

Introduction

A Theory of Religious Influence on Political Behavior

AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS formed and joined associations devoted to every imaginable purpose, whether social, cultural, recreational, religious, or political. These tangible expressions of Americans' seemingly endless capacity for associational life have motivated scholarly inquiries since the early days of the republic. Thoughtful observers of American politics have contributed immensely to this literature, understanding that group activism models the conditions in which democratic forms of government may flourish. After observing the myriad forms of associational life throughout his travels in the early nineteenth-century United States, Tocqueville vested associations with the capacity to protect freedom from encroachment: "If each citizen did not learn . . . to combine with his fellow citizens for the purpose of defending [his freedom], it is clear that tyranny would unavoidably increase together with its equality" (1994: 106). More than a century later, David Truman asserted that associations are essential to ensure the freedom to act, linking the modern American forms of group life to the classical ideals of Aristotle: people "must exist in society in order to manifest those capacities and accomplishments that distinguish them from the other animals" (1951: 14).

From the insights of Tocqueville, to the findings of the early behaviorist literature in the mid-twentieth century (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Dewey 1927; Lenski 1961; Truman 1951), through the sophisticated empirical analyses of leading contemporary social scientists (Huckfeldt and

Sprague 1995; Putnam 2000; Zuckerman 2005), one central insight recurs: *group membership has political consequences*. Oddly, however, considering the ubiquity of groups in American public life, most scholarly inquiries into American political behavior have consistently shied away from contemplating the full civic implications of associational life. The reasons are complex and varied (for a cogent intellectual history, see Zuckerman 2005: 3–20), but the consequences of eliding such important questions about the political salience of Americans' social attachments are significant and detrimental, diminishing an essential element of democratic society.

In this book we redress this fault through a careful, systematic inquiry into one critical facet of American associational life: the church. We investigate how membership in organized religious bodies shapes the political life of church members, developing a theoretical framework that captures the multifaceted elements of church life that combine to affect individual attitudes and actions.

Our goal in this inquiry is more comprehensive, however, than merely to explicate a theory of church-centered influences on political behavior in order to advance the study of religion and politics. We seek through this investigation to recenter scholarly attention on the voluntary association as an essential element of American civic and political life. The social context of human behavior shapes how people react to one another, the bonds they form with others, and how they approach society. It is not appropriate to single out individuals for study, nor is it sufficient to inquire about their social relations with other individuals in isolation. Hence, in describing how religious associations influence their members' political lives, we offer a theoretical roadmap applicable to the study of a wide array of voluntary associations, and we demonstrate the utility of this approach for addressing critical research questions across the social sciences.

We begin this inquiry with few *a priori* assumptions about associational life. We do not assume the interests of the groups being studied, levels of interaction among group members, or the nature and frequency of communication within such groups. Instead, we measure these elements directly through a unique research design (described in Chapter 1). The advantage of this effort to specify and measure the salient aspects of associational life will become apparent: articulating a more fully specified model of how associations expose individuals to political information and norms will help us to understand the political opinions and behavior of citizens while also providing a clearer understanding of the contributions of churches to sustaining democracy. Churches are similar to other voluntary associations in terms of leadership structure, formal organization, and informal interactions. Thus,

the results we describe here are broadly applicable to democratic societies and to social scientific research. However, since churches hold such a unique, powerful place within the spectrum of American voluntary associations, the results of our inquiry also have value in and of themselves – they speak directly to the peculiarities of American democracy.

Through our investigations, we confront a classic set of concerns about the capacities and roles of individuals and associations in a democracy. We inquire specifically about the role of the church in shaping the political opinions of members, and also investigate members' political behaviors and their antecedents. The consequences of these processes are critically important to democratic society writ large. We seek to determine whether churches are polarizing or integrating forces in civic life, and whether churches truly are egalitarian providers of civic resources – does the political influence of church underwrite the democratic promise or does it promote the mischief of faction?

More tangibly, in addressing these normative concerns with an empirical inquiry into the political salience of religious organizations, we contribute to a number of literatures across the social sciences. We press contextual analyses to confront organizational structures and a diversity of individual motivations; we advance public opinion formation by elaborating how individuals process information from social sources dependent on social location and interaction; and we push forward the study of political participation by incorporating organizational measures as well as social interactions and information flow among members. As will be seen, our specific findings concerning gendered responses to church-centered political messages also hold relevance for scholars in gender studies and political communication.

An inquiry into the political influence of church must begin with an understanding of organizational structure. We will start with a brief narrative depiction of church life before formalizing its salient elements in relation to the political lives of members.

