

# The Political Activities of Religious Congregations in the United States

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*In recent decades, much research has focused on how religious congregations affect individuals' political participation. However, only scant attention has been paid to examining the various ways in which religious congregations engage in political activism as formal organizational entities. Using data from the 1998 National Congregations Study (NCS), a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,236 religious congregations, we begin to fill this gap in our knowledge about religion and politics. We report the rates at which congregations engage in a broad range of political activity, and we examine variations in this activity among major religious traditions. We emphasize two basic findings. First, although in absolute terms congregations' levels of political activism seem rather low, relative to other nonpolitical organizations they engage in politics in substantial numbers. Second, there are qualitative rather than quantitative differences in political activity across religious traditions. Religious traditions specialize in different modes of political participation, a fact that is obscured when attention is focused solely on the political activities of conservative religious groups.*

The emergence and continuing presence of the Christian Right in American politics have generated a great deal of social scientific research about the relationship between religion and political activity in the United States. Substantial variation between religious and nonreligious people and among individuals affiliated with the various major religious traditions in America has been found in such diverse political activities as voting turnout and choice, lobbying elected officials, engaging in collective communal action, and participating in protests (Ayala 2000; Cassel 1999; Guth et al. 1998; Harris 1994, 1999; Kellstedt et al. 1996a, 1996b; Kellstedt, Smidt, and Kellstedt 1991; Kohut et al. 2000; Macaluso and Wanat 1979; Manza and Brooks 1997; McVeigh and Sikkink 2001; McVeigh and Smith 1999; Peterson 1992; Regnerus and Smith 1998; Secret, Johnson, and Forrest 1990; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wald, Kellstedt, and Legee 1993; Wuthnow 1999, 2002). Although some of this research has focused on differences in theological beliefs and private religious practices to explain this variation (Harris 1994, 1999; Jelen, Smidt, and Wilcox 1993; Kellstedt and Smidt 1993; Legee and Kellstedt 1993b; McVeigh and Sikkink 2001), most of it has focused on differences in participation at religious services and other activities of religious congregations.

Numerous studies have shown a significant positive relationship between frequency of religious service attendance and likelihood of voting (Ayala 2000; Cassel 1999; Harris 1994, 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wald, Kellstedt, and Legee 1993). With respect to more disruptive political action, McVeigh and Smith (1999) reported that people who attend the religious services of congregations more often than weekly are more likely to protest than those who attend religious services less often than weekly (but see Anderson 1996). The political significance of congregations for individuals' political participation extends beyond religious services. For instance, Harris (1999) found that being actively involved in groups within congregations positively predicts participating in collective community organizing, and Alaya (2000) showed that practicing civic skills in congregations—writing letters, making decisions at meetings, chairing

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meetings, and giving presentations—increases the likelihood that people will engage in political acts that demand significant time and energy, such as lobbying public officials, being actively involved in political organizations, and participating in marches or demonstrations (cf. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The primary conclusion emerging from this research is that differences in religious service attendance and involvement in other activities of congregations are associated with differences in political activity among people in ways that are not reducible to other characteristics—for example, social class, education, or gender—known to generate variation in political participation.

Although we know much about how congregations influence individuals' political involvement, we know very little about the ways in which congregations are politically engaged as organizational actors. From social movement literature, we know that congregations' infrastructures have been "cooptable" in such diverse collective action efforts as the U.S. civil rights movement, anti-abortion activism, conservative Christian grassroots mobilizing, the U.S. Central American peace movement, and recent community organizing (Hart 2001; Jaffe, Lindheim, and Lee 1981; Liebman 1983; McAdam 1999; McCarthy 1987; Morris 1984; Park 1998; Smith 1996; Warren 2001; Wood 1999, 2002; Zald and McCarthy 1987). We also know that clergy sometimes attempt to mobilize congregations by organizing political discussion and action groups within congregations, discussing political issues from the pulpit, and requesting that parishioners vote in elections, take part in other political actions, and back certain candidates and positions (Beatty and Walter 1989; Cavendish 2001; Guth et al. 1997, 1998; Harris 1999; Kohut et al. 2000; Olson 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Welch et al. 1993). Valuable as this research is, it has limits for understanding *congregations'* political activity. Mobilization efforts on behalf of clergy within congregations are not tantamount to mobilization efforts of congregations. Prior research has shown that both laity and actors external to religious congregations—candidates, officials, and activists—often attempt to mobilize congregations for a variety of political causes and issues (Greenberg 1999, 2000; Harris 1999; Hart 2001; Hertzke 1993; Wald 1991; Warren 2001; Wood 2002). Focusing exclusively on what clergy do politically within congregations offers only a partial portrait of what congregations do politically.<sup>1</sup> Nor does the literature in social movements broadly inform our knowledge about the political involvement of congregations. This literature only tells us that at certain times and under certain conditions, certain social movements have appropriated the organizational resources of congregations. But this means that we miss any political activity of congregations not directly linked to social movements.

Very occasionally, research based on national surveys of congregation members provides information about the political activity of congregations. Rank-and-file reports of congregations' political activity are limited in several respects. First, many of these surveys ask members of congregations whether they personally participated in their congregations' political activities or were personally requested by their congregations to participate in certain political actions, not whether their congregations participated in political activities or made political action requests generally (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:558). This obviously underestimates the political involvement of congregations, since congregations that are politically active are reported as such only if the surveyed individuals attached to them also participated in these activities and were personally solicited to take political actions. Second, when members of congregations are asked to report on the political activity of their congregations, a good number of them do not know whether their congregations have engaged in such activity. On the Civic Involvement Survey (Wuthnow 1997), for example, roughly 20 percent of congregation members did not know whether their congregations had participated in a voter registration drive. Finally, even when members of congregations report that their congregations have not been politically active, it is difficult to know whether this is because their congregations were not actually politically active, or whether their positions within congregations prevented them from knowing that their congregations had been politically active. All of this renders rank-and-file reports of congregations' political activity problematic.

