THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF CHURCHES

Paul A. Djupe and Christopher P. Gilbert investigate the political influence of churches: how membership in organized religious bodies shapes the political life of members. Djupe and Gilbert’s goal in this inquiry is to recenter scholarly attention on voluntary association as an essential element of American civic and political life.

The authors develop a theoretical framework that captures the multifaceted elements of church life that affect individual political attitudes and actions. Political information from clergy, small groups, and social networks flows plentifully in churches, but individuals process that information differently depending on their motivations, and related to their status in the church. 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.

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The most enduring and illuminating bodies of late-nineteenth-century social theory – by Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others – emphasized the integration of religion, polity, and economy through time and place. Once a staple of classic social theory, however, religion gradually lost the interest of many social scientists during the twentieth century. But scholarly interest in religiously based political conflict has been reawakened by emergence of such phenomena as Solidarity in Poland; the dissolution of the Soviet empire; various South American, southern African, and South Asian liberation movements; the Christian Right in the United States; and Al Qaeda. At the same time, fundamental questions are once again being asked about the role of religion in stable political regimes, public policies, and constitutional orders. The series Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion, and Politics will produce volumes that study religion and politics by drawing upon classic social theory and more recent social scientific research traditions. Books in the series offer theoretically grounded, comparative, empirical studies that raise “big” questions about a timely subject that has long engaged the best minds in social science.

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The Political Influence of Churches

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Acknowledgments

When we submitted our grant proposal in 1998, we did not anticipate that it would take a decade to see this book completed. During that time, we have been busy following a research agenda that has been allowed by the data and encouraged and informed by numerous people. The results of the research have been immensely satisfying, but we wouldn’t trade for anything the relationships that have been built and sustained, in part, around this research agenda. Some of the colleagues who read chapters and provided helpful critiques and insights include Kristi Anderson, John Geer, Julie Gilbert, Ted Jelen, Scott McClurg, Quin Monson, Laura Olson, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Lee Sigelman, Sarah Sokhey, Katherine Stenger Knutson, and a bevy of anonymous reviewers.

We owe a great debt to the Cambridge series editors, David Leege and Ken Wald, for their support of us and this work in so many respects. Both have been tireless advocates for the study of religion and politics and have been pioneers opening new routes of inquiry, some of which we have followed here. In addition to motivating us to pursue this research in the first place, they have shared their deep insight about what we have done and why, greatly improving the manuscript. Three others are particularly important to distinguish. One of the more rewarding of the relationships that have developed during the course of this research is with Anand Sokhey; Chapter 6 is one of the tangible and highly successful results of
our collaboration. This book would not be the same without the expertise and great friendship of a frequent discussion partner. Anything having to do with deliberation can be attributed to a series of conversations and papers with Jake Neiheisel – another gem to have come from Denison University. A series of difficult, intriguing discussions with Greg Gwiasda over a year at Denison were particularly helpful in expanding the reach of the work.

Of course, this project only went forward because of generous support from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9809536 to Gustavus Adolphus College), as well as a small grant from the American Political Science Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the book are ours alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the two granting agencies. Generous support from Denison University and a grant to it from the Lily Foundation supported a year-long sabbatical Djupe, which allowed the completion of this manuscript. Chris Gilbert’s participation in this project was supported in part by a paid sabbatical leave from Gustavus Adolphus College for spring semester 2005.

The distribution, collection, and data-entry phases of this project would not have been possible without the yeoman service of numerous Gustavus undergraduates who worked on the project from 1998 through 2002. Five students coauthored academic papers related to the project: Devin Colvin, Robert DeHaven, Martin Kaduc, Julie Moberg, and Jaclynn Moen; Devin, Martin, and Jackie deserve special mention for entering all responses from the congregational surveys utilized in this book. Other Gustavus students whose assistance proved invaluable include Steve Biljan, Heather Boyd, Erin Holloway, Jonathan Keske, Alissa Manske, Theo Mbatha, Michael Ryan, and Tobias Stalter. Bob Weisenfeld provided important assistance in formulating the NSF grant proposal. Last but not least, director Naomi Quiram and her staff in the Gustavus Post Office processed more than 20,000 pieces of mail for this project; we greatly appreciate their efficiency and hard work. James Hanneman and Marie Zimmerman also helped in various capacities in getting the project off the ground.

Over the decade, a lot has changed, but family has seen this project through – Kate, Dan, David, Lynn, Anand, Matt, and, finally, Bear. Thanks.