

# Congregation Shopping During the Pandemic: A Research Note

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*The COVID-19 pandemic provided perhaps the perfect storm to shake up American religion. Congregations closed for a time, the majority offered services online, and people seemed willing to engage with web worship. Moreover, the country was as divided as ever, polarized around the most divisive president in the modern era. In this research note, we focus on data from the middle of the peak of the pandemic (October 2020) to assess the degree to which individuals shopped for new congregations, the degree to which politics and church closures motivated that search, and whether congregational leaving grew during this period. Congregational leaving is perhaps a third greater than normal and shopping appears much higher than normal. Notably, shoppers are not necessarily leavers, and political differences play a role, particularly in the decision to leave among marginal members.*

**Keywords:** *congregation shopping, congregation leaving, disaffiliation, pandemic, nondenominational, political disagreement.*

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, many state and federal agencies gave directives to “stop the spread” of the COVID-19 virus, which led congregations across the United States to move their services online. This exogenous shock to the normal pattern of religious attendance not only appeared to weaken the social and communal benefits of religious attendance, but it also lowered barriers to engage with and attend different houses of worship. Eventually, many of these congregations, even in the same community under the same legal guidance, began to return to in-person services on different timelines. As the responses to the pandemic became mired in political ideology and exacerbated by a presidential election year, these acts of reopening may have become informational shortcuts as to the political leaning of the leadership and congregation, allowing individuals within and without to estimate their political agreement in addition to areas of agreement in the belief that are often identified through denominational association. The sudden prevalence of a newly opened marketplace of worship venues as the vast majority of congregations began to offer online worship, as well as the information shortcut of partisan belief based upon the reopening and response to covid measures, provided an opportunity to assess the influence of associational relationships and partisan agreement on congregational loyalty. Did shopping increase during the pandemic? Did shopping promote leaving? Were both linked to politics?

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The United States already had a market-driven religious system before the pandemic that encouraged individualism and ate at the once long-term congregational bonds reinforced by the community and family (e.g., Wuthnow 2000). Any practice, such as online worship, enabling easier comparisons as well as organizational exit outside of social accountability could increase the further fraying of congregational attachments and augment the importance of individual comforts in decision-making. This was a great fear, that the pandemic would undermine American religious life, not just through the lack of social engagement, but through a new religious market in hyperdrive.

We argue that more people engaged in shopping during the pandemic because the associational bonds were weakened and shopping would not bear the same reputational and group costs that it did in the “before times.” Yet, the bonds of religious association were able to be stretched, but not broken. Importantly, we show that shopping now is not the same as leaving and frequent attenders are more motivated to shop while being less likely to leave. Moreover, consistent with prior research, the bonds of association can transcend partisan difference; political disagreement does not appear to motivate a congregational search, though, for those whose congregational attachments are weak, the experience of partisan disagreement does motivate leaving.

Not only does this work offer important contributions to the growing understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on members of religious communities, but it also shows that these communities possess resilience and flexibility, which can withstand the increased shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, it shows that the increase in congregational shopping does not appear to be driven by political disagreement, though it can be a compounding factor in leaving.

### **PANDEMIC AND POLITICS IN CONGREGATIONAL SWITCHING**

While the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March and early April 2020 showed a general public agreement with stay-at-home orders and drastically reducing the size of gatherings, as the weeks progressed to months, opinions began to diverge by political affiliation (Freking and Fingerhut 2020). Because partisanship is a critical heuristic that individuals use to process complex information (Lau and Redlawsk 2001), and directly affects the public response to communicable diseases (Baum 2011), the response to COVID-19 became a deeply partisan issue. President Trump held daily press briefings to address the rising pandemic, where he would frequently downplay the severity and spread of the virus across the country, ostensibly not to create a panic in the country (Gangle, Herb, and Stuart 2020). The President’s lackadaisical response trickled down to the state and local level, with Republican Governors less likely to issue strict stay-at-home orders (Baccini and Brodeur 2021), and county-level compliance with social distance recommendations was inversely related to the relative support of Donald Trump in the 2016 election (Golwitzer et. al. 2020). In the midst of the hyperpartisan interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic, houses of worship were left with decisions on how to navigate the legal, scientific, social, and political realities of pandemic life.