Even less common when examining congregations' political involvement is research that uses congregations as the unit of analysis. This research largely consists of qualitative studies of particular congregations. We have learned from these studies that congregations sometimes engage in such political activities as organizing voter registration drives, distributing voter guides, hosting political leaders, and participating in marches aimed at solving community problems (Becker 1999; Greenberg 1999, 2000; Harris 1999; Hart 2001; Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Warren 2001; Wood 1994, 1999, 2002). But since these congregations were selected based on specific demographic and other characteristics—in some cases precisely because they were politically active—their findings are not broadly generalizable to other congregations. Quantitative surveys of congregations that include measures of political activity are rare. Losh, Fobes, and Gould (1994) included a number of questions about political activity on their survey of 37 congregations in one relatively large Southern community. Besides the fact that their results can only be narrowly generalized, they potentially omitted as many as 20 percent of congregations in this community because they used a telephone directory to select their congregations (Becker and Chaves 2000). Additionally, Losh, Fobes, and Gould (1994) employ a very problematic religious tradition classification scheme in their analysis, as they, among other things, do not separate Catholics from mainline/liberal Protestant groups. Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1993) surveyed a national sample of congregations, but their telephone book sampling frame and very low response rate—19 percent—cause serious bias in their sample. Moreover, their survey contains only a few measures of political involvement, and their omission of any denominational information makes it impossible to examine differences among religious traditions.

This body of work is important, but the absence of a quality national sample of religious congregations that contains various measures of political activity has meant that we have been unable to answer certain basic questions about the political involvement of congregations in the United States. Specifically, no research to date has adequately assessed the extent to which American religious congregations currently engage in a wide range of political activity on a national scale, and the nature of religious variation in this activity. We consequently know very little about the political activity of these religious organizations that often mediate between political activists and the religious constituents those activists sometimes wish to mobilize. Certain prior studies, based on either surveys of congregation members or qualitative analyses of particular congregations, suggest that the religious tradition with which congregations are affiliated affects their political activity (Greenberg 1999, 2000; Harris 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Besides the methodological drawbacks previously mentioned, these studies consider only a few of the many possible ways in which congregations may engage in political activity, do not control for congregational-level characteristics known to affect political participation, and generally fail to include all of the major religious traditions in America or adequately distinguish among them.<sup>2</sup> Thus, extant research has not rigorously analyzed the extent to which different religious traditions may variously structure a wide range of congregation-based mobilizing efforts.

This article begins to fill these gaps in our knowledge about religion and political participation in the United States with results from the 1998 National Congregations Study (NCS), a nationally representative sample of 1,236 religious congregations. We offer two contributions. First, we provide basic descriptive information about congregations' overall levels of political participation on a broad range of political activities. Our results show that although congregations' political participation is, in absolute terms, rather low, their level of political activity seems more impressive when compared with the political activity of other kinds of organizations whose primary purpose is *not* political. Second, we show that, as Guth et al. (1997) have argued concerning white Protestant clergy's political participation, religious differences in congregations' political activities are generally less a matter of quantity and more a matter of qualitative differences in strategic repertoires. Congregations specialize in particular modes of political participation, in the same way that individuals, whether religious or secular, seem to prefer certain types of political involvement over others (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and

Brady 1995). In the case of congregations, this specialization is strongly structured by religious tradition. Among other things, this result implies that the enormous attention paid recently to the political consequences of conservative religious groups and to political differences among white Protestants has obscured the political activities of black Protestant and Catholic congregations.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data

This article draws on data from the 1998 National Congregations Study (NCS), a survey of a nationally representative sample of religious congregations in the United States. Inspired by the insight that organizations attached to a random sample of individuals comprise a random sample of organizations, the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS)—a representative sample of noninstitutionalized English-speaking adults in the United States—included a set of items asking respondents who said they attended religious services more often than “never” to report the name and location of their religious congregation. This procedure generated a nationally representative sample of 1,456 religious congregations. The NCS gathered data via a 60-minute interview with one key informant—a minister, priest, rabbi, or other leader—from 1,236 of the nominated congregations, a cooperation rate of 85 percent. The NCS response rate is 80 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The probability that a congregation appears in this sample is proportional to its size. Because congregations were nominated by individuals attached to them, larger congregations are more likely to be in the NCS sample than smaller congregations. Some congregations also were nominated by more than one GSS respondent. Weighted only to account for the duplicate nominations, univariate statistics from the NCS describe the characteristics of congregations in terms of the numbers of religious service attenders who attend congregations with those characteristics. In this case, each *attender* is given equal weight. When the data are weighted inversely proportional to congregational size, however, each *congregation* is given equal weight, regardless of its size, and univariate statistics describe the characteristics of congregations as establishments. Although both kinds of distributions often will be substantively interesting, because the focus of this article is on the political involvement of congregations as institutions, we report statistics that describe congregations as organizational units without respect to size. When it comes to congregations' political participation, we analyze how many congregations engage in certain kinds of political activities rather than how many religious service attenders are in congregations that engage in those activities. The exception to this is when we compare certain NCS results with results from national surveys of members of congregations and nonpolitical associations. In this case, we only weight NCS data to account for duplicate nominations, so the comparison is substantively equivalent.

