

Political Mobilization in American Congregations: A Religious Economies Perspective

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Abstract: It has become an article of faith that congregations in America play an important role in the political mobilization of the faithful, but the reasons why congregations themselves provide political opportunities are not well understood. We unite various strands of work about congregational political engagement under the canopy of the religious economies model. Using the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Study and 1998 National Congregations Study datasets, we show that market forces shape churches' provision of political goods, suggesting that the congregational embrace of political activities should be understood not as a politically strategic exercise, but as another way to reach out to new members and retain current ones.

Through the last several decades of social science research, we have established an article of faith regarding the political role of American congregations. In a variety of ways at varying levels, congregations equip, inform, and mobilize members to engage in political action (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). While we know much about these relationships between individuals and their houses of worship, we can draw on precious little research to understand the variation in congregation-level political engagement. Furthermore, when researchers feel compelled to write about the political engagement of congregations, they often offer caveats that churches¹ are not primarily political entities. Therefore, congregations are known to be political in

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varying amounts and we suspect that variance is due to apolitical forces. In this paper, we take this question head-on, asking: Why are some churches engaged in politics more than others?

Researchers have long investigated related questions in other units of analysis, especially focused on clergy. Only a few studies have focused on congregations themselves (e.g., Beyerlein and Chaves 2003) and have focused their analysis largely on religious traditions. Other studies, though, have emphasized the importance of church leaders pursuing political opportunities (Campbell 2004; McDaniel 2008) in promoting activism by churches, conditional on the willingness of their parishioners to go along with such efforts (see, for instance, Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974).

Our approach attempts to integrate a broad range of inquiry under the umbrella of one important strand of theory in the sociology of religion—the religious economy perspective. Research investigating the central claims of the religious economies model has populated scholarly journals in a number of disciplines and is now more commonly used in the context of the developing world, especially in Latin America. But this approach has not yet been applied to religion and politics in the United States. Thus, in this study, we generalize the religious economies approach from abroad to explore how religious market forces affect churches' provision of political goods in the United States. We argue that churches' political engagements vary for apolitical reasons—congregations engage in politics as one benefit designed to attract and retain members. We pair religious census data with two national samples of congregations, the National Congregations Study (Chaves and Anderson 1998) and the U.S. Congregational Life Study (Woolever and Bruce 2002) to assess the connection between forces linked to religious competition and congregational political engagement.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN AND OF CONGREGATIONS

Despite a long history of ambivalence about the separation of church and state, American congregations have long been considered a storehouse of democracy (Tocqueville 1994). The definitions of democracy vary, but if we consider the political activity of citizens as the democratic good of interest, then the evidence is nearly unequivocal. Simply put, affiliation with a congregation improves the chances of a member participating in politics (Hougland and Christenson 1983; Leege 1988; Peterson 1992; Gilbert 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Harris 1999; Wuthnow 1999; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Schwadel 2005;

Djupe and Gilbert 2009). And a growing number of studies employing creative designs have demonstrated that this relationship is causal (Bloom and Arikan 2012; Gerber, Gruber, and Hungerman 2016). This simple relationship, though, obscures a wealth of mechanisms through which congregations enable political activity. Through clergy, small groups, informal networks, and individual beliefs, congregations can help inform, motivate, and recruit people to take part (e.g., McAdam 1982; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schwadel 2005; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006).

There is considerable nuance in the literature and little agreement on the predominant mechanisms that link religion to political action. The greatest discrepancies are between the approaches that assert connections between religiosity and efficacy (e.g., Harris 1999) and those that emphasize organizational experience (e.g., Legee 1988; Tate 1991; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2009), though see Calhoun-Brown (1996, 2010) for a blended perspective. That is, most of this work considers churches to *house* processes that affect political participation (e.g., Putnam and Campbell 2010) rather than to *direct* those processes. To be clear, the former argues that churches host religious experiences and a variety of small groups in which individuals can exercise civic skills and develop opinions, which are then transportable to the public square. The latter perspective would argue that churches are intentional in their deployment of political groups and information that may help connect congregants with political opportunities outside the church. There need not be an either/or answer, but it is this latter set of activities that is the focus of this paper.

There is existing evidence that some churches direct political action. Most of the research in this area, however, starts from a different vantage point—the clergy and the church organization rather than the individual congregant. A minority of congregations do engage in political activities, with the highest number pursuing officially non-partisan activities like informing congregants about political opportunities and distributing voter guides, with far fewer engaging in active voter registration and protests (Chaves, Giesel, and Tsitsos 2002; Chaves 2004). The amount of activity also varies by religious tradition, with congregations specializing in particular types of activities by religious tradition to an extent (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Smith 2016). Still, by these measures, it is clear that Catholic and Black Protestant congregations in the United States are the most involved in the political action (see also Morris 1984), with evangelicals the least engaged (except with voter guide

distribution—Beyerlein and Chaves 2003, 237). This pattern also obtains at the level of the individual congregant (Campbell 2004). But it is still not clear why some congregations are more political than others within religious traditions. If such activity affects individual political engagement, it is curious why far from all congregations do it.

From the perspective of clergy political engagement, the distributions of activity look quite different and a clearer story emerges. Referencing patterns across religious traditions, old gaps between theologically liberal and conservative clergy appear to be declining (Guth et al. 1997) and, from the scattered evidence we have, political activity among clergy is *up* from past levels (Guth 1996; Djupe and Gilbert 2008). Most of the work on clergy has explored their political engagement relative to distributions of opinion in the congregation and community, which together demonstrate a concern for organizational maintenance.

After Campbell and Pettigrew's (1959) pathbreaking study that described clergy deeply constrained by disagreement over civil rights, researchers have continued to focus on the importance of congregational disagreement. "Storms in the churches" during the civil rights movement and beyond suggested clergy engaged in politics at their peril and pain of losing members (Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974; Guth et al. 1997; Friedland 1998; Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018; see also McDaniel 2008). Indeed, churches that were cohesive (and "strong"—Kelley 1972) combined traits of social ties, theological conservatism, and tension with the world—the seeming opposite of those engaged with current politics (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990). However, more recent work carved out room for a prophetic role for clergy in their congregations, showing that greater disagreement with the congregation promoted more political speech (Djupe and Gilbert 2003).

