

The Resourceful Believer: Generating Civic Skills in Church

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We investigate the conditions under which members practice politically relevant civic skills in church, generating a base of resourceful citizens equipped for political activity. Previous research has considered congregations to be black boxes, with sometimes unspecified and almost always untested processes operating to encourage civic skill development. In contrast, we conceptualize churches as diverse organizations and find evidence that the social homogeneity of church-based small groups allows for greater individual skill development. Moreover, members direct their energies toward the church and skill development when they are socially isolated from their communities. We also test the efficacy of clergy to promote skill development, finding mixed evidence. Overall, we find considerable support justifying the decision to open the black box and investigate the varied ways in which churches promote the acquisition of civic skills.

Effective representation must always be a central concern in democratic polities. Addressing questions of representation involves institutional structures in part, but much of the responsibility for assuring adequate representation falls to citizens directly. The public must participate through available channels, though not everyone has the resources, interest, and invitation necessary to do so. There is near-universal agreement that civil society can subsidize deficits of crucial participatory ingredients, but researchers have often mischaracterized the problems being addressed and have failed to explore the nature of civil society's solution in sufficient depth.

Both of these concerns alter the nature of inquiry into representational deficits. First, while underrepresentation should be conceptualized in part as a problem individuals own through a lack of resources or motivation, it is just as significantly a community-based problem. Even resourceful people can be underrepresented due to extant conditions where they live. Therefore, the question can be recast: how can civil society rectify an imbalance of representation in a community where some people (perhaps independent of their personal resources) are socially marginalized? Second, the groups that assist individuals to acquire the tools necessary to boost political participation may be subject to the same dynamics that produce the

community imbalance—some groups may not have the same access to civil society as others.

To rectify these critical concerns, we examine how one important institution of civil society, the church, distributes access to one crucial resource needed for political activity: civic skills. This investigation is not merely an intellectual exercise to refine our understanding of civic skills acquisition, though that is an important issue itself. At stake is an enhanced grasp of the roles churches fulfill in American politics and civic life. Are churches moderating forces, subsidizing skill deficits for a diverse citizenry without extensive education or professional occupations? Or are churches polarizing forces, granting skill development opportunities to a homogenous, already skilled assembly?

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady have advanced an optimistic answer: "The domain of equal access to opportunities to learn civic skills is the church" (1995, 320). That is, more significant disparities exist in skill building among demographic groups in the workplace and within secular group domains than in churches. But the fact that a diversity of people practice skills in churches only means that church membership is less demographically stratified in the United States than secular group membership or the employed population; it does not necessarily mean that every church member has equal access to prac-

ting skills *in a particular church*. Therefore, one must look within specific congregations to understand how they allocate access to civic skill-building opportunities.

We argue here for the central importance of social interaction in structuring which individuals develop civic skills in church. The social composition of the community channels individuals' social pursuits, leading church members to spend more time in church when they are unlike others in the community. In turn, the social composition of small groups within the church dictates who is allowed access to skill-building activities—skills are acquired more efficaciously in homogenous small groups. That is, resourceful citizens will develop skills in church through small groups and activities in which they feel welcome, especially when the secular community offers few other social opportunities. Using a unique data set, we propose to establish these claims, and in so doing to bridge significant gaps in the current understanding of the political role of churches and the nature of church-based civic skill acquisition.

Existing Literature

Considering the significant place that churches occupy in supporting Americans' democratic capacity (Bellah et al. 1985; Putnam 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), it is curious that the particular church-based mechanisms generating civic resources and political orientations are both undertheorized and underinvestigated. The typical research design treats the individual congregation empirically, if not rhetorically, as a "black box" (Harrington and Fine 2000), that is, as an undifferentiated unit (Peterson 1992; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). This approach results from the understandable desire to evaluate the comparative efficacy of churches versus other organizations, such as the workplace; comparative studies are not concerned with the internal dynamics of a group, seeking only to uncover whether citizens are more or less resourceful as a consequence of their group affiliations.

But many scholars have attempted to contextualize the effects of the church as a training ground. Some have investigated broad patterns of civic skill development among (Cavendish 2000) and between religious traditions, such as between Protestant and Catholic (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Cavendish 2000; Djupe and Grant 2001; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) or white and black

churches (Cavendish 2000; Djupe and Grant 2001; Musick, Wilson, and Bynum 2000; Verba et al. 1993). Others show that differential church participation rates between men and women can affect resulting skill development (Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994). Lastly, Verba and colleagues (1993, 1995) incorporate and find empirical support for the logical argument that a politically charged church environment may positively affect civic skill development.