Given that information about congregations' political activity was obtained from a single key informant, some may wonder about the validity and reliability of this information.<sup>4</sup> It is true that asking a key informant to report on the characteristics of an organization like a congregation is not without error, but not all features of an organization on which a key informant reports are equally susceptible to validity and reliability breaches. A good deal of social psychological research has shown that when people report on the beliefs of others, they consistently overestimate the similarity between their own beliefs and those on which they report (Krueger and Clement 1994; Marks and Miller 1987; Ross, Greene, and House 1977). This is especially the case when people report on the beliefs of groups or organizations with which they identify or of which they are a part (Mullen et al. 1992). Additionally, studies in organizational sociology have documented that organizations rarely have unified and cohesive beliefs, identities, missions, and goals, so, depending on the informant being interviewed, reports of such items may vary widely (Scott 1992:ch. 11). All of this problematizes asking a key informant to report on the overall values, opinions, beliefs, goals, missions, and so on of an organization. McPherson and Rotolo

(1995) found, however, that reports of voluntary associations' demographic characteristics (size and gender, age, and educational composition) made by a group official were just as reliable as direct observation of these characteristics at a group meeting. Based on such evidence, we conclude that because political activities—like demographic characteristics—are more or less directly observable features of congregations, it seems very likely that the key informants in the NCS validly and reliably reported on this aspect of their congregations.

### **Dependent Variables**

The NCS contains information on the following types of congregation-based political activity: (1) whether people at worship services were told, within the past 12 months, of opportunities for political activity, including petitioning campaigns, lobbying, or demonstrating; whether congregations had a group, meeting, class, or event, within the past 12 months, to: (2) organize or participate in a demonstration or march either in support of or opposition to some public issue or policy; (3) discuss politics; (4) get people registered to vote; or (5) organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials of any sort; and (6) whether, within the past 12 months, congregations had anyone running for office as a visiting speaker. Each congregational-level political involvement variable was dichotomously coded, 0 and 1, with 1 indicating that a congregation participated in the respective political activity.

The NCS also contains data on whether congregations have ever distributed voter guides to their people. Contrary to popular belief, voter guide distribution is not unique to Christian Right groups. For example, the League of Women Voters and the American Federation of Labor Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) have distributed voter guides, as has the Interfaith Alliance (TIA), an association of liberal and moderate faiths (Goodstein 1996b; Rozell and Wilcox 1999). When congregations reported distributing voter guides, they were asked to report the source of those guides. We used these open-ended responses to code whether congregations distributed voter guides produced by Christian Right or non-Christian-Right groups.<sup>5</sup> Some congregations, however, did not know the source of the voter guides they distributed. Based on these responses, we constructed a voter guide distribution variable with four nominal response categories: (1) distributed no voter guides, (2) distributed voter guides from Christian Right sources, (3) distributed voter guides from non-Christian-Right sources, and (4) distributed voter guides but did not know the source of those guides.

### **Independent Variables**

#### ***Religious Variables***

Our primary independent variable was religious tradition. We distinguished four: Catholic, black Protestant, mainline/liberal Protestant, and evangelical/conservative Protestant.<sup>6</sup> The distinction between mainline/liberal and evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations was drawn in standard fashion (Kellstedt et al. 1996a; Steensland et al. 2000).<sup>7</sup> Protestant congregations whose regular participants were at least 80 percent African American were included in the black Protestant category whatever their denominational affiliation.<sup>8</sup>

These four categories, based largely on denominational affiliation, do not exhaust the religious differences likely to influence congregations' political activity. We used two additional indicators of religious culture that cross-cut these four religious traditions. First, there is good reason to think that charismatic congregations differ politically in certain systematic ways from noncharismatic congregations (Green 1993, 1996; Hertzke 1993; Wald 1991). Although charismatic activity frequently occurs within evangelical/conservative Protestantism, this activity also occurs within Catholicism, black Protestantism, and mainline/liberal Protestantism (Smidt et al. 1996, 1999). We therefore used a measure indicating, for all Protestant and Catholic congregations, whether

people spoke in tongues at any service within the past 12 months. Second, we included a measure of self-reported congregational theological conservatism. The exact wording of this question was: "Theologically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?" Congregations were coded 1 if they answered "more on the conservative side," and 0 if they answered "more on the liberal side" or "right in the middle." Although much of the liberal/conservative variation among congregations is represented by differences in denomination-based religious traditions, there also is substantial theological variation within denominations (Wuthnow 1988), prompting use of this item.

### *Control Variables*

Congregations are aggregations of individuals as well as more or less formally constituted organizations. Since it is likely that congregations' political activism largely reflects the political preferences and activities of their people, it is important to control for variables known to influence political attitudes and behaviors among individuals as well as for variables measuring relevant characteristics of congregations as formal organizations. Variables in the former category included the percent of a congregation's members that were female, the percent with four-year college or higher degrees, the percent with less than a high school diploma, the percent with household incomes over \$100,000 in 1998, the percent with household incomes under \$25,000 in 1998, the percent under age 35, the percent over age 60, whether the congregation was located in the South, and whether the congregation was located in an urban area. Variables in the latter category included congregations' size (logged number of regularly participating adults), congregations' years in existence since founding date, whether congregations' head clergy had at least a graduate degree, and whether congregations were politically conservative.

### **Statistical Analyses and Modeling**

Each of the six logistic regression models used one of the dichotomous political activity measures as the dependent variable. One of the two multinomial logistic regression models for the newly created four-category nominal voter distribution guide variable used "did not distribute any voter guides" as the omitted category, while the other, "distributed voter guides from non-Christian-Right sources."<sup>9</sup> Coefficients from these models represent changes in terms of logits (log of the odds). Because changes in logits are not very intuitive (Long 1997:80), we relied instead on odds ratios ( $e^{\text{logits}}$ ) when substantively interpreting and discussing these results in the text.

With the exception of region in which the congregation was located, all the variables in the regression models had cases with missing information.<sup>10</sup> We used multiple imputation (MI) for these cases (Rubin 1987; Schafer 1997, 1999a; Schafer and Graham 2002; Schafer and Olsen 1998).<sup>11</sup> MI avoids shortcomings associated with other commonly used techniques for handling missing data, such as listwise or pairwise deletion, dummy variable adjustment, or mean imputation (Allison 2002:5–12). We generated five imputations, each of which replaced cases with missing information with plausible values based on their predictive distributions. We ran identical regression models for each of the five imputed data sets, using complete data on all variables. We then combined these results to produce overall estimates, standard errors, and significance levels that take into account uncertainty about missing data.