Some of the differences between these studies were resolved by turning to richer measures of clergy engagement with politics. That is, once researchers captured the content of their public argumentation, they found that clergy speech does not shrink in the face of disagreement, in part because clergy can rely on other reference groups (Calfano 2009), but especially because their speech tends to be more ideologically balanced (Djupe and Calfano 2012). From this perspective, the balanced presentation of issues is more common among mainline Protestant clergy than other clergy because they face more diverse congregations (Olson, Djupe, and Cadge 2011). This behavior can be tied to congregational maintenance strategies since pursuing balanced policy speech is simultaneously linked to political division in the congregation and

congregational outreach toward new members (Djupe and Calfano 2012). Presenting balanced accounts of a policy issue is a way to build more informed, thoughtful citizens (e.g., Price, Capella and Nir 2002), but is also a way to maintain engagement by people who disagree with each other (Guttman and Thompson 1996). That is, clergy facing diversity in the pews shift their political presentations in ways to serve member retention and the demands of outreach to grow the membership.

Disagreement in the congregation can be managed from another perspective. Political disagreement is seldom confronted directly in organizational societies. In Olson's (1965) view, members belong to groups for the selective benefits, which are typically tangential to the public purpose of the organization. Friendship and cheap insurance attract and maintain members and not the pursuit of clean air (but see Rothenberg 1988). Congregations may work similarly, though the benefit packages obviously vary. If clergy politicking costs members because of a perceived inattention to the needs of the congregation (e.g., Hadden 1969), then it is no surprise that political action is enabled as a byproduct of attention to congregational needs (Djupe and Gilbert 2008). That is, clergy will be more politically engaged when their members are satisfied with the religious and social life of the congregation.²

This is not to say that researchers have been inattentive to the role of the community in shaping clergy and congregational political presence. The earliest work was not particularly sanguine about the role of churches in reshaping their communities, finding them (too) well integrated into the economic life of mill towns (Pope 1942), a finding echoed later in work on churches in civil rights struggles (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; see Friedland 1998 for an overview). While a concern for the relationship of the church to the community lay dormant for decades, more recent work has placed it front and center. Especially in areas left organizationally barren, clergy stepped in to play representative roles, serving as liaisons to local government and even enlisting their congregations as service providers (McAdam 1982; Olson 2000; Owens 2007; but see McRoberts 2003). More generally, Djupe and Gilbert (2003) find that clergy engage in more political activity when their congregations hold minority views in the community, reinforcing their roles as representatives when needed (see also Djupe, Burge, and Calfano 2016).

Altogether, these concerns about how clergy react to congregation and community can stand integration. A growing chorus finds congregations pursuing politics in ways that demonstrate an abiding concern for membership maintenance. Clergy are also mindful about their place in the

community in a manner that appears to balance the needs of the congregation with their reputation in the community. One way forward is to draw on a religious economies approach, which is explicitly concerned with how congregations and clergy entrepreneurs develop strategies to attract and retain members in a religious marketplace.

THE RELIGIOUS ECONOMY MODEL

Described by Warner (1993) as one aspect of an emerging “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion (see also Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Jelen and Wilcox 1998), the religious economies model draws upon economic concepts to argue that competition between houses of worship makes religious organizations stronger and increases participation in religious practices (Finke and Stark 1988, 1989, 2005). The core assumption of the religious economies model is that individuals assign a value to religious belief and will maximize the benefits they receive when choosing a particular religious home (Gill 2001). The incentives, then, are for religious entrepreneurs (typically clergy) to offer an array of religious models in order to meet a diversity of needs through congregations. A denser array of options in the religious economy should drive up the intensity of services offered to recruit and maintain members (Jelen and Wilcox 1998). Hence, free markets marked by dense pluralism should and do have greater public participation in them (Finke and Stark 2005; McCleary and Barro 2006).

While certainly not without its critics (e.g., Breault 1989; Olson 1998; Voas, Crockett, and Olson 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Hill and Olson 2009), the religious economies perspective has opened up fruitful new avenues of research and bears the promise of connecting institutional and contextual factors with decision-making among individuals. It has been employed, with some success, in explaining why strict churches are often so successful (Kelley 1972; see also Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990)—a puzzle with which other models struggled to contend (see Iannaccone 1988, 1992, 1994).

Even though the economic approach is appealing in many respects, the evidence in support of canonical statements of the religious economies model is spotty (Chaves and Gorski 2001). Early research (Finke and Stark 1989) has been roundly criticized for a series of mistakes that affected the conclusions about the relationship between competition in the religious marketplace and religious practice (Breault 1989; Olson 1998; Norris and Inglehart 2004), while more recent work has gone after the measurement

strategies used to gauge whether the model can explain religious adherence across countries and over time (Voas, Crockett, and Olson 2002). However, there are stable findings—a bevy of analyses have replicated the relationship that small marketshare congregations enjoy greater religious commitment (Stark and McCann 1993; Jelen and Wilcox 1998; Stark 1998; Perl and Olson 2000; Brewer, Jozefowicz, and Stonebraker 2006; Hill and Olson 2009). Relatedly, religious participation is linked to state deregulation of religion, which is necessary for the free market to function (Fox and Tabory 2008). On the other hand, analyses pitched at the congregational level have found little to suggest that low market-share congregational clergy “try harder” to attract new adherents by engaging in outreach efforts (Hill and Olson 2009).

If competition drives congregations to alter their behavior, there is no reason those behaviors are limited to religious activities. Indeed, a religious free market marked by competition is argued to be a primary driver of innovative practices in the search for adherents (Finke and Stark 2005). Politics can be one such tool that congregations may use to reach out and distinguish themselves in the marketplace. This is just the argument that a select few political scientists have made with respect to the political orientation of the Catholic Church under authoritarian regimes (see Gill 2001). The argument is straightforward—the Catholic Church will support the regime (or remain quiescent) until religious competition from Protestants compels the Church to take more progressive and populist stands against the regime (Gill 1998). For instance, the Catholic Church in Mexico was pressured into supporting indigenous causes by the expansion of Protestantism to the poor by U.S. missionaries (Trejo 2009). Catholic priests in Brazil similarly turned to deliver social justice messages from the pulpit, as opposed to lines of argumentation focused on personal morality, when primed to think about competition from other religious “firms” (Smith 2016).

While compelling, this research has not yet gelled into a comprehensive theoretical framework applicable outside autocratic regimes (or countries with an autocratic past). First, this work has focused on responses by the Catholic Church to the exclusion of other religious groups (for a new, notable exception see Smith 2016). This is, of course, a sensible analytic choice given the dominance of the Catholic Church in many countries with autocratic regimes that might then open up to religious competition. But if the religious economies model has empirical legs, it must apply outside of autocratic regimes to groups at varying levels of

dominance. And we know little about how Protestants respond to competitive pressures (e.g., Bellin 2008; though see Smith 2016).

