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For God and Country: The Political Activism of Religious Congregations in the United States

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Abstract

Conservative Christian movements have attracted the attention of political observers, but just how widespread are they? This paper draws on the National Congregations Study to answer this question. It finds that while conservative Christians are known for their political activism, Catholic and Black congregations are the most politically active. They distribute voter guides, register people to vote, form groups to discuss politics, lobby or march, and invite political candidates and elected officials as visiting speakers. Black churches are also the most likely to publicly support or oppose a political candidate, and Catholic churches are the most likely to declare themselves sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants. It turns out, however, that independent “evangelical” congregations did become more politically active in 2018, and while they represent only a small slice of American congregations, they may be able to exert an influence on U.S. political outcomes.

Keywords: *Congregations, politics; National Congregations Study; Patriot Churches; New Apostolic Reformation*

Introduction:

In October 2018, Pastor Ken Peters and members of Covenant Church in Spokane, Washington, began holding monthly worship services on a lawn outside of the local Planned Parenthood, calling itself “The Church at Planned Parenthood” (TCAPP). Why? Because Peter argues, “We care about what’s going on in our nation... we’re murdering children, and we’re just fighting it with worship and prayer and giving and taking church from the four walls right out to the gates of hell and expecting that God will prevail” (quoted in Lea, 2019). Although Peters insisted that their monthly gatherings were only worship services and not political protests, a local judge ordered the group to move across the street (Shanks, 2020). This experience, at least in part, inspired Peters to found the “Patriot Church” movement (Everton, 2022), part of “an evolving network of nondenominational start-up congregations that say they want to take the country back for God” (Bailey, 2020).

It is unclear how successful Peters’s movement will be. Currently, there are only four Patriot churches. Peters founded the first in 2020 near Knoxville, Tennessee, where he is the pastor. Another is in Lynchburg, Virginia, a third is in Moses Lake, Washington, and a fourth is in Houston, Texas. Moreover, while conservative Protestants have a reputation for political activism, much of this stems more from the politicking of elites (e.g., Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, and James Dobson) than of local congregations (Averill, 1989; Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003, 2020; Greeley & Hout, 1999; Martin, 1996). As Sarah Pulliam Bailey (2020) notes, most white evangelical churches “only touch on politics around election time and otherwise choose to keep the focus during worship on God.” Thus, the Patriot Church movement could be out of step with most theologically conservative churches.

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That said, it identifies with the Pentecostal tradition (Everton, 2022; Giwanatara & Hendrawan, 2021), which, although sharing many beliefs with evangelicalism, differs in that it holds that the Holy Spirit continues to act as it did at the first Pentecost (i.e., fifty days after Christ's resurrection). As such, Pentecostals contend that acts of healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues continue to occur and are available to believers today (Synan, 1997; Wacker, 2001; Welch, Sikkink, Sartain, & Bond, 2004). There is no obvious reason to assume that Pentecostal beliefs naturally translate into political activism, but there is at least one strand of Pentecostalism, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), that is politically active. The NAR is an independent network of Pentecostal leaders and churches that believe God is calling them to establish God's kingdom on earth (Berry, 2020; Poloma, 2016). Many involved with the NAR hold that God has anointed former President Donald Trump to help accomplish this and "that Trump's political adversaries [are] inspired by demonic spirits under the guidance of the Devil to destroy Trump and the United States, and thereby prevent the full realization of the Kingdom of God on Earth" (Berry, 2020:71-72). And there is some evidence that the Patriot Church movement has ties with the NAR or is at least sympathetic with its goals (Everton, 2022). For instance, Peters backed the "Stop the Steal" movement and spoke at a Washington, D.C. rally the day before Trump supporters breached the U.S. Capitol. He also attended Trump's rally on the day of the riot but did not participate in the riot itself (Kuznia & Kamp, 2021). Thus, Peters's movement might be able to tap into this loosely connected Christian nationalist network that Donald Trump exploited in his presidential runs (Dias, 2020; Gorski, 2017; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018) and which played a prominent role in the January 6, 2021, riot (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Some political observers have expressed alarm that movements such as the NAR and the Patriot Churches threaten American democracy (Berry, 2020; Burnett, 2022), but how widespread and influential are such groups? This paper seeks to answer this question. It examines the political activism of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, comparing their level of activism to other religious congregations in the U.S. To do so, it draws on the National Congregations Study (NCS), which has explored how congregational activism has changed over the past two decades and how it varies across religious traditions (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003, 2020). The paper begins with an overview of the data and methods employed in this paper. The NCS's first wave occurred in 1998, with subsequent ones in 2006-07, 2012, and 2018-19. It then turns to an analysis of eight types of political activities that the NCS has examined in all four of its waves. The most recent wave included two additional sets of questions that explore congregational reactions to the Trump administration's efforts to limit immigration and ease restrictions on the politicking of religious organizations. Thus, the paper considers how responses to these new questions fit into the overall pattern of congregational activism. In addition, because many churches that identify with the NAR are independent and not affiliated with a Pentecostal denomination, it also examines the political activism of congregations that embrace Pentecostal practices (e.g., speaking in tongues) regardless of denominational affiliation. As we will see, speaking in tongues predicts congregational political activism better than formal affiliation with a Pentecostal denomination. The paper concludes with a summary of the results and suggestions for future avenues of research.

The paper contributes to the existing literature in at least three ways. First, it expands upon recent exploratory analyses that have considered how congregational political activity has varied over the four waves but did not examine how this activity has varied by religious tradition (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2020). Second, to the best of my knowledge, this paper explores more congregational political activities than previous analyses (see e.g., Baker & Martí, 2020; Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003, 2020; Brown, 2006; Djupe & Neihsel, 2019; Everton, 2015). This is not to suggest that more is always

better, but doing so does offer additional data points for understanding congregational political activism. Third, it treats white and Black Pentecostal congregations as distinct traditions. As noted above, although researchers often group Pentecostals with other theologically conservative Protestants, Pentecostals should be analyzed separately, especially when certain aspects of the tradition may be more politically active than others (e.g., Patriot and NAR churches).