The logistic and multinomial logistic regression models used unweighted data. We formally tested whether there were misspecification errors related to the probability-proportional-to-size feature of the NCS for each of these models (DuMouchel and Duncan 1983; Winship and Radbill 1994). These tests indicated no such errors for the logistic and multinomial logistic regression estimates of unweighted data, with the exception of voter guide registration. Following the recommendations of DuMouchel and Duncan (1983) and Winship and Radbill (1994), we explored

**TABLE 1**  
**POLITICAL ACTIVITIES OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS: NATIONAL**  
**CONGREGATIONS STUDY, 1998**

	Percent of Congregations that:
Told people at worship services about opportunities for political activity within the past 12 months	26
Have ever distributed voter guides	17
Have ever distributed voter guides from Christian Right sources	6
Have ever distributed voter guides from non-Christian-Right sources	6 <sup>a</sup>
Have had a group, meeting, class, or event within the past 12 months to:	
organize or participate in a demonstration or march in support of or opposition to some public issue or policy	9
discuss politics	7
get people registered to vote	8
organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials of any sort	4
Have had someone running for office as a visiting speaker within the past 12 months	4
Participated in at least one of these political activities	41

*Note:* Unweighted number of congregations for all political activities is 1,236.

<sup>a</sup>The percentages for have ever distributed voter guides from Christian and non-Christian-Right sources do not sum to the percentage for have ever distributed voter guides because some of the congregations did not know the source of the voter guides they distributed.

various possible sources of misspecification error for this model. Based on evidence from this exploration, we respecified the voter guide registration model by adding interaction terms between congregational size and several other independent variables. We refrain from reporting these interaction terms, however, since adding them did not significantly change any of our conclusions, and including them would have unnecessarily complicated the presentation of our results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Univariate Results

Table 1 presents univariate results of congregations' political activities in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Congregations most frequently engage in the following two political activities: offering opportunities for political activity—such as petitioning campaigns, lobbying, and demonstrating—at worship services and distributing voter guides to their people. More than one-fourth of congregations offered opportunities for political activity at worship services; 17 percent of congregations distributed voter guides. When the source of voter guides is considered, as many congregations distributed Christian Right voter guides as non-Christian-Right ones. This is noteworthy, given all the recent media and scholarly attention documenting the efforts of the Christian Right political organizations to distribute voter guides within congregations (e.g., Goodstein 1996a, 1998). Six percent of congregations distributed voter guides produced by Christian Right and non-Christian-Right groups. Almost one out of every ten congregations organized groups to participate in a demonstration or march for or against some public issue or policy and to get people registered to vote, and 7 percent of congregations organized groups to discuss politics. Finally, congregations were least likely to have had groups to lobby elected officials and political candidates as visiting speakers. Only 4 percent of congregations engaged in each of these political activities.

Are the numbers in Table 1 large or small? From one perspective, the level of congregation-based political activity seems rather low. Fifty-nine percent of congregations did not participate in any of the NCS measured political activities. At a time when politically active congregations and congregation-based political mobilizing receive quite a lot of media attention (e.g., Goodstein 1998; Niebuhr 1996), and social scientists are *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics* (Leege and Kellstedt 1993a), it is worth noting that the majority of religious congregations do not engage in political participation qua congregations. From another perspective, however, it is noteworthy that more than 40 percent of congregations were politically active in some way. We wonder if there is another set of organizations whose primary purpose is *not* political action, but where 41 percent of those organizations participate in some kind of political activity. No extant data allow us directly to compare congregations' political activity level with that of other nonpolitical organizations. An indirect comparison can be made, however, with results from Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). Weighted only to account for duplicate nominations, NCS data show that 37 percent of religious service attenders were in congregations where opportunities for political activity were mentioned (result not shown), a result similar to that found when congregation members were asked whether their congregations encourage political action other than voting (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:373). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995:373, 558) showed that only 8 percent of contributors to or members of nonpolitical organizations and only 16 percent of people working full- or part-time report being asked to be politically active in some way in these settings. It seems reasonable to conclude then, as Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) do, that congregations lead the way among nonpolitical organizations when it comes to offering opportunities for political activity.

### Bivariate and Multivariate Results

Table 2 presents bivariate results of religious tradition variation in congregations' political activities. Tables 3a and 3b contain coefficients from either multivariate logistic or multinomial logistic regression models predicting the likelihood that congregations will engage in each of the NCS measured political activities.<sup>13</sup> The bivariate religious tradition differences evident in Table 2 are largely sustained when other important variables are controlled. Consequently, in discussing religious tradition variation in political activity, we draw on both bivariate and multivariate results.

The central finding, evident in Table 2, sustained and enhanced by the multivariate analyses, is that congregational political activity is strongly structured by religious tradition. It would be tedious to narrate all the numbers presented in Tables 2, 3a, and 3b. Instead, we describe the distinctive patterns of political activity evident within the four major religious traditions in the United States, drawing on the key results that indicate these patterns.