Second, to be applicable to developed democracies and to prove the mechanism, the unit of analysis must shift. While previous work in Latin America has considered the Catholic Church as a unitary religious body (e.g., Gill 1998, 9), that simplification does not hold water in the United States where there is a strong decentralizing tendency, even among the most hierarchical groups (Hatch 1989; see also Philpott 2007). There are also good theoretical reasons why the unit of analysis should shift—the congregation is the primary unit where competitive pressures are active (Finke and Scheitle 2013), though broader religious groups are not unaware of them. Moreover, the democratic contributions of religion are rarely posited to emanate from aggregated religious bodies (though see Wood and Bloch 1995), but instead from congregations as discussed above. Therefore, a more efficacious religious economies claim explaining political engagement should be pitched at the congregational level. Lastly, to be broadly applicable, the political ends pursued by congregations should be diverse and not limited to progressive causes. The claim that competition results in exclusively progressive political movement by religious groups is clearly a non-starter (e.g., Gerring, Hoffman, and Zarecki 2018; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011).

Conceptualized more broadly, we lay hold of the primary mechanism of the religious economies approach—under pressure, churches work to provide services to their members to attract new adherents and stave off defections to other religious firms (see also Jelen and Wilcox 1998). In an effort to maximize benefits and minimize costs, religious consumers may seek out churches that offer the most in the way of services (support groups, daycare, etc.). When options are numerous and religious pluralism high, the religious market is for the buyer and services will be plentiful. There is no reason to limit the nature of these services (within reason), which modern megachurches highlight—there are activities for an eye-widening array of interests, including groups for mechanics, sports of all kinds, and every form of grief and relationship type. Politics has never been out of bounds among most religious groups in America and may be considered an additional good that churches and other houses of worship might provide. Much as is the case with individual clergy, who are permitted to engage in political activities in return for satisfying the religious needs of their congregants (Djupe and Gilbert 2008), opportunities for political activism in the church are likely driven by a desire to provide a wide range of services to current and prospective

members. Therefore, politics is likely to be pursued by congregations under competitive pressure as just one among many interests they may cater to.

HYPOTHESES

Our main hypothesis is that congregations under pressure of competition will offer political activities at greater rates. We test this notion through four variables that capture evidence of competition and one (theology) that conditions its effects. First, we expect that greater *religious pluralism* in an area (in this case, the county) will drive up political activity. It is worth acknowledging that an alternate hypothesis suggests that religious pluralism cuts down on congregational politicking owing to a dearth of like-minded confederates (e.g., other churches that share a denominational affiliation) in the region. Second, greater *religious marketshare* could either undercut political activity by encouraging lazy monopolistic behavior or could increase political activity as a measure of intra-religious group competition, particularly given that most religious switching occurs within denominations (Sherkat 2014). Third, religious bodies with a monopoly over the production of spiritual goods might take this power as a license to make political demands of their members (see Stedman 1964).

However, we also believe that competition will drive congregations to offer programs conditional on what they believe is an appropriate response (what might be termed their “role orientation”). In particular, religious conservatives have tended to adhere to the notion that they should render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s; religious liberals have tended to embrace politics as an appropriate mission (e.g., Guth et al. 1997). Put somewhat differently, theological conservatives often focus on “otherworldly rewards’ over an emphasis on the everyday demands of the social gospel” (McAdam 1982, 91). Thus, under competitive pressure, we expect religious liberals and conservatives will diverge in their offerings in a brand-consistent way—low marketshare liberals will be more heavily political while low marketshare religious conservatives will be less political.

This conditional hypothesis explicitly acknowledges the moderating role that *theology* plays in shaping the responses of congregations (and congregational leaders) to market pressures in the local religious economy. Political theology, as Amy Erica Smith notes (2016), may help determine clergy’s stance toward mixing political activity with other facets of the church experience (see also Philpott 2007; Toft,

Philpott, and Shah 2011). That is, we would expect churches' organizational reactions to competition to depend, at least in part, on the theological tradition with which they are oriented. Protestant clergy (which are almost universally theologically conservative in the Latin American case), for instance, have been known to respond to market forces not by changing the messages that they relay from the pulpit, but rather by encouraging the sorts of social ties that limit members from seeking out other houses of worship (see Smith 2016). Theologically conservative churches, on balance, simply demand more of their members and may, therefore, be able to discourage membership losses by fostering strong social ties among the laity (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990). By contrast, theologically liberal churches may have to compensate for the relative lack of close-knit connections among their members by offering a wide array of services.

Lastly, we include two measures of felt competition—congregational behaviors that should respond to competitive pressures (which we provide evidence for later in the paper). Congregations under competition should have to work harder to attract and retain members. Therefore, we expect that congregations offering a (1) greater *diversity of non-political activities* and (2) more *outreach activities* should be more likely to engage in political activities. We discuss these measures in more detail below.

An alternative hypothesis suggests that religious organizations are active in the political realm only in situations where their involvement might prove determinative. Much as is the case with individuals, groups (including religious groups) are perhaps most likely to participate in politics when they are explicitly asked to do so (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Organizations that are ostensibly non-political in nature, such as churches, are often asked to venture into the business of politics by campaigns and political parties that are strategic about the business of mobilizing voters. While the Republican Party receives a great deal of the credit for bringing the faithful into the political fold to turn so-called “values voters” out to the polls, most political campaigns make overtures aimed at mobilizing churchgoers, including Barack Obama’s campaign in 2012 (Dallas 2014). These efforts by campaigns are likely focused in areas in which the returns are expected to be the greatest—geographic regions in which the candidates are in tight contests. In testing this conjecture we include measures of party competition and the Democratic share of the two-party vote for president at the county level in all of the models. Again, the response to the political environment is likely to be brand consistent—theological conservatives are more likely to engage in a majority

Republican area, with theological liberals engaging more in Democratic areas.

Although there has been a great deal of debate regarding the appropriate level of aggregation at which to examine the nexus of religious and political competition (see Jelen and Wilcox 1998), we focus on counties owing to their importance as political entities. As Masket notes, “many local political structures are established at the county level, and it is there that many electoral contests are waged” (2009: 1026). Moreover, if the campaigns are successful at mobilizing the faithful, then the effects of such efforts should be localized to the county level—the unit at which many campaign field operations are organized (see Masket 2009).