Data and Methods

No comprehensive list of religious congregations in the United States exists, so the NCS relies on hypernetwork sampling to draw a random sample of U.S. congregations (Chaves & Anderson, 2008, 2014; Chaves et al., 2020; Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, & Barman, 1999). Analysts can derive a representative sample of organizations by first randomly sampling individuals and then having them nominate organizations with which they are affiliated (McPherson, 1982). It has been used to collect random samples of voluntary associations (McPherson, 1983; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1986, 1987; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995), work establishments (Kalleberg, Knoke, Marsden, & Spaeth, 1996; Knoke & Kalleberg, 1994), and protest events (Beyerlein, Barwis, Crubaugh, & Carnesecca, 2016). To generate a random sample of religious congregations, the NCS asked respondents to the 1998, 2006, 2012, and 2018 General Social Surveys, who said they attended religious services at least once a year, to name the congregation they attended (Chaves & Anderson, 2008, 2014; Chaves et al., 2020; Chaves et al., 1999). It then approached key representatives of these congregations (e.g., priest, rabbi, pastor, or other staff member or leader) and asked them a series of questions about their congregations, such as their size, sociodemographic makeup, the number of worship services held each week, and so on. Of particular interest here are the questions the NCS has asked about how congregations are politically active. These questions, detailed below, are the focus of this analysis.

Because congregations are nominated by individuals affiliated with them, larger congregations are more likely to be included in the sample than smaller ones. However, “although larger congregations are over-represented in the NCS sample, they are over-represented by a known degree that can be undone with weights. Retaining or undoing this over-representation corresponds to viewing the data either from the perspective of attendees at the average congregation or from the perspective of the average congregation, without respect to its size” (Chaves, 2020:10). In the following analysis, I weight the results to draw conclusions about political activism from the average congregation’s perspective.

Political Activities

All four waves of the NCS contain information on the following types of congregation-based political activity: (1) whether within the past 12 months, people were told at worship services about political opportunities, including petitioning campaigns, lobbying, or demonstrating; whether in the past 12 months, congregations had a group, meeting, class, or event to: (2) distribute voter guides, (3) organize or participate in a demonstration or march either in support of or opposition to some public issue or policy, (4) register people to vote, (5) organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials, (6) or discuss politics; or whether within the past 12 months, congregations had (7) anyone running for office or (8) an elected official as a visiting speaker. I examine congregational responses to each of these questions, as well as construct an additional variable that indicates whether a congregation participated in at least one of these eight activities.

The NCS included two additional sets of questions in the fourth wave that capture aspects of the political environment during the Trump administration. One set explores the degree to which

religious congregations were willing to publicly support or oppose candidates running for office. Specifically, the NCS asked congregations if, within the last two years (rather than 12 months), they had publicly supported or opposed a candidate running for public office and, if not, whether it would if such actions did not put their tax status at risk. Why did it include these additional questions about churches and political candidates? Because in 2017, President Trump issued an executive order that attempted to relax enforcement of the Johnson Amendment, which forbids churches and other tax-exempt organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates (Wagner & Bailey, 2017). A second set of questions captures congregational reactions to the Trump administration's "hardline policies against immigrants and immigration" (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2020:664). The NCS asked whether a congregation had declared itself a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants and, if not, whether it had discussed doing so. I examine congregational responses to these four new questions in the following analysis.

Religious Tradition

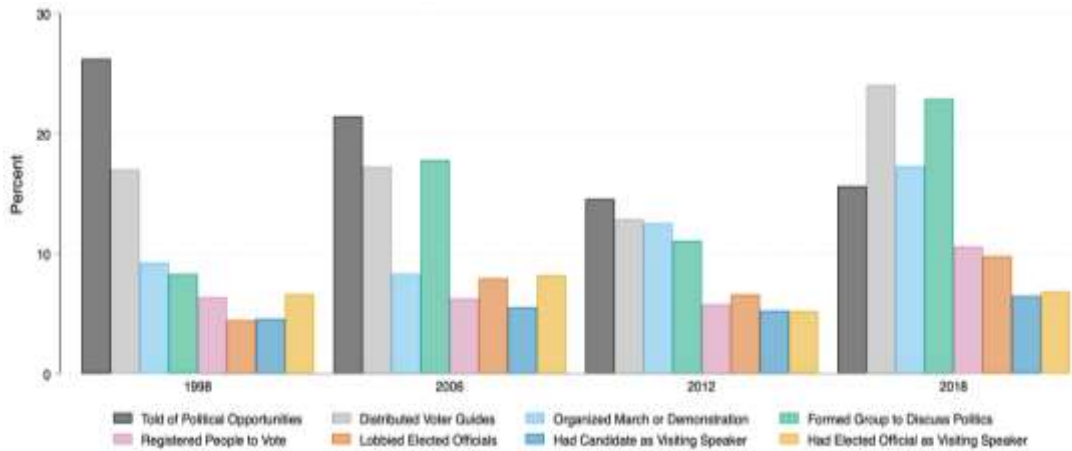
This analysis's primary independent variable is religious tradition. The NCS sorts congregations into five categories or traditions using a standard classification scheme based primarily on denominational affiliation (Steenland et al. 2000; Mushtaq & Ahmed, 2022). Here, I use an expanded scheme that distinguishes white and Black Pentecostals from Evangelical and Black Protestants and sorts "non-traditional" forms of Christianity into a separate category (Dougherty, Chaves, & Emerson, 2020), yielding a total eight religious traditions: Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical, White Pentecostal, Black, Black Pentecostal, Other Christian, and Non-Christian. I also identify congregations that speak in tongues, regardless of denominational affiliation. Evangelical, Catholic, Black, and Mainline congregations where members speak in tongues are often called "charismatic" rather than "Pentecostal" churches. I sometimes use that term as a shorthand for referring to them.

Methods

I compare how congregational political activity varies across religious tradition using univariate statistics presented in tables and graphs. The latter are often more helpful because they visually capture differences between the congregational political activity of religious traditions. Nevertheless, statistical tables provide details that can be difficult to detect in graphical presentations of data. As a check on the results of this analysis, I estimate t-tests, as well as multivariate logistic models that control for potentially confounding factors. For the latter, I use multiple imputation (MI) methods implemented in Stata 17 (StataCorp, 2015a, 2015b) to supplement the original data. MI has become increasingly popular because it avoids the statistical pitfalls of other methods for handling missing data (Carpenter & Kenward, 2013; Enders, 2010; Rubin, 1987, 1996; Schafer, 1997; StataCorp, 2015a:3-4). I report the results of these additional tests where relevant.

Results and Analysis

Figure 1 presents the political activities of religious congregations by type and wave for the eight activities explored in all four waves of the NCS. The figure captures how some forms of congregational activism are more common than others. On one end of the spectrum are activities such as informing people about political opportunities at worship, distributing voter guides, organizing marches or demonstrations, or forming groups to discuss politics; on the other are activities such as registering people to vote, lobbying elected officials, or inviting candidates or elected officials as visiting speakers.



Source: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, 2018-19.

Note: Unweighted number of congregations for all political activities is 1,234 for 1998, 1,506 for 2006-07, 1,331 for 2012, and 1,202 for 2018-19.