While the effects of COVID-19 on the religious and political landscape are just beginning to be studied (e.g., Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020; Djupe and Friesen 2022; Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2020; Smothers, Burge, and Djupe 2020) and will continue to grow,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that it fundamentally affected the American religious landscape. The exogenous shock of COVID-19 profoundly affected religious practice; in April 2020, 91% of Americans who attended services once a month or more reported that their church had closed its regular services in response to

<sup>1</sup>Though just beginning, we know there will be continued growth in this literature, and we specifically want to acknowledge the Exploring the Impact on Congregations Project, found at <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org> for an important engagement and aggregation of such research.

COVID-19, and 82% said their church offered streaming/online services (Pew Research Center 2020). This sudden change in the habits and actions of the religious faithful altered their experience of religious worship. Only the most creative (and expensive) online worship services maintained the unified act of congregational singing and, in some traditions, prayer and recitation, it altered or even curtailed the personal fellowship, friendship, and community with fellow congregants before and after the service. Worship became less social and less connected to the fellowship of others, mediated by the impersonal (and sometimes spotty) internet connection. This change in medium potentially weakened or even broke some of the traditional attachments that regular attenders have to their church.

Research has shown that parishioners decrease attendance and deidentify from their religious tradition in light of pervasive scandal (Bottan and Perez-Trugalia 2015), controversial theological declarations, and national exogenous political shocks (Frick and Simmons 2017; Frick, Moser, and Simmons 2021). Further, individuals change their behavior and attendance as partisan differences begin to pervade the religious sphere (Margolis 2018; Patrikios 2013), with those who identify as a Democrat more likely to disaffiliate (Campbell and Putnam 2012). This process of deidentification has been pervasive in the United States, giving rise to the category “nones” as the largest religious group in the United States (Burge 2021), whose rise is often linked to a response to the politics of the Christian Right (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger 2018; Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

But as Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey (2018) note, there is an important difference between deidentification from a tradition and disaffiliation from a specific congregation. Specifically, “The drive in American religion to be politically relevant surely promotes both processes; it yields a slow but steady drip that drains marginal affiliates from congregations” (Djupe, Neiheisel, Sokhey 2018: 169). Disaffiliation is strongest with those whose attendance was the lowest and who perceived their politics to be dissimilar to the congregation. Interestingly, they find that political dissimilarity had no additional influence on disaffiliation for those who attend two to three times a month or more. That finding helps confirm that the communal aspect of religious worship bonds people to a specific group around their religious identity and works to build bridges across political ideologies (Wuthnow 2007).

Related to disaffiliation are the concepts of church hopping and church shopping. Hopping occurs when individuals are “going from one congregation to another, rather than settling” and church shopping is when individuals “change congregations, even within the same denomination” (Wuthnow 2007: 113–114). In a survey of those who changed churches, the two dominant reasons provided were theological (looking for better sermons) and social (feeling welcomed by members and leaders) (Pew Research Center 2016). Religious leaders recognize the reality of church shopping with churches and religious webzines offering “guides” to church shoppers (Beautiful Saviour Lutheran 2021; Moscow Church of the Nazarene 2021; Olson 2021). Yet, many view the active attempt to encourage shopping as akin to “sheep stealing” (Chadwick 2001; Harney 2003).

We want to push back on the literature to reclaim the normal use of shopping as a search process, which may or may not result in a new purchase (i.e., switching congregations). That search may be akin to curious browsing with no intention to switch or a motivated one where there is no turning back. What is critical is that, whether someone stays or goes, the decision to switch is unlikely without a search process.