Church Involvement and Political Behavior

The choice of where to attend religious services – what church to call one's own – carries with it significant consequences for the everyday lives of Americans.¹ At first glance, it is not obvious that some of these

¹ The terms church and congregation are used interchangeably in this book, both referring to a specific assembly of people who come together regularly for religious worship. In contemporary usage these terms generally refer to Christian religious organizations, which are the principal focus of our study. For the sake of clarity, we will use these same terms when discussing religious bodies generally.

consequences should be political in nature. After all, churches exist to provide spiritual direction to their members first and foremost. Religious activities constitute the essential core of congregational life: organized worship services, faith classes for young and old, development of personal devotional practices, liturgies to mark significant life milestones, and much more.

But even as the life and work of the church center on its religious dimension, the influence of church life on the political behavior of church members is an important – and in many respects an inevitable – outgrowth of these same religiously oriented activities, just as Tocqueville, Truman and others have observed in regard to the general consequences of associational ties in the United States. The theoretical framework and empirical findings set forth in this book proceed from this insight about American churches: *congregational life presents myriad opportunities and information that help structure the civic engagement and political opinions of church members; indeed, the political life of church members cannot be properly understood without a detailed explanation of how and why congregations exert such influences over their members.*

Evaluating this claim requires a detailed theoretical framework. A proper test of our theory demands evidence that is not typically collected in political science research centered on religious influences. To meet this challenge, in Chapter 1 we will describe our unique data set and its utility for our research; in Chapters 2 to 5 we bring these data to bear on several significant aspects of church-based political influence. We have chosen two U.S. denominations as the focal point of this study: the Episcopal Church, USA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).² Some aspects of the political behavior of Episcopalians and Lutherans are unique to each denomination, but, as we argue in Chapter 1, the processes by which our respondents connect their religious experiences with their political lives have considerable relevance across the American religious and political spectrums. To reiterate, we seek through this research to redirect the scholarly debate about the nature of religious influences on the political behavior of Americans, reasserting the social component of religious influences and demonstrating that citizens do not reason through the political implications of their religious beliefs and practices in a social vacuum. Moreover, our findings highlight the ways in which a group-centered research design contributes not just to explanations of the

² We use “ELCA” to refer to the church as an organization – the denominational body – and we use “Lutheran” to refer to the membership of the ELCA. When we refer to other brands of Lutherans in the United States, such as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, we identify them as such.

political implications of religious life, but also more generally to theories of citizen opinion formation and political activity.

Church-Centered Paths to Political Life

Church life is surprisingly varied and political cues come from many directions. Those cues may not be uniformly influential, as intended audiences can be inattentive or motivated to defend against (especially oppositional) political messages. Those messages that reach members' ears may produce a chain reaction, initiating social interaction and influence with unintended consequences. And some political cues, under the right conditions, ignite ongoing political engagement in numerous forms.

Before articulating a full theory of church-centered political influence, it is useful to consider how information flows within a congregation, particularly at those times when political connections are made in some fashion. The vignettes presented here illustrate several possibilities for how congregation-based activities and cues can lead to political activism among members, or, as exemplified in the final vignette, how explicitly political messages can be shut out by those who don't wish to mix their religion with their politics.

Vignette 1: Joan heads the church council at a small ELCA congregation in the upper Midwest. Having helped steer the congregation through a building expansion and the search for a new pastor (both of which were successful), Joan is approached by the chair of the county Republican organization, who also sits on the church council. Would Joan be interested in assisting with fundraising efforts for the county GOP? She agrees to put her skills to use in this new endeavor for the upcoming campaign season.

Vignette 2: Phil and Eldrick belong to Single Again, a support group for newly divorced congregants at All Souls Episcopal Church, located in the northeastern United States. Finding they have much in common besides their marital status, Phil and Eldrick begin to meet regularly for coffee before the group meetings, in the process sharing their divergent views about many local and national political issues. Their disagreements spark both men to read and learn more about the issues they discuss, leading to an ongoing friendship and even more discussion inside and outside their congregational small group meetings.

Vignette 3: On a cold Lenten Sunday, Pastor Johnson tells his Lutheran congregants that Jesus' willingness to stand up for the poor and outcast must be reflected in their own lives, and in the work of their

church. Pastor Johnson notes that Lent offers Christians a chance to reflect on the choices they make, and indicates that for him, one manifestation of Christ's kingdom on earth is his volunteering at the local food shelf. At coffee hour after the service, several members tell their pastor that they too wish to do more in the local community, and clergy and congregants brainstorm several ways to concentrate their efforts. One member promises to call her state representative, asking him to support state efforts to assist local food shelves in meeting the increasing demand for basic staples. The meeting concludes with the formation of an ad hoc group dedicated to assisting in the ongoing work and ministry of the local food shelf.