Evangelical/conservative Protestants specialize in distributing Christian Right voter guides. Indeed, this is the only political activity in which evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations are more likely to engage than congregations in the other religious traditions. Looking at Table 2, 10 percent of evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations distributed voter guides produced by Christian Right groups, compared to only 1 percent of Catholic congregations and 2 percent of both black Protestant and mainline/liberal Protestant congregations. The multivariate results sustain these large differences. Looking at the third column in Table 3b, the odds that evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations will distribute voter guides produced by Christian Right groups relative to distributing no voter guides are 10 times that of Catholic congregations ( $e^{-2.314} = 0.099$ ;  $1/0.099 = 10.1$ ), 9 times that of black Protestant congregations ( $e^{-2.205} = 0.110$ ;  $1/0.110 = 9.1$ ), and almost 4 times that of mainline/liberal Protestant congregations ( $e^{-1.332} = 0.264$ ;  $1/0.264 = 3.8$ ). The same pattern holds when distributing voter guides from Christian Right groups is contrasted with distributing voter guides from non-Christian-Right groups. These findings indicate that, despite overt appeals on behalf of many Christian Right leaders in recent years to broaden support for their political organizations (e.g., Reed 1996), Catholic, black Protestant,

**TABLE 2**  
**RELIGIOUS TRADITION VARIATION IN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS’**  
**POLITICAL ACTIVITIES: NATIONAL CONGREGATIONS STUDY, 1998**

Religious Traditions	Percent of Congregations that:			
	Told people at worship services about opportunities for political activity	Have had a group to organize a demonstration or march	Have had a group to lobby elected officials	Have had a group to discuss politics
Catholic	32	25	11	7
Black Protestant	38	10	3	10
Mainline/liberal Protestant	24	6	4	9
Evangelical/conservative Protestant	21	7	3	1

  

Religious Traditions	Percent of Congregations that:			
	Have had someone running for office as a visiting speaker	Have had a group to get people registered to vote	Have ever distributed voter guides	Distributed Christian Right/non-Christian-Right voter guides
Catholic	1	16	13	1/7
Black Protestant	16	29	24	2/14
Mainline/liberal Protestant	3	2	11	2/3
Evangelical/conservative Protestant	1	3	19	10/3

*Note:* Unweighted number of congregations for each column in the table is 299 for Catholics, 143 for black Protestants, 302 for mainline/liberal Protestants, and 433 for evangelical/conservative Protestants.

and mainline/liberal Protestant congregations remain very substantially less likely than evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations to distribute voter guides produced by Christian Right political organizations. Such low levels of Christian Right voter guide distribution among congregations affiliated with these religious traditions is consistent with research documenting the general lack of support for Christian Right political groups among mainline/liberal Protestants and especially among Catholics and black Protestants (Appleby 1997; Calhoun-Brown 1997, 1998; Wilcox 1992, 1994).

The fact that evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations are committed to voter guide distribution efforts, and not to other forms of congregation-based political activity, is not surprising when viewed in light of the recent political strategies that national Christian Right political organizations pursue. Many observers have pointed out that, since at least the late 1980s, evangelical/conservative Protestant political organizations have adopted a conventional political repertoire that embraces electoral politics and prominently features recruiting candidates and providing campaign support for these candidates (Green 2000; Guth et al. 1998; Wilcox 1994, 1996). Distributing voter guides within religious congregations is an important part of this strategy (Green et al. 1994). Our results provide, for the first time, a national estimate of Christian Right political organizations’ voter guide distribution strategy success. If reaching 6 percent of congregations generally and 10 percent of evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations specifically is considered a success, then this strategy of Christian Right political organizations has been successful.

**TABLE 3A**  
**LOGISTIC COEFFICIENTS FROM THE REGRESSION OF RELIGIOUS**  
**CONGREGATIONS' POLITICAL ACTIVITIES ON SELECTED INDEPENDENT**  
**VARIABLES: NATIONAL CONGREGATIONS STUDY, 1998**

Independent Variables	Offer Political Opportunities	Group to Demonstrate or March	Group to Lobby Elected Officials	Group to Discuss Politics	Candidate as Visiting Speaker
<i>Religious Traditions<sup>a</sup></i>					
Catholic	0.357 (0.201)	0.860*** (0.237)	0.730* (0.324)	-0.094 (0.348)	-0.565 (0.621)
Black Protestant	0.627** (0.235)	0.016 (0.313)	0.377 (0.434)	1.151** (0.395)	3.184*** (0.506)
Mainline/liberal Protestant	0.018 (0.203)	-0.463 (0.285)	0.187 (0.361)	0.952** (0.337)	1.171* (0.538)
<i>Religious Culture</i>					
Theological conservatism	0.061 (0.156)	0.089 (0.191)	-0.401 (0.235)	-0.249 (0.238)	0.256 (0.317)
Charismatic	0.273 (0.172)	0.450* (0.207)	0.297 (0.255)	0.100 (0.264)	0.583 (0.341)
<i>Control Variables</i>					
Size (logged)	0.174** (0.059)	0.300*** (0.075)	0.395*** (0.095)	0.487*** (0.092)	0.529*** (0.131)
Years since founding	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.006* (0.003)
Head clergy graduate degree <sup>b</sup>	0.257 (0.158)	0.580** (0.208)	0.115 (0.261)	0.092 (0.256)	-0.151 (0.345)
Political conservatism	-0.148 (0.166)	0.042 (0.192)	0.101 (0.233)	-0.584* (0.246)	0.002 (0.326)
% female	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.008)	0.010 (0.011)	0.001 (0.010)	-0.023* (0.011)
% ≥ 4-year college degree	0.003 (0.003)	0.006 (0.004)	0.008 (0.005)	0.011* (0.005)	-0.003 (0.009)
% < high school diploma	0.005 (0.004)	0.002 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.007)	0.004 (0.008)	0.002 (0.009)
% > \$100,000 household income	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.010 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.007)	0.005 (0.012)
% < \$25,000 household income	-0.001 (0.003)	0.004 (0.004)	0.005 (0.005)	0.006 (0.005)	0.004 (0.008)
% > 60 years old	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.008 (0.005)	0.004 (0.006)	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.009)
% < 35 years old	-0.004 (0.004)	0.014** (0.005)	0.009 (0.007)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.015 (0.010)
Urban	0.005 (0.148)	0.255 (0.192)	0.436 (0.253)	0.511* (0.253)	0.400 (0.384)
South	-0.257 (0.134)	-0.064 (0.174)	-0.445* (0.231)	-0.479* (0.215)	0.084 (0.293)
Constant	-1.740** (0.544)	-4.540*** (0.738)	-6.715*** (1.022)	-5.728*** (0.926)	-6.171*** (1.126)

*Note:* Numbers in parentheses are standard errors; unweighted number of congregations is 1,236 for all models.

