ellison, 1992; Wuthnow, 1990). Private prayer and frequent reading of sacred scriptures are associated with greater levels of civic engagement (Lam, 2002; Loveland et al., 2005). Individuals who pair high levels of personal religious activity with high levels of public religious activity are especially likely to be civically engaged with both religious and secular organizations (Smidt et al., 2008).

A second mechanism used to explicate the relationship between religion and civic engagement is the power of social networks. The reason that religious individuals give and volunteer more than the non-religious is because religious individuals are connected to more people and those connections matter (Becker and Dhingra, 2001). It is the social networks religion encourages, and not anything about religion per se, that explain the relationship between civic engagement and religion (Putnam, 2000). This happens in several ways. Congregations operate as recruiting centers where people can be readily recruited for service (Wuthnow, 1991, 1994b). Congregations and religious activities can also highlight needs in the community to people who otherwise might not been made aware of such needs. The social networks explanation is especially persuasive considering that the effects of frequency of attendance are identical for those who attend secular groups (Campbell and Yonish, 2003). Individuals who consistently attend any group's meetings, no matter if the group is religious or secular, exhibit higher levels of civic engagement. Also, more associational memberships translate into greater levels of engagement

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