Vignette 4: Adult education hour at St. Stephen's Episcopal in southern California centers on the Episcopal Church's recent decision to ordain an openly gay bishop, a move that has caused considerable tension in U.S. Episcopal circles and in relations with other branches of the Anglican Communion. Knowing their congregation to be more theologically liberal than most in the area, St. Stephen's members and their rector agree that "the other side of the story" needs to be communicated to critics of the decision. The rector and another member decide to draft a letter to the local newspaper, explaining why they believe the Episcopal Church was correct to ordain the bishop, and emphasizing publicly that St. Stephen's is "a community welcoming to all."

Vignette 5: Similar concerns about public policy issues surrounding sexual orientation lead Lutheran Pastor Therese to preach about recognizing the humanity of all people. Pastor Therese knows that most citizens in her congregation, and in the rural Wisconsin community where it is located, are uncomfortable with homosexuality and wary of efforts to give legal recognition in any form to same-sex couples. While Pastor Therese never mentions any specific political issue in her sermon, in the days that follow she hears from several members who attended that Sunday. A few agree with her point of view and tell her that they already quietly support groups that are standing up for gay rights. Most, however, make it clear that her intermixing of religion and politics is, in their eyes, not appropriate for this congregation: "We do not bring politics into God's house here."

The first two vignettes demonstrate the importance of social networks, both formal and informal, in shaping opportunities for political involvement. Here, political cues meet a supportive and resourceful audience – church leader Joan possesses the skills necessary for political organizing, and a fellow member recruits her to do so; and new friends Phil and Eldrick find, through their shared small group activity, that they like discussing politics. Social networks also arise in the third and fourth vignettes, both of which

raise the question of whether the initial burst of civic engagement (calling the state representative, writing a letter to the editor) has deep enough roots to develop into something long term.

The fourth vignette illustrates a common but often overlooked aspect of church-based political activity: an awareness of opinions in the church's surroundings that might influence both the level and the forms of civic or political activity. For members of this church, recognition that they constitute a minority in their local community is the motivation that spurs them to publicize their own point of view. Moreover, the issue itself arises out of a denominational dispute, reminding us that most congregations (including those of the ELCA and Episcopal Church) belong to a national denomination that establishes policies and trains clergy through its seminaries, thus shaping the religious and nonreligious experiences of local congregants.

The third and fifth examples indicate that clergy have multiple venues through which they can engage members' political interests, although their efforts to influence members' political decision making can create tensions within the congregation. Example three shows the positive side: clergy discussion of a topic spurs interest and action, with little controversy generated along the way. Our previous research on clergy political activity demonstrates that clergy often shape members' political agendas through the choice of topics clergy discuss publicly, a phenomenon we will explore in more detail here too.

The fifth vignette reveals another possible outcome: members can reject the idea that religion should affect politics at all, actively avoiding such engagement where found in the congregation, and, as in this case, directly confronting clergy to ward off any more such linkages. In fact, a small percentage of the citizens we surveyed for this project denied that any religious-political connections existed in their congregations. These separatists proudly proclaimed that the religious and political spheres were, and ought to remain, distinct, and that they actively maintained this separation in their lives; for such citizens, factors other than the ones we outline here may determine their political outlooks and actions. We are cognizant that not all citizens want or perceive any intersections of politics and religion in their midst, and we incorporate this notion explicitly into our analyses.

Having considered some of the political cues given in churches and several mechanisms by which they initiate or influence political activity, we turn now to a systematic framework that organizes these mechanisms into a coherent theory. This framework moves beyond typical approaches to the study of religious influences on political behavior by utilizing the first

data set constructed to analyze multiple forms of religious influence systematically and simultaneously.

Five Factors Shaping Citizen Political Behavior

Numerous political scientists have documented incontrovertible evidence that religion matters in the formation of citizens' politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Djupe 1997; C. Gilbert 1993; C. Gilbert et al. 1999; Green et al. 1996; Jelen 1989, 1992; Layman 2001; Legee and Kellstedt 1993; Lopatto 1985; A. Miller and Wattenberg 1984; W. Miller and Shanks 1996; Noll 1990; Wald 1997; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990). But scholars who study religious influences on individual political behavior have not normally put congregational life at the center of their research, despite the fact that church-based influences recur as salient factors in all studies that test for such influences. With some significant exceptions, the literature on religion and political behavior tends to emphasize personal religious beliefs and behaviors and to deemphasize – or omit – the social dimensions of religious experience.