Another alternative explanation for why only some congregations offer political goods is that clergy are often limited in their ability to delve into the political arena by the people in the pews. We term this the “gathering storm” thesis.³ Specifically, this perspective holds that mismatches between the policy preferences of clergy and those to whom they minister are likely to present barriers not just to clergy, but congregational politicking. When congregants are opposed to mixing politics with religion, or are opposed to the political messages coming from the pulpit, political goods are unlikely to be provided by the congregation.

A final alternative hypothesis views congregations as part of organizational fields filled with other service providers and community-engaged organizations. In this social movement perspective, church service provision is not the result of filling representational gaps, but instead results from connections to available community initiatives and mobilization from community partner organizations (e.g., Fernandez and McAdam 1988; Kitts 1999; Baldassarri and Diani 2007).

DATA AND METHODS

To examine the relationship between religious competition and the provision of political goods in churches we principally turn to two datasets that are particularly well-suited to the task: the 1998 wave of the National Congregations Study (NCS) and the 2001 wave of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. The 1998 NCS collected responses from a key informant from 1,236 congregations snowballed from 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) respondents (see Chaves et al. 1999; Chaves 2004)—a procedure known as hyper-network sampling (McPherson 1982). Although not without its difficulties owing to its reliance on key informants (see Schwadel and

Dougherty 2010), the NCS has an ideal set of questions for this inquiry, gathering a nearly comprehensive set of information about the congregation, its composition, and its community, though it is (unfortunately) light on the information content flowing through churches. Critical to this effort, the NCS collects data on the diversity of organizationally-based services offered to members as well as a few political activities the congregation might engage—chief among them being the sponsorship of a voter registration drive.⁴ Though the activity list is long, it is missing clergy initiatives (especially their speech) as well as any informal politicking that takes place. The U.S. Congregational Life Study (USCLS) covers essentially the same ground as the NCS, generated by the same snowball sampling method (but using the 2000 GSS).⁵ To both datasets, we attach county-level data on religious membership from the 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS) and county-level data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics to test the social movement hypothesis.

We create two measures of market pressure from these religious census data. For each denominationally affiliated group in each sample, we attached their county-level marketshare (total group adherents divided by total adherents in the county).⁶ We also constructed a Herfindahl-style measure of market concentration which sums the squared proportion of each religious group in the county—a higher value (toward 1) suggests that adherence is concentrated in one or a few groups, and values toward 0 suggest equally-sized group pluralism.⁷

Two other measures of “felt competition” are of special note. The first indexes several activities that congregations may use to reach out to potential members. The items are similar across the two studies, asking about explicit new member recruitment, placing paid ads, encouraging members to invite others, conducting a survey in the community, mailing a flyer, follow-ups with visitors, and forming a special membership committee. In the NCS, the mean outreach is 4.4 (out of 7 with a S.D. of 2). In the USCLS there are 14 items with a mean of 7 (S.D. of 3).

The second measure is a count of the number of different group services the congregation sponsors. The USCLS asked whether congregations engaged in 23 different forms of service, including such things as senior citizens assistance, support groups, preschool, emergency relief, sporting activities, music programs, and craft groups. Sample congregations engaged a mean of 7 (S.D. of 4, range from 0 to 18). Two of these, not included in the services variable, were explicitly political

activities, including “voter registration or voter education” and “political or social justice activities.” This constitutes one of our dependent variables.

The NCS asked about more group types at a much finer grain. Of the 43 types asked about in 1998 (six of which were political), the mean number ascribed was 5.5 (S.D. of 3.6). It is important to note that this measure is not the same as the raw number of groups meeting in a church (i.e., there could be many sections of a group type). In another part of the survey, informants in the NCS were asked to record the total number of groups meeting in the congregation. The correlation between that figure and our service diversity figure is 0.26 ($p < 0.01$). Our theory is not that the raw number of groups matter, but that some congregations are consciously generating different group types to attract and maintain members with a wider selection of interests—they are seeking a broader share of the market. We will test both measures below, expecting only service diversity to be significantly linked to political activity, and thus the raw number of groups serves as a placebo test. The six political services asked about in the NCS, which constitutes our other dependent variable, were: groups or activities to discuss politics, to register voters, to lobby elected officials, to participate in a march or demonstration, to distribute voter guides, and to tell members about political opportunities.

To operationalize the social movement alternative hypothesis, we draw on data available from the National Center for Charitable Statistics. The 1998 core data capture public charity filings for the United States, which we aggregate by the county to attach to the NCS and USCLS. Our alternative hypothesis holds that more community initiatives should boost the opportunity for congregations to engage and represent more partners that can help mobilize congregations to act.

RESULTS—DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE

First, we examine the distribution of congregations engaging in up to six political activities among the four major religious traditions represented in the 1998 NCS (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). Overall, 56% engaged in at least one activity, though the figures are quite a bit different depending on the religious tradition. Less than majorities of evangelical and mainline Protestant congregations engaged in at least one activity and their distributions look almost identical. More Catholic and Black Protestant congregations were active and their overall activity levels were higher. Just under

three-quarters of Catholic parishes reported at least one political activity, with Black Protestant congregations trailing closely with 67%. That pattern is reflected in the average amount as well—among those congregations that engaged in at least one political activity, Catholics (2.47) and Black Protestants (2.36) engaged in at least 0.5 more activities than evangelical (1.84) and mainline Protestants (1.86). While these religious tradition differences are significant, they do not reveal why they are different and clearly leave considerable variance to be explained.

Perhaps the most appropriate place to start the analysis is with a gut check of the religious economies theory. In [Figure 1](#), we present the raw distributions of the diversity of services offered by congregations in the two samples (gray area) along with the amount of congregational political activity across the service-level distribution (black line). Panel A shows the proportion of congregations engaging in voter registration given the diversity of other services they offer in the USCLS data, which is overlaid on the distribution of congregation service-provision. The proportion engaging in voter registration climbs steadily across the range of services offered. The correlation between congregational service diversity and engaging in voter registration is 0.27 ($p < 0.01$) in the USCLS data (the correlation between outreach activities and voter registration is insignificant ($r = 0.08$, $p = 0.12$)). Panel B shows the NCS variant, which uses a political activity index rather than simply voter registration (though the voter registration variable itself produces a similar pattern). While the NCS has a higher number of congregations offering none of these services, it otherwise shows the same association between service diversity offered and the average number of political activities pursued. The correlation in these data is a bit smaller at $r = 0.16$ ($p < 0.01$; the correlation between outreach activities and political activities is $r = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, there is consistent evidence from these two datasets that the provision of political activities is linked to the diversity of services offered.⁸