Scholars and religious practitioners recognize that those individuals who are more settled in their life and faith can congregation shop, and such action occurs as a “reflection of opportunity and desire” (Wuthnow 2007: 114). Political identity is also a key predictor of those who engage in congregation shopping, as those with “partisan identification as either a Republican or a Democrat are associated with a significantly greater likelihood of church shopping, compared with political independents” (Audette and Weaver 2016: 253). Particularly, congregation shopping can be a “form of partisan driven religious change—[which] allows individuals to sort into religious environments that match their political outlooks” (Margolis 2018: 32, n3).

The exogenous shock of COVID-19 may have lowered the barrier to “church shop” by providing opportunity and boosting desire. As the shutdown shifted most churches to physically close their doors, many offered an online worship service (Pew Research Center 2020), and streaming through their church’s website, via other platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, or through sermonaudio.com. First, the opportunity to participate in a different congregation increased in availability because the “opportunity cost” of checking out other congregations was lowered with a click of a button. Further, the new medium minimized the social cost of missing worship, since others were isolated at home and they would not readily know if a specific individual tuned in to participate or not.

Second, and this is the focus of the paper, we suspect that the shutdown and move online may have increased the desire to congregation shop in two ways. Because of the hyperpartisan interpretation of COVID measures, the individual’s desire to church shop might be piqued because churches’ varying speed to return to in-person worship and mitigation strategies could be viewed as an informational shortcut to the political leanings of the leaders and congregants. Second, since the social interaction of corporate worship is weakened, the bonding power of social connectivity found in shared religious identity is weakened, and thus political and other differences within the congregation may have motivated a search for a new religious community. This may particularly be felt in larger congregations: “These largest congregations [over 1500] further had to combat low levels of member commitment, with the lowest per capita giving and rates of volunteering, and the highest rate of conflict” (Thumma 2021: 292).

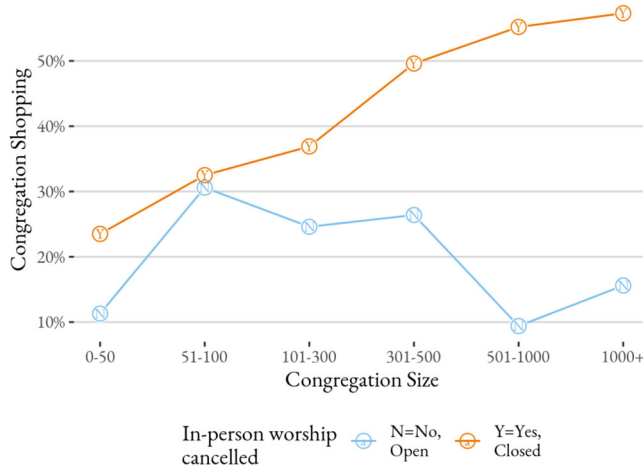
## DATA

The data necessary to address such questions are simply not often asked in social scientific surveys. Most previous analyses of switching, apostasy, and deidentification draw on strategies similar to the General Social Survey, which compares current affiliations with that at age 16. That strategy is not going to be sufficient to gather the kind of short-term searching at issue in the pandemic.

Instead, the survey we draw upon asks a range of questions that enable a description of just the behaviors we hope to study. In October, 2020, Qualtrics Panels provided 1790 adult, American respondents that fit Census-based quotas on age, region, and gender. To return a sample that resembles the nation in other respects, we use a raking weight that ensures representation on race and education, while retaining representative amounts on the three quota variables. This is not a probability sample, though nonprobability samples often return relationships that closely resemble those from probability samples (Krupnikov, Hannan Nam, and Style 2021; Lewis et al. 2015; Mullinix et al. 2016).