<sup>a</sup>Reference category is evangelical/conservative Protestant; this set of dichotomous variables also includes a variable indicating a residual category that is neither Catholic, black Protestant, mainline/liberal Protestant, nor evangelical/conservative Protestant. It is only included in the models so that the religious tradition reference category is meaningful.

<sup>b</sup>Reference category is head clergy with no graduate degree; a dichotomous variable for no head clergy is also included, but the coefficient is not reported.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**TABLE 3B**  
**COEFFICIENTS FROM THE REGRESSION OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS'**  
**POLITICAL ACTIVITIES ON SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: NATIONAL**  
**CONGREGATIONS STUDY, 1998**

Independent Variables	Group to Get People Registered to Vote <sup>c</sup>	Voter Guide Distribution <sup>d</sup>		
		Non-Christian Right Guides/ No Guides	Christian Right Guides/ No Guides	Christian Right Guides/Non-Christian-Right Guides
<i>Religious Traditions<sup>a</sup></i>				
Catholic	0.134 (0.315)	0.268 (0.364)	-2.314*** (0.469)	-2.582*** (0.561)
Black Protestant	1.932*** (0.329)	1.322*** (0.387)	-2.205** (0.774)	-3.527*** (0.841)
Mainline/liberal Protestant	-0.322 (0.409)	0.174 (0.376)	-1.332** (0.425)	-1.506** (0.547)
<i>Religious Culture</i>				
Theological conservatism	0.298 (0.235)	-0.422 (0.244)	0.307 (0.329)	0.729 (0.390)
Charismatic	0.748*** (0.227)	0.467 (0.261)	0.920** (0.300)	0.453 (0.379)
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Size (logged)	0.483*** (0.096)	0.226* (0.099)	0.501*** (0.117)	0.276 (0.145)
Years since founding	0.003 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)
Head clergy graduate degree <sup>b</sup>	-0.170 (0.241)	0.624* (0.284)	0.242 (0.284)	-0.382 (0.386)
Political conservatism	-0.078 (0.240)	0.139 (0.242)	1.275*** (0.380)	1.136** (0.437)
% female	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.011)	0.003 (0.013)	0.010 (0.016)
% ≥ 4-year college degree	0.006 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.012* (0.006)	-0.005 (0.008)
% < high school diploma	0.016** (0.006)	0.001 (0.007)	-0.008 (0.010)	-0.009 (0.012)
% > \$100,000 household income	-0.003 (0.010)	0.005 (0.007)	-0.007 (0.013)	-0.012 (0.014)
% < \$25,000 household income	0.011 (0.006)	0.008 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.007)	0.005 (0.008)
% > 60 years old	-0.010 (0.007)	0.008 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.009)
% < 35 years old	0.003 (0.006)	0.012 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.008)	-0.015 (0.010)
Urban	0.523* (0.268)	0.492 (0.272)	-0.216 (0.265)	-0.708* (0.364)
South	-0.355 (0.221)	-0.488* (0.236)	-0.063 (0.245)	0.425 (0.326)
Constant	-6.047*** (0.870)	-3.959*** (0.948)	-4.969*** (1.108)	-1.010 (1.401)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors; unweighted number of congregations is 1,236 for all models.

<sup>a</sup>Reference category is evangelical/conservative Protestant; this set of dichotomous variables also includes a variable indicating a residual category that is neither Catholic, black Protestant, mainline/liberal Protestant, nor evangelical/conservative Protestant. It is only included in the models so that the religious tradition reference category is meaningful.

<sup>b</sup>Reference category is head clergy with no graduate degree; a dichotomous variable for no head clergy is also included, but the coefficient is not reported.

<sup>c</sup>Logistic regression coefficients.

<sup>d</sup>Multinomial logistic regression coefficients.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

The evangelical/conservative Protestant use of voter guides has received substantial attention from both scholars and journalists. This attention notwithstanding, evangelical/conservative Protestants do *not* have a monopoly on this form of congregation-based political activity in the United States. Black Protestant congregations are also very likely to distribute voter guides, just not ones produced by Christian Right groups. Looking at Table 2, 14 percent of black Protestant congregations distributed non-Christian-Right voter guides, compared to 7 percent of Catholic congregations and 3 percent of both mainline/liberal Protestant and evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations. Interestingly, black Protestant congregations have the highest percentage of general voter guide distribution among all religious traditions. In a multivariate context (Column 2, Table 3b), the odds that black Protestant congregations will distribute voter guides from non-Christian-Right sources relative to distributing no voter guides are almost four times that of evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations ( $e^{1.322} = 3.8$ ) and roughly three times that of both Catholic ( $e^{1.055} = 2.9$ ) and mainline/liberal Protestant congregations ( $e^{1.148} = 3.2$ ).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although more moderate and liberal religious and political organizations have produced voter guides, our results show that these have not penetrated Catholic congregations and mainline/liberal Protestant congregations to the same extent as they have black Protestant congregations.

Reflecting the enduring political activism of black Protestantism—since at least, if not before, the Civil Rights era—we also find that, relative to congregations in all the other religious traditions, black Protestant congregations are particularly more likely to engage in two political practices: bringing political candidates to congregations to speak and having a group to get people registered to vote. Sixteen percent of black Protestant congregations had a political candidate as a visiting speaker, and 29 percent had a voter registration drive. Both of these numbers are substantially higher than the comparable percentages for Catholic, mainline/liberal Protestant, and evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations.