RESULTS—MODELS

With a plausible connection between the two established, we turn to estimates in a model predicting the provision of political activities by churches. We begin with the National Congregations Study data in [Table 1](#), which shows the results of two models—one of engaging in a voter registration effort (logit—20% pursued voter registration) and another of a 6-item political participation index (negative binomial).⁹ The results are largely in

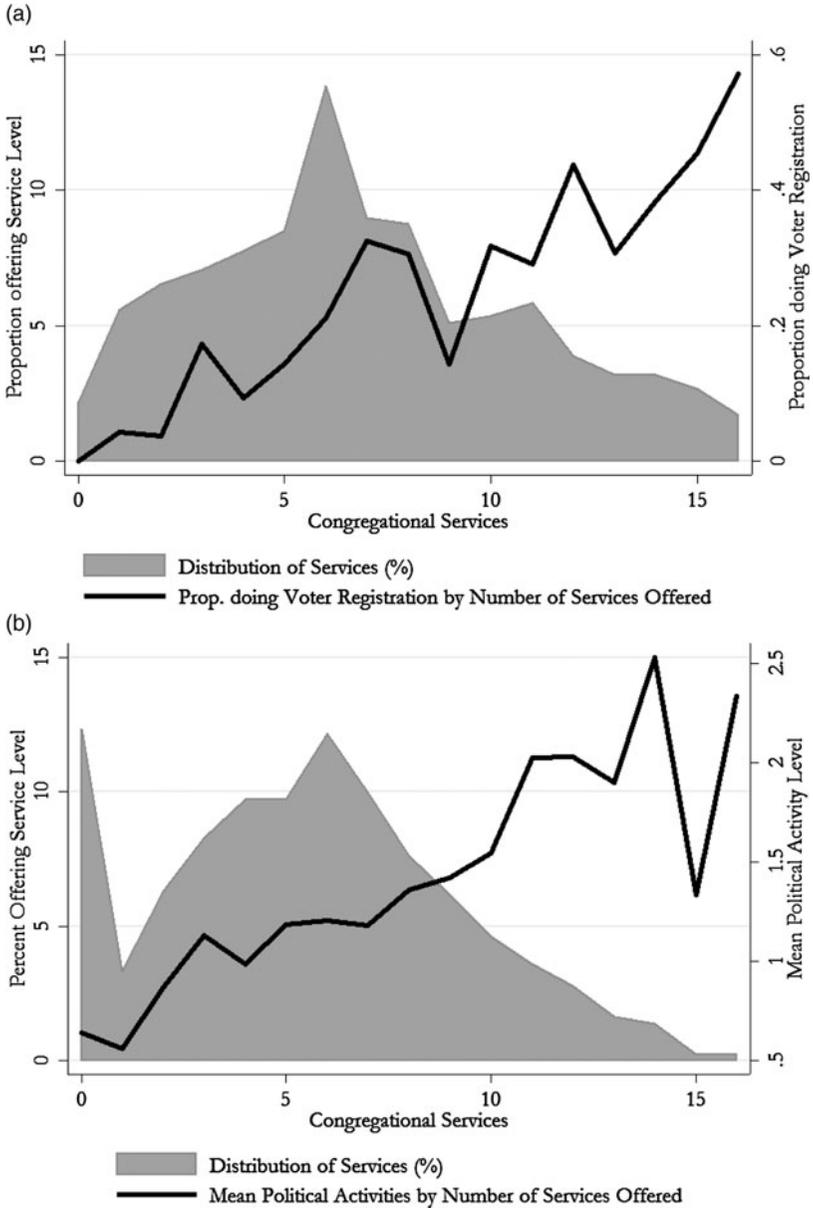


FIGURE 1. The Distribution of Congregational Services and the Relationship of Congregational Political Activity to Service Provision. (a) U.S. Congregational Life Study. (b) National Congregations Study

Table 1. Logistic Regression Estimates of Voter Registration and Negative Binomial Regression Estimates of a Congregational Political Activity Count Measure

	Activity Index			Voter Registration		
	β^*	(S.E.)	<i>p</i>	β^*	(S.E.)	<i>p</i>
Services provided (non-political)	0.04	(0.01)	***	0.15	(0.05)	***
Outreach activities	0.13	(0.02)	***	0.29	(0.10)	***
Sought government permit	0.29	(0.07)	***	0.60	(0.34)	*
Conflict in church	0.07	(0.07)		-0.28	(0.26)	
Denominationally affiliated	0.31	(0.16)	*	0.38	(0.53)	
1/congregation size	-34.96	(19.44)	*	-109.35	(162.03)	
Church income	0.00	(0.00)	**	0.00	(0.00)	**
Catholic church	0.20	(0.18)		-1.89	(0.79)	**
Evangelical church	-0.07	(0.17)		-2.44	(0.64)	***
Mainline church	-0.35	(0.18)	*	-2.33	(0.81)	***
Midwest	-0.31	(0.11)	***	-1.33	(0.52)	**
South	-0.40	(0.11)	***	-1.19	(0.46)	***
West	-0.19	(0.14)		-0.86	(0.52)	*
Bible is inerrant	-0.04	(0.09)		-0.01	(0.41)	
Clergy gender	0.06	(0.15)		0.28	(0.85)	
Pct with college degree	0.00	(0.00)		0.01	(0.01)	
Pct female	-0.00	(0.00)		-0.02	(0.02)	
Pct over 60	-0.01	(0.00)	***	-0.02	(0.01)	*
Pct under 35	-0.00	(0.00)		-0.01	(0.01)	
Pct with long drive	0.00	(0.00)	**	0.01	(0.01)	*
Pct poor	0.01	(0.00)	**	0.02	(0.01)	***
Pct rich	0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.01)	
Pct white	-0.01	(0.00)	***	-0.02	(0.01)	***
Pct who are church leaders	-0.00	(0.00)	*	-0.00	(0.01)	
Political ideology	-0.02	(0.07)		0.05	(0.26)	
Theological liberals	0.16	(0.11)		-0.04	(0.54)	
Theological conservatives	-0.81	(0.48)	*	-3.97	(1.90)	**
Logged marketshare	0.65	(0.40)		2.01	(1.60)	
Theo. cons. * In marketshare	-0.02	(0.12)		0.53	(0.46)	
logged marketshare squared	-0.05	(0.13)		-0.29	(0.58)	
Theo. cons. * In marketshare sqrd.	0.01	(0.02)		0.13	(0.06)	**
Religious concentration	-0.03	(0.02)		-0.16	(0.10)	
Democratic share of 2-party vote	0.66	(0.50)		1.17	(2.21)	
Theo. conservative * Dem. voteshare	-1.10	(0.64)	*	-2.62	(2.32)	
Party competition	-0.98	(0.57)	*	-1.33	(2.26)	
Public charities in the county	0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.00)	***
Constant	-0.28	(0.61)		-0.19	(2.62)	
Observations	$N = 720, \chi^2 = 370.11^{***},$ pseudo $R^2 = 0.11$			$N = 718, \chi^2 = 201.13^{***},$ pseudo $R^2 = 0.36$		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