Figure 1: Congregational Political Activism by Type and Year

What may not be immediately obvious from Figure 1 is that religious congregations were more politically active in 2018-19 than in previous waves. This is reflected in Table 1. Just under half (49.5%) of U.S. congregations engaged in at least one of the activities listed in the upper part of Table 1, compared to 41.9% in 1998, 43.9% in 2006-07, and 34.6% in 2012. Other than telling people about opportunities for political activity at worship in 1998 and 2006-07 and having elected government officials as visiting speakers in 2006-07, congregations were more active in 2018-19. In 2018-19, handing out voter guides was the most common form of political activity, with 24.0% of congregations doing so, almost double that of 2012. This was followed by congregations forming groups to help register people to vote (22.9%), organizing a demonstration or march (17.3%), or telling people at worship about political opportunities (15.6%). In 2018-19, only about a tenth of congregations formed groups to lobby government officials (10.6%) or discuss politics (9.8%), and just a little over one in twenty invited political candidates (6.5%) or elected officials (6.8%) as visiting speakers.

Figure 2 presents the percentage of politically active congregations (i.e., those that participated in at least one of the eight activities listed in the upper part of Table 1) by religious tradition. It shows that Black Protestant and Roman Catholic churches have consistently been the most politically active over the last two decades.² Black congregations led the way in 1998 and 2018-19, and Catholic ones in 2006-07 and 2012. In 1998, 56.3% of Black congregations took part in at least one of the political activities listed in the upper part of Table 1. Their level of activism remained relatively unchanged in 2006-07 (55.9%), declined slightly in 2012 (46.8%), and then jumped to almost 79.8% in 2018-19. In other words, in 2018-19, four out of five Black churches engaged in political activity, which is high for nonpolitical voluntary organizations (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003).

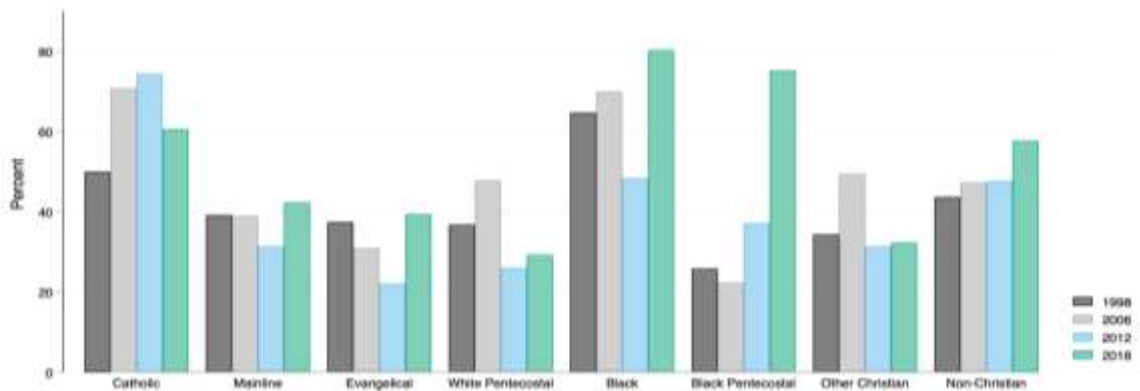
² Multivariate regression models confirm these results.

Table 1: Political Activities of Religious Congregations by Year

	1998	2006-07	2012	2018-19
Told people at worship services about opportunities for political activity within the past 12 months	26.2	21.4	14.5	15.6
Have ever distributed voter guides	17.0	17.2	12.9	24.0
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 in opposition to a public issue or policy	9.2	8.3	12.5	17.3
Register people to vote	8.3	17.8	11.1	22.9
Organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials	6.4	6.3	5.8	10.6
Discuss politics	4.4	7.9	6.6	9.8
Have had someone running for office as a visiting speaker within the past 12 months	4.6	5.5	5.3	6.5
Have had an elected government official as a visiting speaker within the past 12 months	6.6	8.2	5.2	6.8
Participated in at least one of the activities listed above	41.9	43.9	34.6	49.5
Declared congregation a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants	-	-	-	4.1
Congregation has discussed declaring itself a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants	-	-	-	9.0
Publicly supported or opposed any candidate for public office?	-	-	-	4.3
Would publicly support or oppose candidates for public office if doing so did not put your congregation's tax status at risk?	-	-	-	17.2
Participated in at least one of these activities, plus public support/opposition of candidate or becoming a sanctuary congregation				51.5

Source: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, 2018-19.

Turning to Catholic congregations, in 1998, 50.0% of them engaged in at least one activity, but in 2006-07 and 2012, the proportion increased substantially to 70.8 and 74.3%, and then declined in 2018-19 to 60.6%. Although their 2018-19 level is not as high as Black congregations, the fact that three out of five Catholic parishes participated in some form of political activity is still remarkable. Notably, religious congregations from the Catholic tradition were the only ones whose political activism increased in 2012. In contrast, over the last two decades, the political activism of Mainline and Evangelical congregations has been far more modest and has consistently lagged behind Catholic and Black ones. The political activism of non-traditional (“Other”) Christian churches (e.g.,) is about on par with Mainline and Evangelical ones, while that of non-Christian congregations only lags behind Black and Catholic churches. We should be cautious about drawing conclusions about either group, however. Both are catchall categories. The former includes Eastern Orthodox, Unitarian Universalist, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unity churches, and so on, while the latter includes Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu congregations (among others). Still, the overall level of activism of non-Christian congregations is interesting because it shows that it is not only Christian churches that are politically active.



Source: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, 2018-19.