Our key measures are congregation shopping and leaving, as well as exposure to political difference. Part of a battery introduced by, “These questions pertain to the house of worship **you have attended.**” (emphasis in the original), the shopping measure asked, “Have you visited another congregation in person or online in the past 6 months?” The response options were yes, no, and don’t know (the latter two were combined). The leaving measure, coming later in the survey, asked, “Are you still attending the same house of worship you were attending in the Spring of 2020?” Aside from yes and no, we leave out of the analysis the respondents who indicated, “No, I was not attending in the spring, and am not attending one now” (emphasis in the original). Note, this response was on top of a filter that only asked these questions to people who reported prepandemic attendance at rates above never. We also provided several statements about the worship status of the congregation to which they could respond yes, no, or don’t know: “In-person worship has been canceled for now because of the coronavirus,” and “My congregation offered online worship services in the past 6 months.” Lastly, we measured exposure to political disagreement by taking the absolute value of the difference between the respondent’s feeling thermometer

Figure 1  
 Congregational shopping rates for open and closed congregations by size [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



score (0–100, cool to warm) toward Trump and their perception of the congregation’s support for Trump on a similar 0–100 scale—the final, shrunk scale runs from 0 to 1. The composition of other measures can be found in the online Appendix.

These are perhaps not ideal data for this purpose because they rely on average worship attenders to report accurately on their congregations’ behaviors. We know that key informants are good representatives of their congregations (e.g., Frenk et al. 2011; Schwadel and Dougherty 2010), but average attenders are surely error-prone. We take some heart that “[K]ey informants provide the most valid assessments when they are asked about directly observable organizational characteristics” (Schwadel and Dougherty 2010). Whether the congregation is online is one of those direct observables, but we have no way to estimate the degree or direction of any errors involved in respondent reports.

**RESULTS**

Of the respondents who reported prepandemic attendance at rates above never, 34.8% reported shopping for a congregation online or in person in the past 6 months. Strict comparables are not available, but this amount seems very high relative to the 30–40% (depending on the specific group) who have ever shopped (Wuthnow 2007: 115; see also Pew Research Center 2016).<sup>2</sup> Of those who were attending a congregation in the spring, 18% reported no longer attending the same congregation by October. This figure is higher by 4–5 percentage points than prepandemic rates (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018), so the pandemic likely has meant increased churn in the religious economy.

It is plain to see the link between COVID-19 measures and congregation shopping in Figure 1, which shows shopping rates for closed and open congregations by their size. Attenders of open congregations have a stable shopping rate of right around 20%. However, attenders of closed congregations show dramatically higher shopping rates, especially as their congregation grows.

<sup>2</sup>Wuthnow (2007: 115) notes that 41% have ever shopped of adults 21–45 who are frequent attenders (once a month or more) and have moved more than a few times. Of those who have lived at only a couple of addresses, the rate of ever having shopped falls to 28%. Pew (2016) finds that 49% of adults have ever looked for a new congregation, but 34% of the population say they shopped because they moved.

In the largest congregations (1000+ attendees, 3% of respondents in this category), almost 60% of respondents reported shopping compared to just over 20% of those in the smallest congregations (0–50, 21% of respondents in this category). It is interesting to note that shopping rates are even greater for those attending congregations that offered online worship—46% shopped compared to just 21% of those attending congregations without online options.

Shopping and leaving rates also vary by religious tradition and in ways that defy, to an extent, the above explanations (see Figure A1 in the online Appendix). Leaving varies little across traditions with no significant differences, but shopping does vary quite a bit. Shopping is highest among nondenominational Christians (40%) compared to just about half their rate among denominational evangelicals (22%) and mainline Protestants (17%). Given that nondenominational and denominational evangelicals share many attributes (e.g., Burge and Djupe 2021), this high rate of shopping likely signals a distinct cultural style of pursuing religion.