Looking at the multivariate results, the odds that black Protestant congregations will have a voter registration drive are almost seven times that of evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations ( $e^{1.932} = 6.9$ ), six times that of Catholic congregations ( $e^{1.798} = 6.0$ ), and over nine times that of mainline/liberal Protestant congregations ( $e^{2.254} = 9.5$ ). The odds that black Protestant congregations will have a political candidate visit and give a speech are 24 times that of evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations ( $e^{3.184} = 24.1$ ), over 42 times that of Catholic congregations ( $e^{3.749} = 42.5$ ), and over 7 times that of mainline/liberal Protestant congregations ( $e^{2.013} = 7.5$ ), net of other congregational characteristics. Overall, these results from a nationally representative survey of congregations comport well with recent research in specific locales, which finds that black Protestant congregations routinely host political candidates and organize voter mobilization drives (Greenberg 1999, 2000; Harris 1999; Pattillo-McCoy 1998). It is becoming increasingly clear that explicitly partisan involvement in electoral politics is more common and more accepted among African-American congregations than among white congregations.

In recent years, Catholics have been in the background in research on religion and politics in the United States as political differences among white Protestants have taken center stage. Our results show, however, that Catholic congregations also have a distinctive way of engaging in politics. Perhaps our most surprising result is that Catholic congregations are substantially more likely than all Protestant congregations to attempt to directly influence public policy by organizing groups to demonstrate or march for or against some public issue or policy, and by lobbying elected officials, although some of the Catholic effect for the latter is attenuated when other congregational characteristics are introduced. One-fourth of Catholic congregations have participated in a demonstration or march in the past year, more than twice the rate within any other religious tradition, and 11 percent of Catholic congregations have lobbied an elected official, over two and a half times the rate within any other group.

For the most part, these bivariate differences are not much reduced when other congregational variables are held constant. Controlling for other things, the odds of Catholic congregations having a group to organize a demonstration or march are over two times that of both

evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations ( $e^{0.860} = 2.4$ ) and black Protestant congregations ( $e^{0.844} = 2.3$ ), and almost four times that of mainline/liberal Protestant congregations ( $e^{1.323} = 3.8$ ). The odds of Catholic congregations having a group to organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials are more than twice that of evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations ( $e^{0.730} = 2.1$ ) and about one and a half times that of both black Protestant ( $e^{0.353} = 1.4$ ) and mainline/liberal Protestant congregations ( $e^{0.543} = 1.7$ ). However, the black Protestant coefficient is nonsignificant and the mainline Protestant coefficient is marginally significant when other congregational characteristics are added.

NCS data do not contain information about the purposes for which Catholic congregations are organizing groups for demonstrating and lobbying. Other research focusing on Catholic congregations, however, suggests that much of this organizing is related to abortion (Byrnes 1991; Jaffe, Lindheim, and Lee 1981; McCarthy 1987; O'Connor and Berkman 1995; Rubin 1991; Salokar 1992; Segers 1992). In the current context, the important point is that Catholic congregations are not less likely to be politicized than Protestant congregations. Like congregations in other traditions, Catholic congregations engage in politics in distinctive ways, a fact that is obscured when Protestants and Catholics are compared only in terms of whether they are exposed to political stimuli generally in their congregations (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Mainline/liberal Protestant congregations do not stand out from the other religious traditions on any one item, but the overall pattern of results suggests a distinctively mainline way of engaging in politics. Mainline/liberal Protestant congregations are significantly more likely than both evangelical/conservative Protestant and Catholic congregations to have a group to discuss politics and to have someone running for office visit their congregations to give a talk. Although we do not find the high levels of mainline/liberal Protestant congregation-based activism that were present in the 1960s and early 1970s, largely because of their clergy (Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974), our results nevertheless indicate a certain political continuity in the mainline/liberal Protestant religious tradition. Recently, Wuthnow (2002) reported that mainline/liberal Protestants do not generally favor their religious institutions and leaders taking a more active and visible role in public policy issues and politics. Rather, they prefer to influence public life as individuals by working "quietly" behind the scenes. Thus, while mainline/liberal Protestant congregations are relatively active when it comes to organizing political discussion groups for their own people and exposing their own people to political candidates, they are not particularly likely, relative to congregations in other traditions, to organize collectively for the purpose of directly influencing political or electoral processes. This is contrary to Guth et al.'s (1997:169–71) finding that white mainline/liberal Protestant clergy are considerably more likely than their evangelical/conservative Protestant counterparts to organize groups for direct political action within their congregations. Perhaps preferring individual to collective involvement in politics is a luxury more likely to characterize congregations within religious traditions with historically close ties to the political establishment.

The four religious traditions indicated in Table 2 do not capture all the religious variation in congregational political activity. Tables 3a and 3b show that, whatever their religious denomination, charismatic congregations are more likely than noncharismatic ones to organize groups to demonstrate and discuss politics and to distribute Christian Right voter guides relative to not distributing any voter guides. Perhaps this is an echo of charismatic congregations' political mobilization by Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential campaign (Green 1993, 1996; Hertzke 1993; Wald 1991). Whatever the sources of this activity, it appears that the charismatic versus noncharismatic divide among congregations is consequential for congregations' political activism, and thus ought to be considered in future work on the political involvement of congregations.

The primary conclusion we draw from the bivariate and multivariate results is that congregations tend to specialize in particular forms of political action, and that specialization is structured by religious traditions. We will resist the temptation to describe several interesting patterns in coefficients attached to control variables in the models in Tables 3a and 3b, except to say that the

results there, in broad terms, point to the importance of considering demographic, organizational, and contextual factors when studying congregations' political activities.