To be sure, many researchers correctly point to the diverse array of groups within churches as the loci for the acquisition of skills (e.g., Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Cavendish 2000; Djupe and Grant 2001; Leege 1988; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wald 1997), though their potency in producing skilled members is left untested (though see Cavendish 2000). For instance, in Brady, Verba, and Schlozman's resource model of participation, the authors note that "church opportunities" allow for skill development, but this crucial factor is left "unobserved" (1995, 277).

To summarize, existing research offers the rather unsatisfying conclusion that people attending church are more likely to develop civic skills than those who do not, probably because attendees participate in church activities. These opportunities are more common in churches with congregational polity (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 320–32), which should be measured at the congregational rather than the denominational level with specific measures of the participation opportunities available to congregants (Cavendish 2000).

A Theory of Civic Skill Generation

It is crucial to reinsert a social component into our understanding of the development of skills situated in the particular contexts where they are developed—church-based small groups. While many individuals enter adulthood well equipped for citizenship due to post-high school education, many others do not have that luxury and need organizational opportunities to nurture essential resources for effective citizenship. And it is a mistake to think of organizations as faceless—they organize social interaction toward some purpose. Thus, one starting point for a theory of civic skill generation is to recognize the social nature of gaining skills, akin to social capital formation:

Social capital cannot be defined on the basis of individual characteristics, or even on the basis of individual organizational memberships, because social capital is not

possessed by individuals. Rather it is produced through structured patterns of interaction, and its consequences for individuals must be assessed relative to these patterns of interaction. (La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998, 581)

Citizens do not often seek out training on how best to fulfill their civic duties; extremely few attend church to become political activists (Djupe and Grant 2001). Hence, most skill development will occur as a byproduct of a church's attempt to fulfill other needs and desires (Djupe and Gilbert 2002a). Churches meet individual needs and interests in many ways, primarily through corporate worship and personal development opportunities. Almost all of these opportunities are socially mediated, and the patterns of social interaction within them will affect whether members participate and what benefits they gain from doing so. As a side note, a likely consequence of this dynamic is a weak tether between the skills gained and political action (Djupe and Grant 2001; Pollock 1982).

But why would we expect that once people direct their energies inward, toward the church, civic skills gained there would come back into the community as political activity? There are at least three answers. First, Djupe and Gilbert (2002b, 2003; see also Olson 2000) find that clergy attempt to mobilize their congregations to become politically active when clergy perceive them to be underinvolved and their beliefs to be underrepresented in the community. That is, clergy attempt to fill directly the representation gap for their congregations, integrating them back into the community. Second, the social networks built and sustained within the congregation and infused with political information contribute greatly to the probability that a church member will engage in political action (Djupe and Gilbert 2002c; Djupe and Grant 2001). Third, this orientation toward the church does not affect individual political commitments, so skills practiced in church at higher rates can be used at the individual's discretion, as would the skills gained from any other group context. Thus, a turn inward to the church does not mean a turn away from civic and political life.

The necessary question to ask, therefore, is what factors encourage people to participate in civic skill-building activities in church? Our central assertion is that the social homogeneity of small groups allows access to skill development—members unlike the rest of the group will develop skills at lower rates. To provide a complete explanation of skill building in church, we also take into account facets of the congregational context: how the individual and church fit into the community, as well as personal motivations and resources (for a similar framework applied to the

political behavior of clergy, see Djupe and Gilbert 2003).

Church Social Context

Large social psychological and communication literatures on the function of small groups suggest that they are something less than egalitarian. Considerable evidence indicates that individual traits help to structure participation in small groups as well as small group outputs (Keyton and Frey 2002). More commonly framed, group cohesiveness boosts group efficacy (Wech et al. 1998) and the extent of group output (Cady and Valentine 1999). The small group communication literature shows that diversity can induce "process difficulty" analogous to the struggles and acrimony that result when a variety of interests are represented in a legislature (Watson, Kumar, and Michaelson 1993). As Oetzel summarizes it: "Process difficulty can include tension, competitive conflict, power struggles, misunderstandings, and *inequality in turn taking among members . . .*" (2002, 123; emphasis added). Therefore, we hypothesize that individual church members will be more likely to participate in skill-building activities in small groups when they are like other group members, whether because of more favorable identification with the group or through more open access to leadership roles.