Figure 2: Congregational Political Activism by Tradition and Year

Table 2: Political Activities of Congregations by Religious Tradition and Year

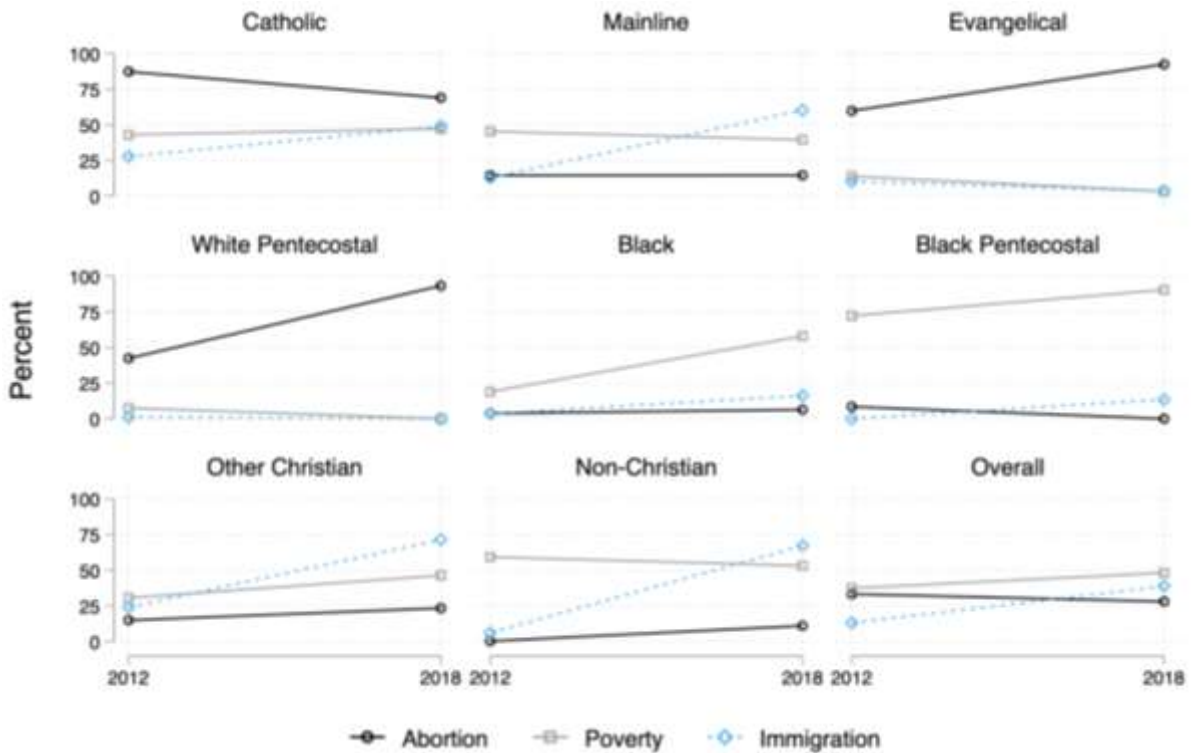
Religious Tradition	Percent of congregations that											
	Told people at worship of opportunities for political activity				Have ever distributed voter guides				Have had a group to organize a demonstration or march			
	1998	2006	2012	2018	1998	2006	2012	2018	1998	2006	2012	2018
Catholic	30.3	31.4	34.0	26.6	14.3	29.3	38.7	27.7	25.7	33.0	55.0	38.4
Mainline	25.8	25.4	16.6	22.1	12.6	9.0	4.2	6.4	6.3	9.8	11.3	18.1
Evangelical	20.5	12.5	6.2	7.9	20.7	14.8	11.6	29.3	7.5	1.9	5.6	8.2
White Pentecostal	27.2	18.6	9.7	6.2	13.8	22.0	12.8	18.3	7.3	12.4	2.4	1.1
Black Protestant	43.6	35.6	16.2	24.4	23.4	28.3	21.5	47.7	11.6	5.5	11.0	23.0
Black Pentecostal	12.0	13.4	9.2	24.1	18.3	12.7	26.7	39.5	0.8	8.6	8.8	25.6
Other Christian	18.8	22.7	18.2	9.3	11.6	15.0	3.6	8.7	6.5	9.3	11.2	11.2
Non-Christian	26.2	21.4	33.1	12.1	9.8	10.7	2.9	15.6	17.4	20.0	36.1	34.1

Religious Tradition	Percent of congregations that											
	Have had a group to get people registered to vote				Have had a group to discuss politics				Have had a group to lobby elected officials			
	1998	2006	2012	2018	1998	2006	2012	2018	1998	2006	2012	2018
Catholic	14.0	25.3	27.2	25.4	6.6	17.4	11.0	13.3	12.1	20.4	23.9	28.4
Mainline	2.9	5.0	5.1	8.9	7.3	13.6	6.6	12.6	3.1	11.9	7.1	9.1
Evangelical	2.7	10.6	5.6	13.4	1.4	2.1	2.8	4.3	2.5	4.2	2.0	0.6
White Pentecostal	1.9	28.2	4.8	9.9	0.1	2.1	0.7	4.1	1.7	1.4	1.0	0.1
Black Protestant	32.6	40.2	26.2	62.1	12.4	6.3	3.8	23.1	4.6	11.6	10.6	20.1
Black Pentecostal	6.8	10.3	22.1	58.4	0.2	0.4	15.9	2.2	0.3	0.0	3.4	26.5
Other Christian	6.0	21.1	10.9	19.6	10.6	6.9	11.2	8.2	6.5	5.8	2.8	5.9
Non-Christian	17.5	17.4	7.1	10.9	30.6	7.2	17.5	11.9	17.8	21.0	14.4	11.8

Religious Tradition	Percent of congregations that											
	Have had someone running for office as a visiting speaker				Have had elected official as a visiting speaker				Have participated in at least one of these activities			
	1998	2006	2012	2018	1998	2006	2012	2018	1998	2006	2012	2018
Catholic	0.9	4.1	1.4	1.3	6.3	12.7	4.4	3.5	50.0	70.8	74.3	60.6
Mainline	3.8	0.6	1.4	2.5	7.0	8.0	3.7	4.9	39.2	38.9	31.4	42.3
Evangelical	1.0	1.3	1.4	1.4	5.1	5.0	4.1	1.8	37.4	31.0	22.1	39.4
White Pentecostal	0.1	6.2	0.8	1.8	0.6	2.7	3.4	3.8	36.8	47.8	26.0	29.2
Black Protestant	20.7	23.4	21.3	15.8	13.2	21.2	8.8	18.4	64.7	69.9	48.3	80.3
Black Pentecostal	1.8	1.4	4.3	24.8	2.2	1.0	10.9	17.0	25.8	22.3	37.2	75.2
Other Christian	0.2	2.4	2.1	10.8	7.1	5.7	2.4	9.8	34.3	49.4	31.3	32.3
Non-Christian	9.8	4.0	3.7	7.0	10.9	4.6	8.9	4.5	43.7	47.3	47.6	57.7

Note: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, and 2018-19. **Bolded** percentages indicate the most active tradition in that year.

Table 2 breaks congregational political activism down by tradition and type and captures how different religious traditions emphasize some types of political activism. It shows that Roman Catholic congregations participate in almost all forms of political activism, at least those measured by the NCS.³ Unsurprisingly, much of their political activism focuses on abortion, but they also mobilize about other issues, such as poverty and immigration (Figure 3). In 2012 and 2018-19, over 40% of Catholic congregations marched or lobbied on behalf of poverty-related issues, and in 2018-19 almost half (48.9%) did so regarding immigration, up from 27.8% in 2012. And at least in 2018-19, when they did, almost all expressed support for immigrants and pro-immigration policies.⁴



Source: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, 2018-19.