### CONCLUSION

This article draws on a nationally representative sample of congregations to provide, for the first time, basic facts about religious variation in political participation among congregations over a broad range of political activities. These results substantively contribute to our knowledge about religion and politics in the United States. We make two basic points. First, although in absolute terms congregations' levels of political activism seem rather low, relative to other nonpolitical organizations they engage in politics in substantial numbers. Over 40 percent of American congregations have participated in some form of political activity. Despite the thorny normative and legal issues associated with congregation-based political action in the United States (Audi 2000), congregations have not been very much deterred from engaging in political activity and practice.

Second, qualitative, more so than quantitative, differences exist in political activity across religious traditions. Guth et al. (1997) make this point concerning variation in political activity among white Protestant clergy, and it appears also to apply to the collective political activity of congregations. Evangelical/conservative Protestant congregations engage in politics by distributing Christian Right voter guides. Black Protestant congregations register voters, open their doors to candidates, and distribute voter guides from sources other than the Christian Right. Catholic congregations organize demonstrations and marches, and they lobby elected officials. Mainline/liberal Protestant congregations organize discussion groups around political issues and host political candidates. Although none of these political activities are completely monopolized by a single religious tradition, clear modalities are present.

We have shown that there are affinities between religious traditions and congregations' political styles. We do not know whether the source of these affinities lies in the nature of the issues of primary concern to different religious groups, in the preferred political strategies national leaders within different religious traditions pursue, in long-term religious differences of political style and strategic repertoire, in variations across religious traditions in clergy-lay relations, in differences among religious groups in proximity to political establishments, or somewhere else. Future research might profitably be directed at investigating the sources of the religious variations in congregational political activity documented here.

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### NOTES

1. Because the clergy studies are based on either samples of clergy from particular religious traditions or specific locales, not nationally based, we do not know the extent to which clergy attempt to mobilize their congregations on a national level. Additionally, these studies only ask about very few of the many possible ways in which clergy may attempt to mobilize their congregations (cf. Guth 2001:35–38). Consequently, our current knowledge about clergy mobilization efforts within congregations is much less extensive than it appears.
2. Harris (1999) and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) only differentiated between Catholics and Protestants in their analyses of congregation-based political activism based on reports from rank-and-file congregation members, and

Greenberg (2000) selected only Protestant congregations in her qualitative study of congregations' political activity (but see Greenberg 1999). All these studies, however, did distinguish between African-American congregations and white congregations.

3. For more details about NCS data and methods, see Chaves et al. (1999).
4. This paragraph draws on Chaves et al.'s (1999:463–65) arguments.
5. Christian Coalition voter guides account for 60 percent of the voter guides in the Christian Right category; pro-life organization voter guides 12 percent; and Focus on Family and/or Dr. James Dobson voter guides 6 percent. No other group accounts for more than 5 percent of Christian Right voter guides. Twenty-five percent of voter guides in the non-Christian-Right category come from the League of Women Voters; 15 percent from city or state government offices and the Catholic Church; and 11 percent from other regional church offices and denominations. All other groups' voter guides represent less than 7 percent of non-Christian-Right voter guides.
6. There are 50 congregations in the NCS that are either non-Christian or of indeterminate religious affiliation. This set of 50 congregations includes Jewish synagogues, Moslem mosques, and Buddhist temples, as well as other types of congregations. Reporting statistics for such a heterogeneous category seems unwise, and looking at each of these groups separately would reduce the case base even further.
7. The largest groups in the mainline/liberal Protestant category are: United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Episcopal Church, and United Church of Christ. The largest groups in the evangelical/conservative Protestant category are: Southern Baptist Convention, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and Assemblies of God.
8. Although classifying Protestant congregations with greater than or equal to 80 percent African-American regular participants as black Protestant seems theoretically appropriate, changing this percent to a lower majority category makes no empirical difference, as only four Protestant congregations have regular participants that are greater than 50 percent and less than 80 percent African American.
9. With respect to the multinomial logistic models, we include the fourth nominal category—distributed voter guides, but do not know the source of those guides—so we do not lose any cases. Since it lacks theoretical significance, we neither report nor interpret the result associated with this category. Additionally, using the Hausman-type test (Hausman and McFadden 1984), we checked to see whether the multinomial logistic regression models violated the assumption of independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). Results from the Hausman-type test did not indicate that this assumption had been violated.
10. Of the 1,236 total congregations in the NCS sample, only 65 percent had complete data for all variables in the regression models. Concerning individual variables, the percentage of cases with missing information ranged from less than 1 percent for whether congregations were located in urban areas to 15 percent for percent of congregations' people with household incomes under \$25,000 in 1998.
11. We used NORM (Schafer 1999b) to run MI for the regression models. NORM assumes a multivariate normal distribution. Past research has shown, however, that it is generally reasonable to perform MI even when distributions do not meet this assumption, which is often the case with real data (Schafer 1997). Since certain features of NCS data deviate from the assumption of multivariate normality, we employed various recommended strategies to help deal with this deviation. For instance, we rounded off binary variables to discrete values, and we applied appropriate transformations for highly skewed variables (Allison 2002; Schafer 1997).
12. Univariate percentages reported here differ minimally from those reported in Chaves et al. (1999) because we use a slightly updated data set and complete data for all variables.
13. We generated variance inflation factors (VIF) to check for collinearity among our independent variables. No VIF exceeded 2.1, a reasonable level (Menard 1995:66).
14. To obtain coefficients for the comparisons between black Protestant congregations and Catholic congregations and black Protestant congregations and mainline/liberal Protestant congregations, we ran two additional multinomial logistic regression models identical to the one displayed in Column 2 of Table 3b, but changed the reference category from evangelical/conservative Protestant to Catholic in one model, and to mainline/liberal Protestant in the other. Unless otherwise stated, results from these comparisons reached significance at least at the  $p < 0.05$  level. We repeated this method to obtain the same religious tradition comparisons for the remaining regression models.

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