As suggested above, differences within groups or the congregation may discourage active involvement and hence skill development. Because skill development takes place in small groups, intrasmall group diversity should matter more than intracongregational diversity. Therefore, one who finds herself outside of the majority composition in a small group should take on fewer leadership roles and gain fewer of the beneficial byproducts of voluntarism.

There is a wealth of research across the social sciences on group cohesiveness, which has been measured in a variety of ways, including opinion-based measures (e.g., Prapavessis and Carron 1997) and trait-based measures (see Carron and Brawley 2000 and Keyton and Frey 2002 for reviews). We adopt a mix of these approaches, blending measures of interest and ideology. We asked respondents who were members of a church small group to tell us if other group members were similar or different in terms of their race, class, age, religious beliefs, party identification, and political ideology; using these responses we created an index of similarity with the group, in which a higher score suggests greater similarity.

Congregants may also be pulled into skill-building opportunities through social network ties

that may or may not overlap with church groups; social networks have been identified as powerful socializing agents in multiple contexts, including the church (Gilbert 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). As a result, the dampening effect of group diversity may be alleviated somewhat by having an ally in the group. Accordingly, we hypothesize that having a political discussant in the small group should help the member practice more civic skills.

Church Environment

Though clergy are the most prominent and important figures in a congregation, we believe their role in promoting skill development among church members is weak and indirect. Clergy can invest organizational resources to encourage more church activity and, hence, the development of politically relevant skills. Clergy can also set a tone that suggests addressing political issues is a normal part of church life. Essentially, clergy can create the conditions under which social influence mechanisms can operate, but they have little direct influence over the actual political involvement of members and the resources that drive such involvement. We test clergy's efficacy in promoting skill development with an index of reported clergy public speech on political topics.¹

The church experience comprises more than just the delivery of religious teachings. Worship is central but takes place along with a wide variety of small group activities, plus interactions with other congregation members and religious professionals. Satisfaction with one or more of these varied elements should positively affect the degree of member participation in church and hence the acquisition of skills. To test this idea we construct an index of satisfaction with the church, composed of ten items representing a wide range of church experiences, such as adult education, spiritual development, and community outreach opportunities.

Orienting Forces

After a significant lull following important early studies (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Lenski 1961; Pope 1942), there has been a resurgence in the recognition of the important effect that communities can have in shaping the public presence of congregations

(Crawford and Olson 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003; Olson 2000). Classic findings suggest that minority status encourages groups to band together, causing greater involvement in like-minded groups (Finifter 1974; Finke and Stark 1992; Key 1949; McGreevy 1996; Moore 1986). In accord with these findings, previous research in religion and politics has found that clergy of underrepresented congregations tend to be more active in the community and also attempt to promote activism among church members at higher rates (Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003; Olson 2000).

We use several measures to assess the orientation of the member and church to the community. First, we draw on clergy perceptions to construct measures of isolation of the church from the community in terms of the congregation's beliefs and activity levels (Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003). The *belief isolation* measure evaluates whether the congregation's theology and politics are different from the community's, while the *activity isolation* measure indexes the degree of engagement of the congregation in the community. Greater isolation from the community should drive up member participation in church and result in increased skill building. We also asked church members directly whether they were different from their neighbors in terms of their religious beliefs. Similar to the isolation measures, we expect that those who feel religiously different from their neighbors will develop more civic skills, as they direct their energies toward a more socially congruent context—the church.

Personal Resources

Some individuals come equipped to play leadership roles in organizational settings due to their education, profession, or economic power. These resources are distributed inequitably through the population, with concentrations found among males, the employed, older people, and whites. Moreover, some members become organizationally adept in other settings, bringing their skills to tasks performed at church. Any account of practicing civic skills in church would be remiss if it did not include the predispositions of members to become involved.

We also include a composite measure of individual religious practice and behavior, adopting the religious commitment index formulated by Green et al. (1996); their work implies that citizens with greater religious commitment would participate more frequently in church, and, by extension, develop more

¹We tested several alternate specifications of the clergy public-speech index variable in the Table 3 logit model. A discussion of that process and its findings can be found in the coding appendix available on the *Journal of Politics* website, <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>.

civic skills. However, we suspect that greater religious commitment, which captures a psychological commitment to religion and not to a particular church, could insulate the member from congregational involvement effects, be the result of the social network ties that also structure civic skill acquisition (Cavendish, Welch, and Leege 1998), or simply be independent of skill building activity.