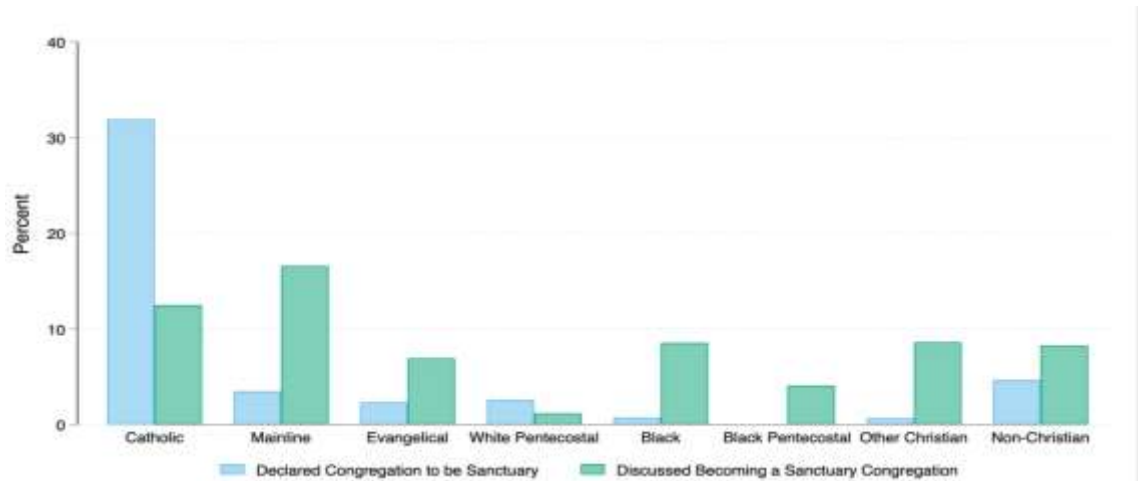
Figure 3: Congregational Marching and Lobbying About Abortion, Poverty, and Immigration

Mainline congregations tend to focus on a handful of activities (Table 2): informing people at worship about political opportunities (22.1% in 2018-19), marching or demonstrating (18.1% in 2018-19), forming a group to discuss politics (12.6% in 2018-19), and lobbying elected officials (9.1% in 2018-19). Although Mainline Protestant congregations are not as politically active as Black and Catholic congregations, Mainline Protestants still engage the public square. Much of this occurs behind the scenes at the denominational, rather than congregational, level (Wuthnow & Evans, 2002;

³ Multivariate logistic regression models found that Catholic congregations were only less likely to form groups to discuss politics or invite political candidates or government officials as visiting speakers.

⁴ The 2018-19, 82.5% of Catholic congregations indicated they marched to support immigrants or immigration.

Pandi & Chinnasamy, 2022). All Mainline denominations maintain offices in Washington, D.C., and they lobby for their respective denominations’ interests. Moreover, as Christian Smith (1996) documents in his study of the movement that opposed President Reagan’s Central American policies, although local Mainline congregations did not directly participate in demonstrations or marches, they funneled members to other social movement organizations that did. Despite their moderate level of political activism, there was a notable uptick in their marching and lobbying activity in 2018-19. Most of this focused on immigration (Figure 3).⁵ Of those Mainline that marched or lobbied, only 12.8% focused on immigration-related matters in 2012, but in 2018-19, that percentage grew to 60.3%, a four-fold increase. And like Catholic congregations, most of their efforts (99.0%) fell on the pro-immigration side.



Source: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, 2018-19.

Figure 4: Sanctuaries for Undocumented Immigrants, Declared and Discussed

The pro-immigration marching and lobbying activities of Catholic and Mainline congregations appear connected to their likelihood of becoming or considering becoming sanctuary congregations for undocumented immigrants. According to the 2018-19 NCS, although only 4.1% of congregations had become sanctuary congregations (Table 1, lower part), most were Catholic. Almost a third (31.9%) of Catholic congregations had become sanctuaries, a rate six times higher than congregations from any other religious tradition (Figure 4). Of those congregations that had not declared themselves to be sanctuaries, 9.1% discussed doing so (Table 1). Most of these were Mainline and Catholic: 16.6% and 12.5% of non-sanctuary Mainline and Catholic congregations indicated that they had discussed becoming sanctuaries.⁶ Contrast this with non-sanctuary Evangelical and Black Protestant congregations. Only 6.9% of the former and 8.5% of the latter discussed becoming one. Pentecostal congregations are even less likely to discuss declaring or becoming a sanctuary. Only 2.6% of White Pentecostal churches have become sanctuaries; of those that have not, only 1.2% have discussed becoming one. And no Black Pentecostal congregations have declared themselves a sanctuary, and only 4.0% have discussed doing so. Non-traditional Christian congregations did show some interest

⁵ In 2018-19, those that did were split about evenly between the pro-life (53.7) and pro-choice (46.3) sides.

⁶ Multivariate logistic regression models confirm that Mainline and Catholic congregations are more likely to have discussed becoming sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants.

in becoming a sanctuary (8.6%), although few so far have become one (0.6%). Interestingly, non-Christian congregations only trail Catholics (in terms of percentage) in actually declaring themselves a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants (4.7%), and a few others have discussed it (8.2%). Notably, like Catholic and Mainline congregations, when non-traditional and non-Christian congregations marched or lobbied in 2018, they were more likely to do so about immigration than poverty or abortion (Figure 3). In contrast, Evangelical, Black, and Pentecostal congregations were not, suggesting that certain beliefs and practices may increase the probability that congregations will engage in pro-immigration marching and lobbying efforts and declare themselves sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants.

As hinted above, Evangelical churches tend to be politically inactive (Figure 2, Table 2). They are unlikely to tell people at worship about opportunities for political activity (with 1998 as an exception), organize a demonstration or a march, lobby elected officials, discuss politics, or invite candidates or elected officials to speak. Instead, they tend to limit their political activities to handing out voter guides, but even here, they lag behind Catholic and Black congregations. The proportion that marched increased slightly from 2012 to 2018-19 (from 5.6% to 8.2%), but this was offset by a decline in the proportion that lobbied (from 2.0% to 0.6%). When Evangelical congregations marched or lobbied, most concerned themselves with abortion (Figure 3). To be sure, there are other ways for Evangelical congregations to be (and are) politically active. For instance, although most pastors will not “tell” their parishioners how to vote on particular issues or which political candidates they should back, some will use specific or coded language in their sermons that signals how they believe they should vote (Graham, 2020; Gabinete, 2022). And they, too, can (and do) serve as feeders to various political activities, such as the 2020 “Jericho Marches” that protested what many white conservative Protestants believe was a rigged election that denied Donald Trump a second term.⁷

The level of the political activity of white Pentecostal congregations resembles that of evangelical ones, although there is some variance across waves (Figure 2). Over the last two decades, they have tended to limit their political activities to distributing voter guides while appearing reluctant to tell worshippers about opportunities for political activity (except in 1998 and 2006), invite candidates or elected officials to speak, form groups to discuss politics, organize a demonstration or a march, or lobby elected officials (Table 2).⁸ In short, few white Pentecostal churches appear to embrace the political activism of the Patriot Church movement or the NAR.