In contrast to this prevailing approach, our study builds from what has come to be termed contextual analysis: “social contexts [are] the environments, groups, or surroundings in which people live and interact with one another” (C. Gilbert 1993: 3). Of all the components of daily life one might choose to examine using a contextual paradigm, religion stands out as perhaps the most obvious. Local congregations are often communities unto themselves, a basis for social relationships and collective identity:

Members of religious groups have a common identity, interact with one another regularly, and expect each other to think and act in certain ways. . . . The norms of a religious group constitute its special culture, a culture that is usually distinct in some ways from the culture of other groups in its environment (Johnson and White 1967: 31).

This idea has deep roots in the rich subset of academic studies that have emphasized the importance of the church as a social context (Djupe 1997; C. Gilbert 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Jelen 1992; Lenski 1961; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990). For example, sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1961) argues that organized religion facilitates the development of socioreligious subcultures – collections of individuals who form attachments that persist inside and outside formal church structures. Membership in these subcultural units opens up organizational channels that transmit political information, resulting in numerous salient conduits for political influence within a congregation.

The critical distinction between previous research and the analysis contained in this book is that we recognize and measure the diversity of information sources in the church and our research design allows for a thorough and detailed specification of these organizational channels. While other scholars have generated theories of religious influence, ours is more accurately termed a theory of the political influence of church. This distinction between religion and church is crucial: it suggests that the political implications of religion are specific to the context in which the lessons are learned and applied. People attending church bring with them their own predispositions and external life experiences, which can expand or attenuate the church's ability to influence their opinions and behaviors. Our theory illuminates process more than content; it spells out what the relevant church-based information sources are and how they interact with individual orientations toward the information and its sources. Our findings present a fundamental challenge to pervasive understandings of how religion affects political behavior, especially to religious commitment, a primarily psychological understanding of religious influence. On that basis, our findings also imply a refocusing of research energies toward incorporation of the social dimensions of religious life.

A number of factors suggest that the church will provide information sufficient to influence citizens' political leanings. Over the last forty years, clergy from all denominations increasingly have incorporated into their sermons political messages that intend to persuade (Guth et al. 1997; Kohut et al. 2000; Djupe and Gilbert 2002, 2003). Other studies have found (as we will demonstrate especially in Chapter 1) that church members discuss politics with one another during coffee hour, within church small groups and activities, or outside the church in another context they share. Whether through direct persuasion or the diffusion of norms, church members do, over time, tend to bring their political behavior into line with their fellow congregants.

Interestingly, several major recent studies in political participation acknowledge the importance of organizational involvement to explain the church's role in promoting political activity (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Djupe and Grant 2001; Kotler-Berkowitz 2005; Putnam 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Thus one important consequence of our approach is that it brings together the literatures on political participation and religion and politics, a long overdue reconciliation that demonstrates both the common theoretical foundations of these literatures and the broad political relevance of religious institutions in the United States. As we will see, however, the

participation literature has suffered from ignoring social interaction in organizations like churches.

Incorporating detailed, precise measures of the church as a social and political context is essential for a full comprehension of religion's influence on political behavior. These measures are derived from four principal sets of factors, which, taken together, establish the contextual determinants of congregant political behavior; a fifth set of factors, explicitly measuring the personal characteristics that clearly also play a role in determining individual beliefs and actions, must be included as well. We turn now to a detailed consideration of each factor; succeeding chapters will further evaluate the salience of each in affecting member political behavior.

Formal and Informal Social Networks

For church members, the exploration of the nexus of faith and politics occurs in a social setting; the outcome of that search depends on the flow of political information through organizational channels from a variety of sources within the church, including the clergy and fellow members of the congregation. These organizational channels are, in essence, social networks – sets of individuals connected in some fashion to one another, providing opportunities for personal interaction and observation, information flow, and influence. We distinguish between social networks in church based on the degree of formal ties with the church organization (Djupe 1997). *Formal social networks* include the numerous small groups, official bodies, and activities existing within the congregation. *Informal social networks* are constructed by individuals: the personal relationships formed with other church members, which often overlap with church small groups and activities but which should be conceived of as distinct entities.

As Huckfeldt and Sprague (1988) note, the composition of social networks is only partly at the discretion of individuals; choices about who belongs to a network are constrained by the social makeup of the context in which the networks are embedded. Social networks are likely to include both casual and intimate acquaintances for this reason, but the nature of personal ties is not a critical factor in explaining political influence; in fact, close personal friendships are no more likely than weak ties to produce political influence within social networks (Levine 2005: 141–7). Formal networks go one step beyond discussion networks since individuals may not have full knowledge of a group's membership before deciding to join; as a consequence they will engage in face-to-face encounters with people they might not otherwise choose as partners for discussion. The diluted