Data and Design: ELCA and Episcopal Church Clergy and Congregations

The information necessary to explore civic skill development in congregations is not typically collected in U.S. national surveys. To address the research questions posed here, we undertook a two-stage study of clergy and congregations in two mainline Protestant denominations: the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). With a combined membership of 7.5 million, similar worship styles, and a formal working agreement that allows for clergy sharing and facilitates other joint activities, the ELCA and Episcopal Church are significant denominations within U.S. mainline Protestantism (see Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003).

In 1999 mail surveys were sent to a random set of members from each of 60 congregations whose clergy had responded to our initial survey; approximately 1,050 ELCA and 550 Episcopal congregation members responded. The congregation survey instrument paralleled the clergy survey, asking a wide range of questions about members' congregation, clergy, and political behavior, including whether and how members practiced several civic skills in church (among other contexts) in the past year.

This rich data set allows us to test our hypotheses about how churches generate civic skills in their members. Furthermore, because our research design is conceived specifically to connect clergy reports of their political beliefs and actions with congregant perceptions of what their clergy think and do politically, we have a unique opportunity to understand how clergy activities affect member political choices and actions.²

²One particular feature of the church member survey is a significant question battery about the respondent's social network. Rather than attempt to combine or average over attributes of a social network (up to three people), we use dyads (each respondent-discussant pair is a case), meaning that respondents may be included multiple times (up to three times). This choice increases the sample size, decreases estimates of the proportion

Our general theoretical framework, in which the interactions among clergy, congregants, and communities shape the political beliefs and choices of clergy and their congregants, clearly applies to numerous American religious communities; indeed it may fit patterns in African-American and Jewish bodies better than among these mainline Protestant denominations (Djupe and Gilbert 2003, 211–12; see also McGreevy 1996; Moore 1986; Morris 1984). Hence information from clergy and congregants in these two denominations offer generalizable insights into analogous dynamics likely to be present across the American religious spectrum.

Civic Skills Practiced in Church

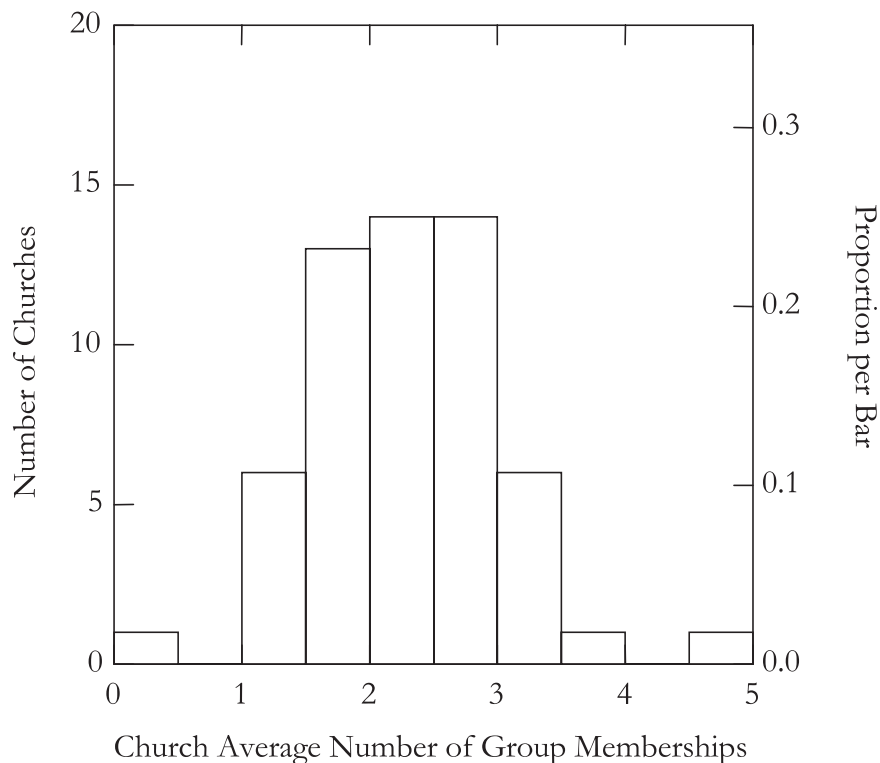
Simply attending a church is not sufficient to develop the kinds of skills that can be used in the political arena. Considering the congregation as a whole, opportunities for the exercise of lay leadership tend to vary inversely with congregational size. But even in large congregations, these opportunities occur in small aggregations of members devoted to specific tasks, whether for the good of the congregation or for personal development.