Like Catholic and Mainline congregations, there was a noticeable increase in the marching and lobbying efforts of Black Protestant congregations in 2018-19 (Table 2). From 2012 to 2018-19, their marching and lobbying activities increased from 11.0% to 23.0% and 10.6% to 20.1%, respectively. Unlike Catholic and Mainline congregations, however, most of this focused on poverty-related issues (Figure 3). Of those that marched or lobbied, 18.9% and 58.1% did so on behalf of poverty in 2012 and 2018-19, respectively. Marching and lobbying are not the only political activities in which Black Protestant congregations participate. They are also likely to tell people about opportunities for

⁷ Taking a cue from the Biblical story about how the Israelite army, by marching around the walled city of Jericho and blowing the shofar, Jericho’s walls “came tumblin’ down,” the Jericho March mobilized believers to circle the corrupt government institutions that helped Biden steal the election, hoping that the official results of the 2020. Presidential election would be overturned. See <https://jerichomarch.org>. As of this writing, it is unclear to what extent Evangelical congregations served as feeder organizations for the pro-Trump protests that led to the storming of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021.

⁸ Unsurprisingly, when they did march or lobby, they almost always did so about abortion (Figure 3).

political activity, distribute voter guides, organize voter registration campaigns, discuss politics, and invite elected officials and political candidates as visiting speakers (Table 2).⁹ These last two activities have long been embraced within the Black church and are perhaps its most visible form of political activism. For example, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama spoke at numerous Black churches during the 2016 and 2008 Presidential campaigns (Cummings, 2008; Livengood, 2016), and during the 2004 campaign, John Kerry and John Edwards spoke at far more churches than President Bush or Vice-President Cheney, most of which were African American (Everton, 2007).¹⁰ Similarly, Bill Clinton and Al Gore visited and spoke at numerous Black churches during the closing days of the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential campaigns (Ifill, 1992), and Andrew Young and Martin Luther King, Sr. escorted Jimmy Carter to several Black churches and had him meet with numerous African American clergy before the 1976 Presidential election (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990: 215).¹¹

Except for 2018, Black Pentecostal congregations have been less politically active than non-Pentecostal Black congregations (Figure 2). They do tend to focus on the same types of activities, though (Table 2). They tell worshippers about political activities, hand out voter guides, help register people to vote, march or lobby elected officials, and invite political candidates and elected officials as speakers. The latter was especially true in 2018. They ranked second behind Black Protestant congregations when it came to inviting elected officials as visiting speakers and first when it came to inviting political candidates as visiting speakers.

It is one thing for a church to invite a political candidate as a visiting speaker; it is quite another to publicly support (or oppose) a candidate running for office. According to the 2018-19 NCS, only 4.3% of congregations did, approximately the same percentage that declared themselves sanctuary congregations (Table 1). It is, however, unsurprising that Black Protestant and Pentecostal churches were the most likely to do so (Figure 5).¹² Black political candidates have long solicited the blessings of Black pastors and ministerial associations. Frederick Harris (1999:12-26) recounts how Carol Mosely Braun jump-started her 1992 senatorial campaign appeared before a gathering of African American ministers, and Mary Sawyer (1982) found that 13 out of 14 members of the Congressional Black Caucus received endorsements from pastors, ten received endorsements from ministerial bodies, and five received financial contributions from churches.

A slightly higher percentage of congregations (17.2%) indicated they would publicly support or oppose a political candidate if there were no harmful tax consequences (Table 1), with Black Protestants, Black Pentecostals, and Non-Christian congregations the most likely to say so.¹³ Interestingly, although former President Trump suggested that conservative pastors would be more likely to endorse him if it did not jeopardize their tax status (Graham, 2020), evangelical congregations were among the least likely to do so. Only 12.2% indicated they would publicly support or oppose a candidate if there were no tax risk, just slightly higher than Mainline churches (11.7%) (Figure 5).

⁹ Multivariate regression models confirm these results.

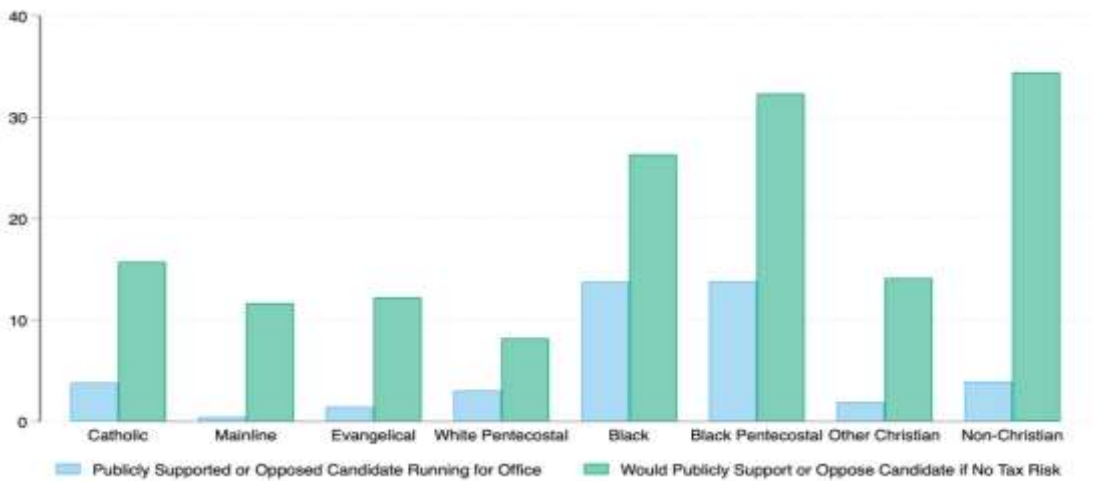
¹⁰ Notably, the one church President Bush did speak at during the 2004 campaign was an African-American congregation (Everton, 2007).

¹¹ Not exactly the same thing, but John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign distributed two million pamphlets at Black churches on the Sunday before the 1960 election (Branch, 1988).