accord, but most importantly religious competition variables are implicated in both models. At the top of the table, both the diversity of services offered and the number of outreach activities engaged have positive and significant effects.¹⁰ In the voter registration model, a shift from the typical lower end of service diversity (mean minus 1 S.D.) to the typical high end (mean plus 1 S.D.) boosts the probability of voter registration by 0.08; the same shift in outreach activities has the same effect on voter registration (0.08). In the index model, this shift from low to high outreach boosts the number of political activities by 0.65 and by 0.39 from that same shift in service diversity. These measures of felt competition are important determinants of the political activism of congregations.

Their effects are comparable with the size of the other significant effects in the model. In fact, the outreach effect (of 0.65 on average) is the strongest in the model with the activity index as the dependent variable. The effect of being denominationally affiliated boosts activity by 0.48. Being affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination drops activity by the same margin. A higher than average proportion of whites in the congregation similarly depresses the rate of political activity. Seeking a government permit increases activity by 0.41, while the other significant effects are operating at about half of this rate. A congregation with a higher than average poverty level has 0.26 more political activities, a higher than average congregational income boosts activity by 0.2, a higher than average number of members with a long drive to reach the congregation tends to have more political activity, as does having a lower than average proportion of seniors (by 0.27).

It is essential to note that the effects of the diversity of group services provided are not achieved by a measure of the *number* of groups active in a congregation. Rather than counting the types of groups, this measure counts the raw number of groups operating in the congregation (we also tested a per capita variant). This measure is not close to significant in these same models (nor is the per capita variant—result not shown). Moreover, the percent of the congregation that is exercising leadership is a significant determinant only in the index model but points consistently toward *fewer* political activities, not more as the civic voluntarism model might predict. As an aside, including the number of groups meeting in the congregation does not affect the estimate of service diversity either. Thus, congregational engagement in politics is not a function of civic skill exercise or simple associationalism in these data. Instead, it is the orientation of the church toward providing a diversity of services to attract and retain members that is important.

Other contextual measures of competition are significantly related to congregational political activity as well and are relatively consonant in their effects across the two models. Greater religious concentration (the opposite of pluralism) undermines the probability of engaging in voter registration and is just outside statistical significance for the general political participation index ($p = 0.13$). This is what a religious economies approach would expect as the trend toward monopolism undermines competition.¹¹ Notably, this particular result runs counter to the expectation that religious organizations nested within an environment studded with other churches of the same denomination provide the kinds of resources necessary to engage in political action.

The measure of group marketshare works in conjunction with the theological orientation of the congregation as expected by role orientation theory. The results are displayed in Figure 2 with confidence intervals; the black line represents predictions for theological conservatives, the x-axis shows changes in marketshare (logged), and the y-axis shows the predicted number of political activities. Theological conservatives respond to

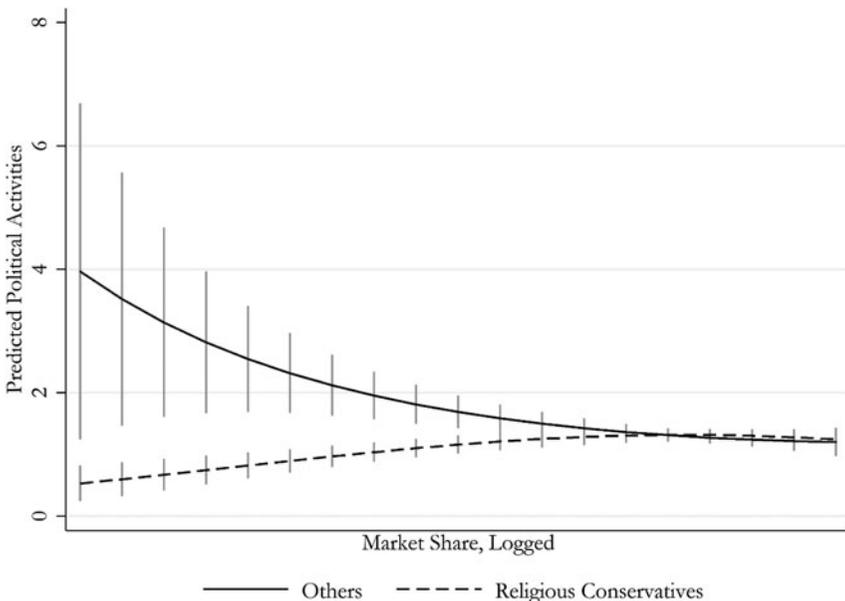


FIGURE 2. Conditional Probability of Congregational Political Activity as a Function of Theological Conservatism and Marketshare (National Congregations Study—see Table 1). Note: Comparing two sets of confidence intervals constitutes a 90% test following Payton, Greenstone, and Schenker (2003)

their marketshare differently than others. While others (liberals and moderates) engage in less political activity as their marketshare increases (from over 2 down to 1), conservatives increase theirs modestly.

The pattern among liberals and moderates corresponds to Djupe and Gilbert's (2003; see also Olson 2000) formulation that (mainline) clergy take on a representative (or prophetic) role when their congregations are not well represented locally. But this misses the larger story—the difference is more important. The result displayed in Figure 2 suggests that under market pressure (low marketshare) liberals and conservatives differentiate their offerings in expected ways—conservatives maintain separation from politics while liberals engage the world. When in average (around -2 on the logged scale) to more concentrated situations, their political presences converge to become indistinguishable.

It is important to note what is not significant as well. Congregations, on average, appear not to engage politics strategically. If it were strategic, then the deployment of resources would take place when they are likely to make a difference—when there is actual competition between the two parties in the United States. While party competition has no bearing on the extent to which congregations get involved, the partisan cast of the county does. In Figure A3, we show that theologically conservative congregations offer more political activities in Republican majority areas, while theological liberals have more politically active congregations in majority Democratic areas. Moreover, the social movement hypothesis that an organizational field saturated with public charities finds some supportive evidence here, but only that they are linked to voter registration drives.¹² However, that result flips to negative in the USCLS (voter registration) model described next.