The ability of members to participate in church-based small groups depends on the supply available in the church. Without the opportunity to join groups, individual motivation to do so is irrelevant. We have no measure of how many groups and activities each church offers (which would present a significant measurement problem); we do observe that the average number of groups church members engage in varies widely from church to church (see Figure 1). Our sample congregations range from an average of one small-group membership per respondent to about four (mean = 2.3); 86% of the sample claimed involvement in at least one church group. Even in our sample of very active congregation members, some churches have a more involved membership than others. It is clear, however, that involvement opportunities exist in all churches.

But how many members build politically relevant skills through their church involvement? The typical analysis of the church's role in providing civic skills

naming a church member discussant (considering the fall off in naming one across the three discussants), and does not add particular kinds of church member discussants to the sample (which would affect the analysis). That is, the proportion of church member discussants who are also church small-group members with the respondent is constant across the three discussants named.

FIGURE 1 Average Number of Group Memberships for Members of Each Church



Source: 1999–2000 ELCA/Episcopal Church Congregational Study. N = 55.

and other resources supporting political activism compares skills practiced in churches to those practiced in other likely locales, such as voluntary associations and workplaces. While fewer skills are practiced in churches than in other arenas, the sheer number of Americans who affiliate with a church implies a widespread societal impact from church involvement (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Verba et al. 1993).

Because we sampled only church members, we cannot estimate the societal impact of church-gained resources. Instead, we look inside the church to study the contexts in which individuals best develop political resources. We can begin, however, with the more traditional comparative analysis, presented in Table 1. Clearly the workplace is the most common source for the political resources we inquired about: writing a letter, giving a speech/presentation, planning a meeting, and studying a political issue. The second most common source is a secular group, while churches lag behind in third. Still, roughly one in five sample ELCA and Episcopal church members had practiced a relevant civic skill in the past year in church. As a component of civic skills, less than one-tenth said they had “studied/discussed a political issue

with a group” in church in the past year; at least twice as many had done so in the other settings. Interestingly, this is also the category in which the workplace is a close second to other, secular groups.

Even these results may overstate the import of churches as generators of civic skills; perhaps church members only “practice” civic skills in church that they may have learned elsewhere. While we did not ask where respondents actually learned these skills, we can gauge the primary locales where they exercise their civic abilities.

Table 2 shows whether members practicing civic skills in church do so exclusively in church or are simply sharing their talents practiced elsewhere. Compared to each context individually, roughly one-sixth exclusively practiced at least one skill in church, while at least one-fourth of the sample exclusively practiced a skill in a nonchurch setting. When all nonchurch skills are collapsed together, we find that only 3.4% of the sample exclusively practiced a skill in church, while 46% exclusively practiced a skill outside of church. Only one-fifth did not practice a skill in the past year, and 30% were active in and outside of church. These results indicate that the church is not a heavy supplier of skills for this sample and that most

TABLE 1 Practicing Civic Skills in Church and Other Contexts (percents)

Civic Skills Performed	Church	Secular Group	Workplace	Other
Planned a meeting	21.0	27.3	31.5	8.3
Given a speech/presentation	19.0	22.8	29.2	7.5
Written a letter	15.2	20.3	36.2	27.9
Studied/discussed a political issue	9.5	23.5	18.5	16.9

Source: 1999–2000 ELCA/Episcopal Church Congregational Study. N = 2,809.

TABLE 2 The Interrelationship of Skill Practice Contexts with the Church (percents)

	Practiced No Skills in Church	Practiced One or More Skills in Church
Practiced No Skills in a Secular Group	40.9	13.0
Practiced One+ Skill in a Secular Group	25.1	21.0
		~100
Practiced No Skills in a Workplace	38.9	14.6
Practiced One+ Skill in a Workplace	27.1	19.5
		~100
Practiced No Skills in an “Other” Setting	42.6	19.9
Practiced One+ Skill in an “Other” Setting	23.3	14.1
		~100
Practiced No Skills Outside of Church	20.1	3.4
Practiced One+ Skill Outside of Church	45.9	30.6
		~100

Source: 1999–2000 ELCA/Episcopal Church Congregational Study.

Note: Each setting (group, job, etc.) is cross-tabulated with practicing skills in church; the four cell entries sum to 100 percent.

members are (not surprisingly) busy in other settings along with whatever duties they may take on in church. At least for this sample, it seems unlikely that the church subsidizes skill deficits; rather, the church depends on resourceful individuals to run and sustain its activities.