¹² Confirmed by multivariate logistic regression models.

¹³ Confirmed by multivariate logistic regression models.

Notably, white Pentecostal congregations expressed the most reluctance. Only 8.2% indicated they would publicly support or oppose a candidate if there were no tax consequences.¹⁴ Compare this with 15.7% of Catholic congregations, 11.7% of Mainline congregations, 26.6% of Black congregations, 32.3% of Black Pentecostal congregations, 14.4% of non-traditional Christian congregations, and 34.4% of non-Christian congregations. These results suggest that although Trump may have been right that loosening restrictions would increase congregational political activism, traditions other than conservative Protestantism appear more willing to do so.



Source: National Congregation Study 1998, 2006-07, 2012, 2018-19.

Figure 5: Congregations Publicly Supporting or Opposing Political Candidates

Non-traditional Christian congregations specialize in two areas of political activity: telling people at worship about opportunities for political activism and registering people to vote (Table 2). The percentage of congregations telling people about the former dropped considerably in 2018 (from 18.2% in 2012 to 9.3% in 2018-19), but this was offset by an increase in those helping to register people to vote (from 10.9% in 2012 to 19.6% in 2018-19). As noted earlier, non-Christian congregations only lag behind Black and Catholic churches regarding their political activism, and we can see in Table 2 that they tend to focus on telling worshippers about opportunities for political activity, organizing a demonstration or march, and lobbying elected officials. When non-Christian congregations marched or lobbied, this was typically about either poverty or immigration (especially in 2018-19). And their emphasis may have impacted their willingness to become a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants. As noted above, by 2018-19, 4.7% of non-Christian congregations had declared themselves a sanctuary, ranking ahead of all others except Catholics.¹⁵

The Political Activism of Independent Conservative Churches

Up to this point, we have seen little evidence that theologically conservative congregations are politically active, whether they identify as evangelical or Pentecostal. As I have already suggested, however, formal denominational affiliation may not adequately capture the political activism of some

¹⁴ White Pentecostal churches were slightly more likely than evangelical ones (3.1% vs. 1.5%) to have publicly supported or opposed a candidate.

¹⁵ Of those that had not, 8.2% had discussed doing so.

congregations, such as those associated with the Patriot Church movement and the NAR. Fortunately, the NCS allows us to tease out the political activism of independent conservative churches, including charismatic ones. Consider Figure 6. It presents the percentage of politically active congregations (i.e., those that participated in at least one of the eight activities listed in the upper part of Table 1) by religious tradition. It combines all four waves of the NCS and distinguishes churches that speak in tongues from those that do not. As it indicates, overall, charismatic churches tended to be more politically active, particularly Catholic, Evangelical, and “other” Christian congregations.¹⁶ Moreover, multivariate regression found that charismatic congregations are positively associated with all eight of the political activities listed in the upper part of Table 1.¹⁷ Interestingly, though, charismatic congregations were not more likely to become (or discuss becoming) a sanctuary for undocumented workers or publicly supporting a political candidate.¹⁸ The notable exceptions to this general pattern are white and Black Pentecostal congregations, where those that speak in tongues are less politically active. However, we should not make too much of this since only 8.8% of the former and 2.0% of the latter said no one had spoken in tongues in the last year, although it is quite surprising that some did not since speaking in tongues is such a defining feature of what it means to be Pentecostal.

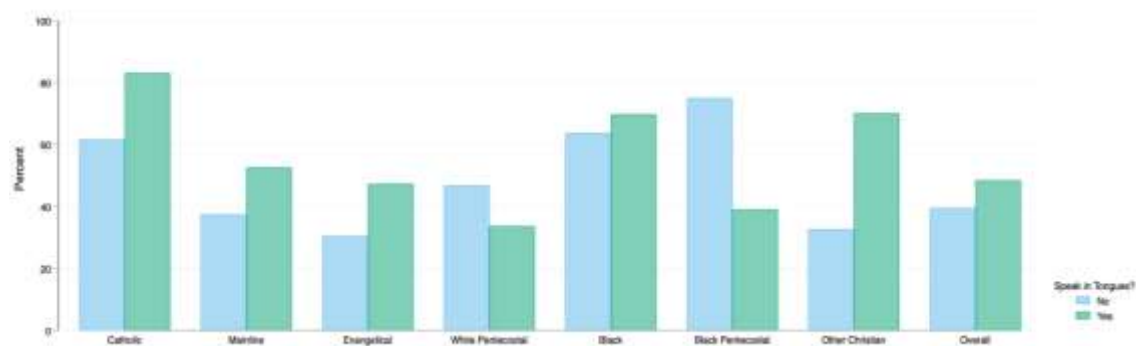


Figure 6: Speaking in Tongues and Political Activism

Included in the evangelical category are independent churches unaffiliated with any denomination. Figure 7 plots the political activism of these churches by year and whether they speak in tongues. As it indicates, except in 1998, the political activism of charismatic congregations is generally higher than those that are not.¹⁹ This is consistent with the observation that independent charismatic congregations, such as Patriot Churches and the NAR, are more politically active than independent non-charismatic ones. It is notable, though, that not only did the percentage of politically active charismatic congregations increase from 2012 to 2018-19 (46.7% to 49.5%), but so did the percentage of politically active non-charismatic independent congregations (12.4% to 31.5%). This

¹⁶ A t-test found the overall difference between the higher level of political activism of congregations that speak in tongues and those that do not to be statistically significant. Additional t-tests found that this was also true of Catholic, Evangelical, and Other Christian congregations. The difference in political activism of Mainline and Black Protestant churches were not statistically significant. Results available upon request.

¹⁷ All positive associations were statistically significant.

¹⁸ Results available upon request.

¹⁹ T-tests indicate that the higher level of political activism of charismatic independent congregations compared to non-charismatic ones in 2006, 2012, and 2018 are all statistically significant.

suggests that while traditional evangelical congregations may shy away from political activism, in recent years, independent (non-charismatic) evangelical congregations may not. At least in 2018-19, they appear far more inclined to jump into the political fray. Whether this is due to their “independence,” a reflection of the current political environment, or both is difficult to determine at this point, but it is certainly a question worth exploring further.