### The Determinants of Congregational Shopping

Shopping of any kind is an active behavior that takes motivation, among other things. Therefore, one of the most intriguing findings in Figure 2 is that shopping was more common among those who reported attending at *higher* rates. These would typically be the most satisfied and involved congregants, but, apparently, that also signifies the motivation to see what color the grass is in other pastures.<sup>3</sup> The size of the congregation is only marginally significant on its own ( $p = .12$ ), but the interaction suggested in Figure 1 holds at conventional levels in the modeling context (though is not shown because it shows the same thing as Figure 1)—those attending larger congregations closed to in-person worship were more likely to shop, while those in open congregations were equally likely to congregation shop at a lower rate during the pandemic.

Shopping is not just about opportunity and incentives. A more individualistic religious worldview, represented by the prosperity gospel and identifying as nondenominational (Djupe and Burge 2021), both push shopping to higher levels. Prosperity gospel belief boosts shopping by up to 26 percentage points (compared to those who completely reject that worldview), while nondenominationalists are about 15 percentage points more likely to say they have shopped. There are no other religious tradition differences compared to evangelicals (the excluded reference category), save the religious nones who still attend worship—they shopped at higher rates, too.

It may be no surprise that a greater amount of education is linked to shopping—each point on the 5-point scale is associated with a 2 percentage point gain in shopping. We read this effect as a measure of resources as well as the personality trait of being open to an experience that would fuel such a search. Women, on the other hand, were less likely to report congregation shopping, which is not a simple effect of being older since that is controlled for.

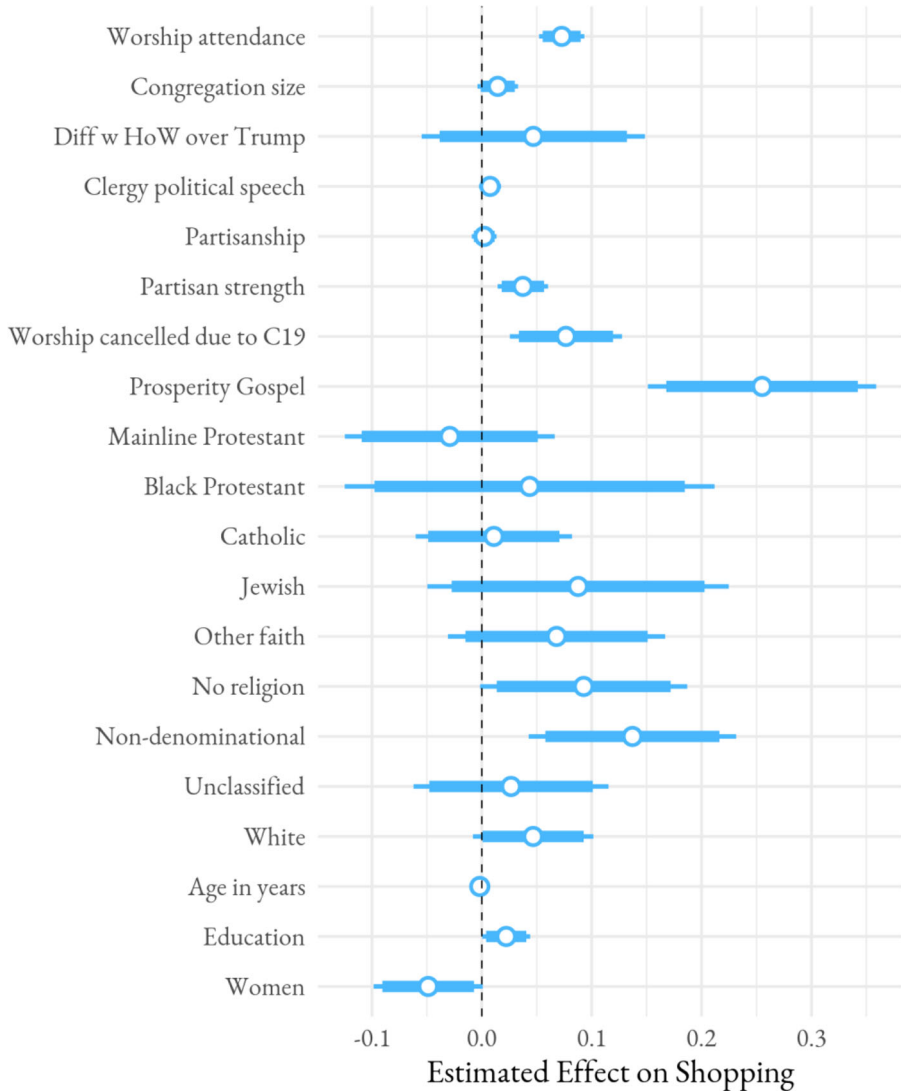
We included a wide variety of measures of politics in and out of the congregation. Shopping was not motivated by disagreement with the congregation over Trump and was very weakly linked to greater political engagement by the clergy (only  $p = .14$ ). There is no relationship with partisanship—Democrats were not more likely to shop than Republicans—but strong partisans were about 10 percentage points more likely to shop than independents, consistent with previous findings (Audette and Weaver 2016). Though many explanations could hold, we take this to suggest the lack of curiosity and engagement of pure independents (Hillygus and Shields 2008; Keith et al. 1992) rather than some sense of innate dissatisfaction of strong partisans. Strong partisans are engaged in all sorts of civic activity at higher levels, not just religion.<sup>4</sup> Together, the evidence suggests we cannot rule out the role of politics in motivating congregation shopping, but it does