Of course, our sample is drawn from denominations at the higher end of the socioeconomic spectrum in U.S. religion (Roof and McKinney 1987), meaning that, in general, churches surely play a larger role subsidizing resource deficits among lower SES congrega-

tions. Our research design allows for testing of this claim. The 60 ELCA and Episcopal congregations in our sample cover a wide portion of the income spectrum; mean congregational member income in our sample ranges from \$25,000–35,000 at the low end to roughly \$85,000 at the top. Mean congregational income is strongly related to the practice of civic skills in church compared with civic skills practiced in the workplace: the ratio of church to job skills in the congregation declines precipitously as congregational mean income rises, dropping just over one-third of a point for each income category gained (results not shown). This suggests that our lower-SES sample churches do indeed subsidize resource deficits among members.

While the results in Table 2 show little unique development of civic skills in church, the opportunity to practice skills in church is important because it adds incrementally to a citizen’s ability to participate in politics and other civic projects. The church can also connect resourceful citizens to one another and direct them toward particular causes. This dynamic will be facilitated by the church’s social environment, including small groups and other social connections.

The Nature of Small Group Heterogeneity

The effect of small group heterogeneity is important and novel enough in political science research to warrant further investigation—how diverse are church-based small groups? What kinds of differences most affect group participation and civic skill development?

It is not surprising to learn that church small groups in these denominations are uniracial and that most group members share the same socioeconomic status. Seventy percent of respondents say they share the same religious beliefs as their fellow group members; of the minority 30%, one-half say their group members are more conservative theologically.

Just under two-thirds live about the same distance from the church, and most of those feeling different say other members live closer. The groups also appear to be well integrated across generations, with only half saying they are of similar age to the group—half of the balance says group members are older, half younger.

While a strong plurality report sharing the same political persuasion as other group members, whether measured as party affiliation or political ideology, it is clear that these groups are not organized along partisan lines. However, when a group member feels different, she perceives herself to be more liberal and Democratic than the balance of the group. This is not surprising especially considering the historic ties of Episcopalians to the Republican party and the propensity of ELCA Lutherans to be politically moderate (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Wald 1997). In all, there is some diversity within church-based small groups, a necessary condition to trigger the social influence process (McPhee 1963; Sprague 1982). At the same time, the degree of homogeneity is quite high, suggesting that most groups are united enough to give most members access to skill-building activities.

If the dampening effect of group heterogeneity holds, it casts a shadow on the notion of church-based skill acquisition as egalitarian. Instead, we could only claim that since a sizable and diverse set of Americans participate in church, skill building is open to all and is more likely when people attend homogenous churches. Moreover, it also presents a typically contradictory dynamic for democratic theory—group homogeneity promotes participation, a democratic good, but also the potential for extreme opinions to form, a chief danger facing democracies. Of course, resourceful citizens with extreme opinions are perhaps more of a problem when they push policies favored by a majority. But they may also participate to represent minority viewpoints and promote a more competitive marketplace of ideas, which we find evidence to support. In essence, the macro ramifications of these microprocesses depend on the political context in which they occur.

Multivariate Analysis

We now explore our core hypotheses in the context of multivariate models explaining whether or not respondents practiced any civic skill in church (using logistic regression) and how many skills respondents practiced in church (using OLS regression). Table 3 presents the model estimates, including changes in predicted probabilities due to common ranges in sig-

nificant variables (mean minus the standard deviation to the mean plus the standard deviation) for the logit model. Following the discussion above, the explanatory factors are grouped into four categories: the *church social context*, the *church environment*, *orienting forces*, and *personal attributes*.

Church Social Context

The church social context variables capture the direct exposure of church members to each other in group settings and through self-constructed social networks. Members cannot readily practice politically relevant skills in the absence of encouragement and an outlet, both of which are found in church small groups. The Table 3 models clearly demonstrate that some facets of the church group experience are more encouraging than others.

Organizational influence on generating skills depends on access—the degree of participation of the member in available church activities. Not surprisingly, group membership exerts a considerable positive effect on practicing skills, increasing the probability by nearly two-fifths; each small group activity boosts the skills practiced by a quarter point.

Feeling similar to other members in the respondent's primary church small group is also positively related to practicing skills, confirming the importance of incorporating a social dimension into theories positing an organizational influence on individual behavior. Social similarity, already high in most groups, boosts the likelihood of practicing a skill by about one-tenth and adds almost a quarter of a civic skill when the respondent is most like other members.