We also attempt to replicate, as near as is practicable, the NCS models using the 2001 USCLS. While the model specifications differ since the two surveys did not ask the exact same complement of questions, many key variables are present in both studies. With a pair of logit models, we used these data to examine the determinants of whether a congregation hosted a voter registration drive in the year prior to the survey, and whether the church reported sponsoring other political or social justice-oriented activities (see the models displayed in Table A1 in the Appendix). Both models are rather sparse in terms of significant determinants, which may not be surprising given that the sample is half the size of the NCS, and yet they agree in one key way. Importantly, both models show that the diversity of group services offered is positively and significantly related to hosting a voter registration drive and sponsoring a political

activity. A higher than average diversity of service provision augments the likelihood of registering voters by 0.15 and of a political/social justice activity by an even greater 0.20.

While there is little evidence from any model to suggest that the provision of political activities by houses of worship is directly related to competition from other denominations in the surrounding religious marketplace (religious pluralism), it is possible that the impetus to offer more diverse services (political and non-political alike) to their members flows from market forces. A series of simple Pearson correlations (see Table A3 in the Appendix) speaks to this conjecture, showing the relationships between service diversity and outreach activities, and between each of those to marketshare and religious concentration. Collectively, these results provide the proof of concept that service diversity and outreach (what we call “felt competition”) are related to religious competition. Service diversity is significantly and positively correlated with outreach activities in both datasets, consistent with the idea that programmatic churches do more and that congregations under pressure engage in more activities to keep and attract members. Service diversity is inconsistently related to objective measures of religious competition. Higher religious concentration in a county is negatively related to service diversity, though only significantly so in the NCS data, and negatively and significantly to the number of outreach activities pursued. These patterns could reasonably be produced by monopolistic environments discouraging activity. On the other hand, service diversity is positively linked to marketshare, though only significantly so in the USCLS data, while marketshare is negatively related to the number of outreach activities (significantly in both datasets). That is, it is reasonable to expect that churches might expend less energy trying to poach other congregants and more energy to retention in high marketshare environments.

In fact, we would expect that denominations would encourage a policy of not coveting thy neighbor’s congregants. This is what we find in a simple model predicting outreach activities using an interaction of being denominationally affiliated and marketshare. Those results show that the outreach activities of denominationally-affiliated congregations decline as their marketshare grows, whereas the outreach of non-denominational congregations rapidly increases (see Figure A4 in the online Appendix). Whether by policy, but more likely by tacit agreement, denominations discourage competitive practices when they are numerically dominant. This would make member retention all the more important, explaining the positive relationship between marketshare and service diversity.

DISCUSSION

Our models find a consistent effect from felt competition and, to a lesser extent, from a contextual measure of competition in the form of market-share. We have two observations to make regarding these conceptualizations. The findings do not turn on whether we understand the diversity of services offered and outreach efforts to be competitive in nature. There may be a number of potential motivations for congregations to engage in outreach and to expand the types of group activities supported, which may include theological justifications (see Smith 2016). But these are at least theoretically consistent with expectations based on exposure to competition and are typically engaged in the most pronounced way by “seeker” churches that have experienced phenomenal growth (mega-churches—e.g., Trueheart 1996; Thumma 2001). Moreover, studies of organizational ecology, a close cousin to the religious economies approach, consider competition to be most robust when organizations involved *do not* report competition but instead display evidence that they are responding to competition, such as niching (e.g., Hannan and Carroll 1992; Gray and Lowery 1996). A robust member retention strategy through service diversity is consistent with niching. Regardless, the more important point is that these measures of service diversity are strongly and consistently related to congregational political activity, which suggests that congregational political activity is a programmatic exercise connected in fundamental ways to organizational survival.

Second, we found links between competition, captured through market-share, and political activity. Connections between congregational activity and marketshare are common in the literature (e.g., Stark and McCann 1993; Brewer, Jozefowicz, and Stonebraker 2006; Hill and Olson 2009), though a connection to congregational political activity is thus far novel (though see Smith 2016 for work on clergy responses to perceived market forces). The more important contribution may be the finding that reactions to competition are conditional. Under pressure, congregations should attempt to differentiate themselves from others to present a distinct offering in the marketplace (Finke and Stark 2005). And that offering is likely to be predictable and brand-consistent according to the core values an entrepreneur holds—in this case approximated by theological conservatism. That is, religious liberals expand their political offerings, while conservatives contract them in pluralistic contexts.

For a promising way forward to plumb these core values, we suggest a return to one of the most persistent distinctions in the literature, that

between church and sect (Troeltsch 1931; see also Niebuhr 1951), which are essentially endpoints on a scale marking the nature of tension between the church and society (Johnson 1963; Finke and Stark 2005). “Churches” live in consonance with society, whereas “sects” live in tension. This is the core of the religious economies model, defining the shape of religious firms and thus the nature and extent of competition (Stark and Finke 2000). We do not expect uniformity in religious models in the marketplace, but instead that congregations should vary between strategies that emphasize inclusion and exclusion, assimilation and distinction, or church and sect. Traditionally, the distinction has been treated as an end in itself, captured through the religious commitment levels and socio-economic status of participants (e.g., Glock and Stark 1965; Iannaccone 1988; Stark and Finke 2000, 214). But direct measures of the value of religious inclusion and exclusion have become available. For instance, data from a sample of American Protestant clergy from across the theological spectrum suggests a uniform emphasis on inclusion and variation only in the degree of emphasis on exclusion (Djupe and Calfano 2013). Still, even if there is minimal variation, there is variation and it relates to political attitudes and behaviors.

If such religious values can shape political attitudes, they surely relate to differences in congregational activity. Moreover, they should be more closely aligned with religious behavior than measures of theological or political conservatism. We suggest that further efforts at charting the contours of Warner’s (1993) “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion look for conditional effects of competition given the inclinations of those under pressure, inclinations that include the relative importance of retention over outreach. Here, we found such conditional effects. Religious conservatives engage a less political presence when they are isolated in a community and look indistinguishable from liberals when they are not (at least in the NCS data). This ratifies previous results (Djupe and Gilbert 2003) and incorporates them under a broader theoretical canopy.