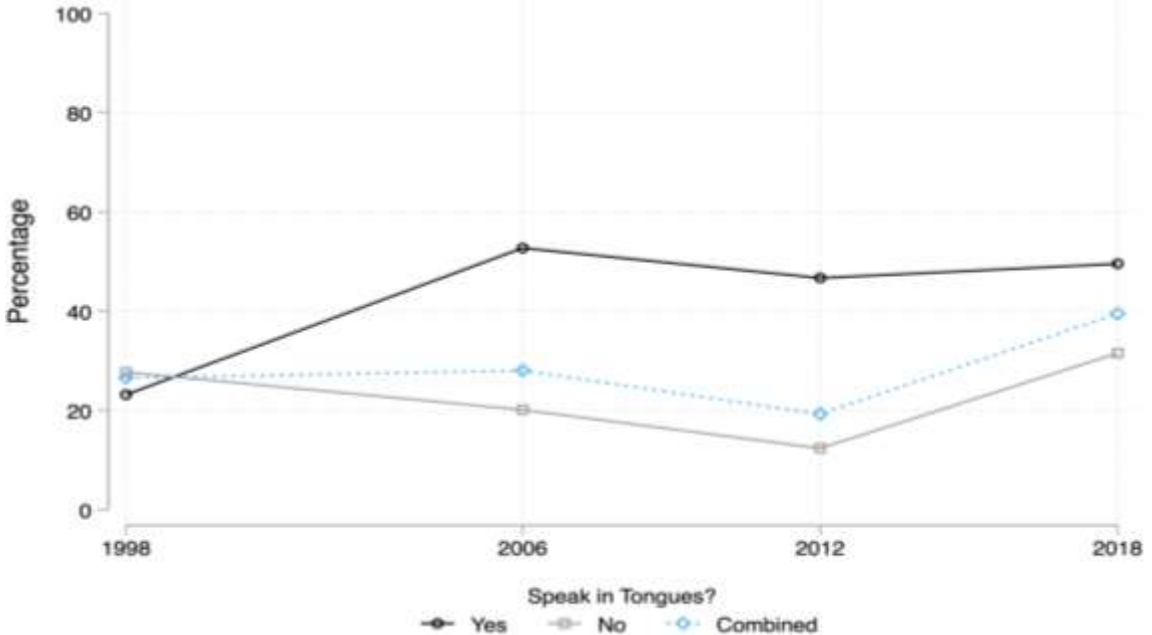


Figure 7: Independent Congregations, Speaking in Tongues, and Political Activism

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has explored the political activism of religious congregations in the United States. Consistent with previous studies, it found that religious tradition affects how they are politically active: some are more likely to distribute voter guides, register people to vote, or form a group to discuss political issues; others are more inclined to lobby, demonstrate, or march on behalf of various issues, and still others are more disposed to inviting political candidates and elected officials to speak at their worship services. The 2018-19 increase in the marching and lobbying efforts of all but Evangelical congregations is notable. For Catholic and Mainline congregations, this increase was attributable almost entirely to efforts concerned with immigration, while for Black congregations, it primarily reflected a concern about poverty. However, support for immigrants and pro-immigration policies was also a factor. Much of this was likely driven by opposition to Trump administration policies. As political commentators David Frum (2020) and Harry Enten (2021) have noted, whatever one thinks about Trump, he did make people care about politics again, and it appears that this impacted congregational activism.

The paper also found that Black and Catholic congregations have been the most politically active over the last two decades. Black congregations tell people at worship about opportunities for political activity, distribute voter guides, march, demonstrate, and lobby on various issues, organize voter registration campaigns, and invite elected officials and political candidates as visiting speakers. It is in terms of these last two activities that Black congregations stand out. They are far more likely than

congregations from other religious traditions to do so, which is why it was unsurprising to learn that they were also more likely to have publicly supported or opposed a candidate running for office or indicated they would if there was no risk of losing their tax-exempt status if they did.

Although the political activism of Black congregations may not strike political observers as particularly surprising, the political activism of Catholic congregations may. Like Black congregations, there are few political activities in which they do not participate. They tell parishioners at worship about opportunities for political action, distribute voter guides, organize marches and demonstrations, register people to vote, lobby elected officials, and are the most likely to become sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants. A closer look at their lobbying and marching efforts also revealed that they are concerned with issues other than abortion, such as poverty and immigration, indicating that Roman Catholic congregations' political activities span the political spectrum. And although only a handful of Catholic congregations form groups to discuss politics, the proportion that has done so is on par with Black and Mainline Protestant congregations. The only activities that Catholic congregations shy away from are inviting elected officials and political candidates as visiting speakers.

In general, Mainline, Evangelical, Pentecostal (both white and Black), and non-traditional Christian congregations are not as politically active as Black and Catholic congregations. However, we did see that congregations that speak in tongues, irrespective of denominational affiliation, are more politically active than those that do not. We also saw that, at least in 2018-19, independent “evangelical” congregations appeared open to political activism. Although they constitute only about 4% of American congregations, a relatively small slice of the congregational pie, collectively, they may be large enough to impact political outcomes in the U.S.

We saw how religious tradition helps drive how and to what degree congregations are politically active, but what accounts for differences within traditions? For example, we know that larger and urban congregations tend to be more politically active (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003; Everton, 2015, 2018); thus, do factors such as these explain within-tradition variation? Another potential research area is the effect that Hispanic/Latino membership has, if any, on congregational activism. For instance, does Hispanic membership drive Catholic congregations to mobilize on behalf of immigration issues? Does it help explain why Catholic congregations are more likely to declare themselves sanctuaries for undocumented workers? Relatedly, there is evidence that some Hispanics are moving to the Republican camp. “Between 2016 and 2020, Mr. Trump improved his share of the Hispanic vote... from 29% to 37%. Among all major ethnic groups, that shift was the largest” (The Economist, 2022). Thus, one cannot help but wonder whether this has affected the political activism of theologically conservative congregations.

In closing, it is worth stating the obvious: the political activism of religious congregations is not the only way people of faith are politically active. Although Evangelical and theologically conservative congregations are less active than Black and Catholic congregations, that does not mean that white conservative evangelicals' reputation for political activism is undeserved. As noted at the outset, this reputation stems, at least in part, more from the efforts of elites than local congregations (Averill, 1989; Bailey, 2020; Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003, 2020; Greeley & Hout, 1999; Martin, 1996). However, it is also true that parachurch groups and organizations, such as the Jericho March, can mobilize theologically conservative Christians for political purposes. In other words, religious affiliation (or lack thereof) matters. Though the U.S. is technically a secular country, where people worship, how often they pray, and what they believe impact the social and political life of the U.S. in general and the election of presidential candidates in particular (Baker, Perry, & Whitehead, 2020; Du Mez, 2020;

Gorski & Perry, 2022; Stewart, 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Whitehead et al., 2018). It is just that, at least until now, their activism has tended not to manifest itself at the congregational level. Perhaps the advent of the Patriot Church movement will change that. Perhaps not. The larger point is that while examining how and to what degree religious congregations are politically active can be illuminating, it does not tell the whole story. There is a lot more that still needs to be told.

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