As further evidence of the salience of social relations in facilitating the development of citizenship, naming a small group member as a political discussant also has a significant and positive effect in both models. In our sample ELCA and Episcopal congregations, social networks reinforce involvement in the setting—small groups—where the transmission of political norms is most likely to occur (Leege 1988; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988).

These results bolster the claim that the church cannot be considered a single, undifferentiated entity. Individual members relate to the church through social networks, clergy, and formal church groups and activities. Collectively, these forces aggregate to produce church contextual effects, but the mechanisms are various and sometimes work at cross-purposes. For instance, Table 3 shows that feeling similar to the congregation weakens the likelihood of practicing a skill in church. The logic of this finding is

TABLE 3 Determinants of Congregant Skill Building

Variable	Whether a Civic Skill was Practiced in Church (Logit)			Total Civic Skills Gained in Church (OLS)	
	Coeff.	(S.E.)	Prob. Diff. ^A	Coeff.	(S.E.)
<i>Church Social Context</i>					
Church activities involved in	.555	(.048)***	.398	.258	(.017)***
Discussant is small group member	.288	(.146)**	.056	.156	(.061)***
Similarity to small group	.685	(.268)***	.094	.228	(.102)**
Similarity to congregation	-.444	(.278)		-.180	(.107)*
<i>Church Environment</i>					
Satisfaction with church	-.476	(.112)***	-.140	-.106	(.039)***
Clergy public speech index	-.140	(.040)***	-.110	-.047	(.015)***
Church size, logged	-.291	(.201)		.023	(.082)
<i>Orienting Forces</i>					
Religiously diff. from neighbors	.145	(.058)**	.073	.089	(.024)***
Community belief isolation	1.402	(.308)***	.139	.485	(.125)***
Community activity isolation	-.387	(.664)		-.249	(.270)
<i>Personal Attributes</i>					
Education	.194	(.065)***	.092	.101	(.026)***
Female	-.253	(.133)*	-.060	-.193	(.055)***
Age	-.000	(.005)		-.004	(.002)**
Political interest	.029	(.055)		.052	(.022)***
Partisan strength	-.033	(.071)		-.050	(.029)*
Civic skills gained outside church	1.822	(.190)***	.334	.495	(.064)***
Religious commitment	.035	(.032)		.016	(.013)
Constant	-2.724	(.898)		-.292	(.354)
N = 1,519			N = 1,519		
McFadden's Rho ² = .220			Adj. R ² = .258		
Correctly predicted = 65.3%			SEE = .978		

Source: 1999–2000 ELCA/Episcopal Church Clergy and Congregational Studies. See Appendix for variable coding.

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

^AProbability difference: (probability at the mean plus the standard deviation) minus (probability at the mean minus the standard deviation).

quite similar to the satisfaction argument: greater similarity weakens the drive to find a comfortable place in the group. And churches with similar congregations are not just small and rural; the relationship holds across various church membership sizes and community types (results not shown).

Church Environment

The church environment measures capture the information environment of the church as well as members' attitudes toward the church. One might expect that more satisfied congregants would participate more often and therefore gain more civic skills in the process. Confirming the earlier finding, Table 3

results suggest the opposite: *less* satisfied members are more likely to exercise leadership roles and gain skills in church. Because of the distribution of the variable (see Djupe and Gilbert 2002a), we cannot claim that active congregants are dissatisfied, since very few in the sample are; instead, high satisfaction likely breeds complacency and may signal a lack of awareness of the church. And that sense of satisfaction drops the probability of practicing a skill in church by over one-tenth—more than education increases it.

Naturally, one source goading congregants to action is the clergy, who often pursue a prophetic role challenging the views of their congregations (Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003). The Table 3 model estimates offer further evidence that clergy take on a prophetic

role in their congregations; the results suggest that more clergy speech on political topics depresses skill development. In this case, we would argue that the relationship is not causal, but instead reflects the clergy's attempt to spur their congregations to get involved and take action, which would surely entail augmenting participation rates in church.

Orienting Forces

What kinds of communities encourage individuals to direct their energies toward the church and participate at higher rates? Our argument applies the logic about group similarity developed above—individuals will seek out and participate in groups consonant with their interests and values. Several Table 3 factors capture the salience of these orienting forces.