CONCLUSION

We believe the religious economies approach holds great promise for unifying a wide body of perspectives to explain the religious presence in politics. To do so, several advances were needed to build from the creative work in comparative politics on the Catholic Church’s orientation toward authoritarian regimes (Gill 1998; Trejo 2009; see also Smith

2016). To apply to a wider selection of governments, especially developed democracies, the unit of analysis had to shift from the religious group (e.g., denomination) to one much closer to individuals—the congregation (see also Norris and Inglehart 2004). This is where competitive pressures are most acutely felt and where democratic goods are produced. The suggestion that competition fuels specifically progressive politics must also be relaxed to incorporate the diverse political interests of congregants. Lastly, the theory must be applicable to all religious traditions and not just the Catholic Church. Specifying and assessing these components have been our aims in this project.

With good data available about the engagement of congregations in politics in the United States, there is a reason to encourage the nascent theory to explain it. And many existing theoretical strands about the political presence of religion in the United States can be united under one umbrella. Religious traditions provide a set point for appropriate church offerings and levels of engagement with the world. Within traditions, there is tremendous room for innovation and adaptation to local conditions. As Djupe and Gilbert (2003) put it, clergy become “representatives” in order to rectify their minority status. A number of scholars have highlighted how the social and political engagement of congregations grows when there are service gaps in the neighborhood or where members have been excluded from the rest of civil society (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Tate 1991; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Olson 2000; Owens 2007). These are two sides of the same coin and should be recognized as such. Taken together, the common thread is the responsiveness of the church to members’ needs conditional on ecological incentives to respond in theologically consistent ways. Congregations under pressure attend to the diverse needs of their members. The greater the diversity of catered interests, the more likely the programmatic net will incorporate political activity. Therefore, political churches are highly programmed churches that do not pursue politics, on average, as a substitute for other activities, but as a complement to them.

This finding stands at odds with at least one prominent explanation in the literature as to why members from some denominations are more politically involved than others. Campbell (2004), for instance, argued that evangelical churches ask so much of their members that they simply do not have time for politicking (see also Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990). Although pitched at a different unit of analysis, our results suggest that churches offer political activities alongside other kinds of activities in a complementary fashion rather than as an either-or type of proposition.

This formulation opens up a new and important line of questioning about the integration of politics in the congregation. Djupe and Gilbert (2009, 200; see also Calhoun-Brown 1996) found that the translation of recruitment in the church to political action required participation in a political activity in the church. Those political activities occur in highly programmed churches. Do sufficient network ties exist across those activities to spread political activism or is political engagement locked away in organizational ghettos? That is, is there an additional layer that enables political action among some members, but prevents it from spreading conflict to the broader congregation?

A long line of work on clergy politicking finds a moderate level of engagement that is sensitive to concerns for membership maintenance. How does the sense of appropriateness of political action affect the political engagement of the congregation or the compartmentalization of their efforts? To what extent do clergy's motivations to pursue a political agenda create a congregational need for politics? In fact, is it possible that their pursuit of a political agenda may then necessitate the creation of other programs to distract members not interested in or opposed to political action?

It is important to emphasize the lack of correspondence between the incentives of the religious and political contexts. On average, congregations do not appear strategic in their engagement in political action; they do not get more involved when they can make a difference (see also Djupe and Gilbert 2003, 131). Instead, congregations generally are more politically active in majoritarian contexts—religious conservatives responding positively to Republican areas, and theological liberals in Democratic communities. Our account does not deny that there are congregations that become politically charged (see Campbell 2004) or that religion is involved with partisan polarization in the United States. But there is a great deal more to explain their political activity, suggesting that houses of worship are broadly interested in the promotion of political engagement as a way to maintain and grow their congregations, forging deep ties between democratic and religious health.

That general link with the political environment suggests a broader caveat. Churches are often integrated into wider communities, and competition from or collaboration with secular organizations may also encourage the provision of political (and other) services to their congregations. There is good evidence that those who are dissatisfied with their church may not leave when there are few organizational alternatives—religious or otherwise. For instance, black churches in the South saw little decline in membership in the 1960s, likely as an outgrowth of the fact that there were very few

alternative organizational structures or institutions for which churchgoers might have left (Nelson and Nelson 1975). In the North, however, “greater competition from other agencies and institutions” (Nelson and Kanagy 1993, 311) gave members of the black church opportunities to find other outlets for community engagement. As it stands, however, there is little to link saturated charitable fields to congregational political involvement—the results are inconsistent across our two datasets for voter registration and insignificant otherwise. There may be more to this story that future research could pursue.

Supplementary Material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048318000512>.

NOTES

1. Throughout the text, we use the term “churches” as a shorthand to refer to the more inclusive, but wordy “houses of worship.”

2. As one member of the clergy in the late 1950s opined after being let go for his social activism, the church’s leadership had expressed its preference for an “Organization Church” wherein “The caliber of its gospel depends upon the satisfaction of its clientele” (qtd. in Friedland 1998, 45).

3. We credit an anonymous reviewer with this particular construction and are grateful for the suggestion.

4. Although some might object to the classification of voter registration drives as political activities on the assumption that nonpartisan political acts are uncontroversial or are otherwise viewed as promoting civic responsibility rather than politics, such offerings might be seen as akin to turnout buying by members of the congregation who do not share the political leanings of the majority. We would also note that earlier studies that have utilized the religious economies framework to analyze the effect of market pressures on clergy politicking have likewise referred to turnout promotion as a political act (Smith 2016; see also McDaniel 2008).

5. All three datasets (NCS, USCLS, and RCMS) are available at The American Religion Data Archive (www.thearda.com), though the county identifiers in the NCS and USCLS are restricted.

6. Some denominations in the NCS and USCLS are not represented in the RCMS and so we attach the appropriate religious tradition statistic. Black Protestant denominations refused to participate in the 2000 RCMS, but did participate in the 2010 version, so we used the 2010 measure. Consistent with the “new paradigm” idea that “disestablishment is the norm” (Warner 1993, 1053) and empirical work on religious apostasy which finds that most religious switching takes place within denominations (see Sherkat 2014), we use the total number of adherents as the denominator in our measure of the county-level religious marketplace, rather than the total population in the county.

7. The county average for congregations in the NCS using a religious tradition-based herfindahl index is 0.146 in 2000—the United States is obviously quite religiously pluralistic.

8. In the Appendix in Figure A2, we show evidence from a different (clergy) sample that clergy-congregant disagreement is not linked to congregational outreach activities.

9. We also ran this model as a tobit and the results were substantively the same.

10. We checked for multicollinearity and did not find troubling correlations.

11. These results obtain after controlling for the number of services or activities offered.

12. The Appendix has a discussion and further results (Table A2) that show that including public charities in the model has no bearing on the religious economies variables we focus on.

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