<sup>3</sup>The model only includes those who say they attend worship more often than never.

<sup>4</sup>For instance, in the 2002 GSS, strong partisans are more likely to participate in civic activities than independents and are involved in one more group activity on average (2.62 vs. 1.36).

Figure 2

Linear probability model of congregational shopping. Source: October 2020 Survey. Note: Thicker lines represent 90% and thinner lines represent 95% confidence intervals. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

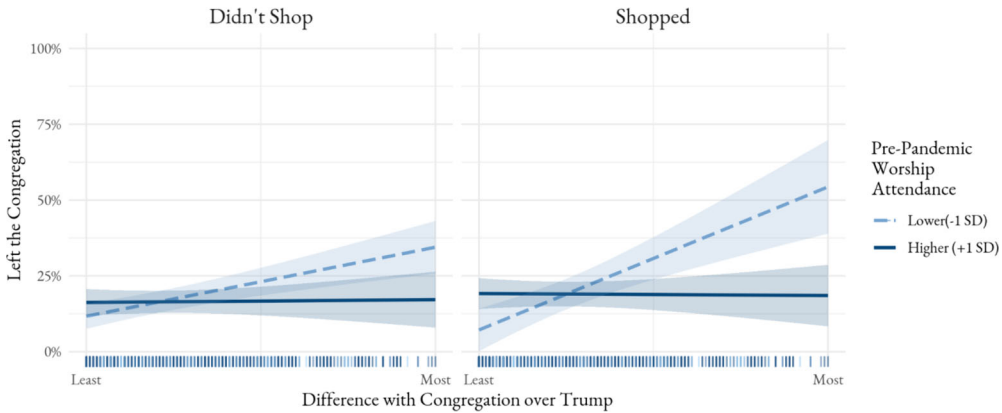


not appear to be the main driver of it in 2020.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the high rates of congregational shopping appear to be a function of cultural styles taking advantage of the unprecedented conditions of the pandemic where online access to worship was greatly expanded.

<sup>5</sup>We tried every interaction term we could think of to look for hidden political dynamics (such as whether clergy political speech motivates shopping more when disagreement over Trump is higher) and found very little evidence of it. We believe that these sorts of political dynamics took a back seat in congregations during the pandemic and other motivations came to the fore.