We find considerable support for our hypothesis. Feeling religiously different from one's neighbors is statistically significant in both models and drives up the probability of practicing a skill in church by 7%. Similarly, community isolation based on the underrepresentation of the congregation's beliefs is a significant predictor in both models and increases the likelihood of practicing a skill in church by about 14%. Individuals will participate more often in their church when their neighborhood or the larger community does not adequately reflect the ideals they embrace. If the community is welcoming, there are fewer reasons to concentrate one's activity in the church. It is noteworthy to compare the potency of these effects to the factors individual members bring to the table, such as education—two of the three orienting forces have effects equivalent to or larger than education.

Personal Attributes

The relationship between personal attributes and practicing civic skills is different than that between personal attributes and political activity. While many political activities are routed through groups or have organizational roots, many others are individual and can be pursued without extensive organizational support. Developing civic skills outside of an organizational setting is difficult, and here, by definition, it is almost impossible. So, while personal resources and orientations that would equip and attract the individual to organizational participation in church are important, they should be less salient than the social and organizational context of the church.

Only a few of the personal attributes in Table 3 are significant predictors of practicing a skill in the logit

model; almost all are significant predictors in the OLS model. This pattern suggests that church structural and social pressures drive members to be involved in at least one group (binary—logit model), while individual resources affect to what extent the member is involved (interval—OLS model). Not surprisingly, education and practicing civic skills outside of church stand out as strong determinants in both models; having above average secular civic skills raises the probability of practicing a civic skill in church by one-third (compared to below average secular skills).

We also find that women and older members develop fewer skills, which is surprising considering the time advantages both populations are likely to possess. Interestingly, strong partisans practice fewer skills in church, though the politically interested practice more; strong partisans tend to direct their organizational energies outside the church, most likely in electoral politics.

Finally, when the social elements of the church are accounted for, religious commitment has no independent effect on the development of civic skills. This null finding echoes Djupe and Gilbert's (2002c) inability to find a relationship between commitment levels and political activity or being recruited to participate in politics by a church member; it also confirms Cavendish, Welch, and Legee's (1998) finding that the strongest determinant of religiosity is the member's church social network.

Conclusion

In this article, we have empirically examined how local congregations help to form civic skills, a crucial resource citizens need to engage in political action. The results offer a glimpse into the social and organizational complexity of churches, attributes that bear on their potential political impact. Of course, not all church members gain politically relevant resources in church. Some choose not to participate in church activities as they direct their energies elsewhere. But many do choose to participate, and our analysis demonstrates the importance of social relationships in structuring their access to and participation in congregational activities that provide skill-building opportunities.

These findings validate in a broad sense, but deviate in specific detail from, the conclusions drawn by Verba and colleagues from their civic participation study. Like Verba et al., we find significant civic skill development in two mainline Protestant denominations with locally autonomous lay leadership, and we

find greater subsidization of skill acquisition in lower SES congregations. But the point of departure from existing findings stems from our research design, incorporating personal attributes along with clergy actions and, uniquely, the characteristics of small groups within congregations that offer outlets for civic skills development and practice.

Several important implications stem from our analysis. First, congregational involvement beyond worship does not guarantee skill development. The social composition of the group will structure, though not dictate, who is able to engage in leadership opportunities, with those most similar to other members having easier access. Essentially, churches with democratic polity work rather democratically in terms of who participates in skill-building activities, with the attendant dilemmas of democracy: the social homogeneity that promotes skill development in church intimates that fewer moderate opinions will find their way into public debate. This dynamic, while not overpowering, does not say much for churches' ability to moderate opinions and temper the tendency toward factionalism. In fact, it suggests that—like any other group interested in public action—churches engage the public sphere more efficaciously when they are socially and politically homogenous.

Second, congregational unity, which is important to skill development, can be bolstered by the surrounding community. When members feel different from their community, they tend to gravitate toward a more agreeable context—the church. The unintended consequence is positive from the standpoint of representing diverse viewpoints in the political process. Essentially, local minorities find an outlet for social involvement through the church, by which they may attain politically relevant skills. The increased political mobilization of the congregation by clergy in such situations (Djupe and Gilbert 2002b, 2003) thus finds fertile ground in a better equipped congregation, making the representation of these underrepresented viewpoints more likely.

Finally, given the weight of the evidence from this and other investigations that incorporate church-based measures of political influence, any individual-level analysis that treats churches as undifferentiated units is theoretically flawed; measures such as church attendance are inadequate to capture exposure to the politically relevant aspects of congregational life. Active involvement in church, primarily in small church-sponsored groups, is a precursor to civic skill development, information flow, and eventual political influence emanating from church-based cues. Adequate measures of these phenomena are a necessary

component of future research that seeks to understand the linkages between churches and American civic voluntarism.

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