Figure 3

Conditional effect of disagreement with the congregation by worship attendance and congregation shopping on leaving the congregation in the past 6 months [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



### Did Shopping Boost Congregational Exit?

Congregational shopping is an interesting behavior in itself, but it matters more if it has consequences, such as leaving a congregation for another (or none). As seen in online Appendix Table A2, congregation shopping is not, by itself, associated with leaving. The coefficient is positive but small (0.02), and overwhelmed by its standard error. Nor are other congregational variables associated with shopping linked with leaving the congregation. Attendance, congregation size, and the cancellation of in-person worship are all insignificantly related to leaving. Instead, several individual attributes are negatively linked to leaving: white identity, education, partisan strength, and prosperity gospel belief. Given the pronounced number of nondenominationalists who were shopping during the pandemic, it is important to note that they are statistically not more and perhaps less likely to leave their congregations ( $p = .16$ ). And the other important result to note is that differences in feelings toward Trump between the respondent and the congregation were positively linked to leaving the congregation, boosting the probability by 13 percentage points across the range of the variable (strong partisans were not more likely to disagree with their congregations).

We still believe that shopping facilitated leaving, but it is likely conditional on their relationship with their current congregation. Figure 3 shows how shopping worked in tandem with felt political differences and marginal commitment to drive the leaving decision. In each case, those weakly tethered to the congregation (below average attendance) showed greater rates of leaving as disagreement climbed. And those leaving rates between low and high attendance participants are distinguishable when they shopped congregations during the pandemic. At the highest levels of disagreement over Trump among shoppers who attend at lower rates, leaving the congregation increased by 45 percentage points to reach 50%, though that is a rare condition. Among higher-than-average attenders, the proportion who left their congregation was constant, whether they shopped or not, and regardless of experiencing political disagreement. This is consistent with prior findings that high commitment suggests there are sufficient bases for maintaining membership independent of political differences (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018).

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A persistent question with these sorts of results is how they translate back into raw numbers. Though disagreement is continuous and different people have different tolerance thresholds, only



16% scored above 0.5 on our disagreement measure (29% scored greater than 0.25). Further, some are insulated from leaving by their high rate of commitment to their congregation, while low-commitment folks are not as motivated to shop. All told, 6% are in a state of low attendance and very high disagreement ( $>0.5$ ), while 16% are in low attendance, modest disagreement ( $>0.25$ ) state. Of course, there are many other reasons to leave a congregation than politics.

From our data, congregational shopping has been very high in the pandemic, fueled by the opportunities provided by online availability, motivated by congregation closures, and freed by the lack of social costs. As such, pandemic shopping is not the costly signal it once was when it meant physical visits, and some of the attributes that motivate shopping also tend to promote staying put, especially worship attendance. This may explain the null relationship between shopping with leaving the congregation. But easy shopping likely greases the exit of people already on their way out due to such aggravations as political disagreement.

Some of the results were surprising. That nondenominationalists were heavy shoppers is not surprising given the culture of choice, but the fact that they did not leave at higher rates is. Clearly, the shopping rates of frequent worship attenders were eye-opening, even if they can be explained by the motivation of valuing congregational experiences. We expected politics to play a role in shopping, but it only motivated leaving, all else equal. Future research needs to assess whether these are time-bound observations or enduring findings. At least for now, the results suggest a considerable degree of congregational resilience in the face of overwhelming pressure.

If the availability of online worship services remains an enduring practice fueled by the pandemic, we suspect that shopping will remain high. If this is true, it may have many consequences even if our results hold that shopping does not drive leaving. Here are two possibilities. It could intensify the pressures on congregations to attract and retain attenders in part because they will know people are shopping, while they do not know their likelihood of leaving. It could also promote standardization among houses of worship, especially in the same community. If political engagement, for instance, is becoming more common among evangelicals, ease of accessing other congregations could encourage the diffusion of that norm.

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### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Figure A1** The degree of church shopping and leaving in October 2020 by religious tradition

**Table A1** Linear probability model results of congregational shopping (see Figure 2 for the visualized results)

**Table A2** Linear probability model results of leaving a congregation