

Sunday School Teacher, Culture Warrior: The Politics of Lay Leaders in Three Religious Traditions*

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Objectives. Political theorists have praised civic organizations as spaces for open political deliberation. But their leadership structure privileges some voices over others. In congregations, clergy set the context for political discussion. We argue that volunteer religious leaders also shape political talk in local churches. Lay leaders serve as political opinion leaders within local churches, with the power to either deepen or bridge political polarization over religion and morality. *Methods.* We compare lay leaders across three religious traditions, using a unique measure from the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey. *Results.* Lay leaders in evangelical, mainline, and Catholic traditions are more politically active than other attenders, but evangelical lay leaders are also more morally conservative than others in their tradition. Comparing across traditions, we argue that evangelical lay leaders foster greater political cohesion within their tradition. *Conclusion.* We identify voluntary group leadership as a mechanism that allows civic organizations to generate political presence.

Since the 1970s, American public religion has become polarized along political lines. White evangelicals have become an important constituency for the Republican Party, while Catholics and mainline Protestants have become internally divided by issues of gender, abortion, and homosexuality (Wuthnow, 1988). James Hunter has described this trend as a culture war between “orthodox” and “progressive” visions of moral authority (1991). But Hunter’s critics argue that the general public remains in the middle, and this conflict is primarily fought by a small set of religious and political elites (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2006). Furthermore, the worlds of local religious congregations are far less polarized and politicized than media rhetoric suggests. While culture war activists are driven by coherent political ideologies, American congregations tend to favor pragmatism, therapeutic self-help, and local concern (Edgell, 2006). Across religious traditions, it is rare for local churches to engage in direct political mobilization (Beyerlein and Chaves, 2003).¹ Given this gap between political elites and local religious life, we need greater understanding of how congregations either deepen or bridge culture war divides.

We propose that nonordained or “lay” religious leaders are critical to linking local congregational life to national politics. Previous research has focused on the role of ordained

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¹Among Christian traditions, the most overt political mobilization occurs in black Protestant churches, where religion provides a predominant strategy of collective action for black communities (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Because of the black church’s unique historic role, this discussion will focus on non-African-American traditions.

pastors as key opinion leaders who bridge the gap between political elites and the general public (Djupe and Gilbert, 2002; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). A majority of Catholic priests identify strongly with the Democratic Party (Jelen, 2003), and they appear to influence their parishioners' policy attitudes on some issues (Bjarnason and Welch, 2004), particularly those priests who are more ideologically liberal (Smith, 2008). Mainline pastors also have more liberal political identities, but they are also hesitant to send political cues that may be controversial among their laypeople (Smidt et al., 2003). Evangelical pastors have become increasingly politically conservative, and communicate their conservative views to the congregation (Guth et al., 2003). Yet, evangelicals are actually *less* likely to hear sermons on political topics at church than mainliners: 28 percent report hearing their clergy speak about politics "sometimes" or "frequently," compared to 20.5 percent of evangelicals (Campbell, 2004). Political talk in evangelical churches may not be as clergy driven as researchers have assumed.

Pastors are not the only important religious leaders who shape the political attitudes of church members. Lay leaders may also set the tone for political talk in church, with the power to either deepen or bridge political polarization over religion and morality. Lay leaders are nonordained volunteers who play key roles in local congregations, such as teaching Sunday School, hosting small groups, and engaging in church governance (Chaves, 2004; Ecklund, 2006). Using the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS), we find that volunteer leaders in evangelical, mainline, and Catholic traditions are significantly more politically active than other regular attenders. We argue that lay leaders are not just religious leaders, but are also positioned as political opinion leaders who can help other members link their religious identity and belief to politics. More broadly, this study demonstrates that patterns of political talk in civic organizations are shaped by their constituency-based leadership structure.

The Political Role of Voluntary Religious Leaders

Religious congregations are important contexts for political behavior because church membership is the most common way that Americans are involved with civic organizations (Putnam, 2000). Across diverse religious traditions, American congregations are structured as voluntary associations that cultivate broad-based, volunteer leadership among members. Lay leaders play a critical role in U.S. congregations because religious affiliation is voluntary and church resources must be mobilized from the membership (Warner, 1993). Yet, scholars have not systematically explored how lay leaders might shape patterns of political talk in local churches. This is an important oversight, especially since many descriptive accounts point to the political role of lay leaders (Becker, 1999; Warren, 2001).

We attribute this scholarly gap to the agenda-setting influence of *Voice and Equality*, a landmark investigation of how civic organizations foster political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Verba and his collaborators argued that because Protestant churches have a constituency-based leadership structure, they develop civic skills among church members. Subsequent research found that small group settings within the congregation are particularly valuable for civic skill development because they provide greater lay leadership opportunities (Djupe, Anand, and Gilbert, 2007). Catholic churches also foster civic skill development, counter to the expectations of Verba et al. (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). Though the formal polity of the Catholic church is more hierarchical, American Catholic parishes allow considerable lay leadership in practice, often in ways that empower female leaders (Ecklund, 2006). *Voice and Equality* launched a productive line

of research on how congregations affected their members' political participation. But this paradigm also downplayed the power dynamics within congregations by assuming that all members have an equal opportunity to gain skills and voice their ideas once they join an organization. Congregations are not neutral deliberative forums that give all individuals equal opportunity to contribute ideas; pastors have particular power to set the agenda and establish ground rules (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009:247).

We argue that lay leaders also shape political talk at church, working alongside or at cross-purposes with ordained clergy. Though clergy are traditionally invested with religious authority, this authority ultimately depends on their ability to influence and inspire a membership to attend worship, contribute financially to the congregation, and participate in church governance (Finke and Stark, 1992). In particular, pastors rely on volunteer lay leaders to take on responsibility in church governance, provide religious instruction, and host spaces of sociability and mutual support (Ammerman, 2005). Volunteer, nonclergy leaders set the tone of small group interaction within local churches by teaching Sunday School, leading prayer groups, chairing committees, hosting social gatherings, or organizing community service activities (Becker, 1999). These small group settings are important sites of religious socialization and sources of congregational vitality (Wuthnow, 1994). Small groups are also sites of informal political discussion, where members exchange views and information that facilitates political participation (McClurg, 2003; Mutz, 2006). Just as pastors influence members' political attitudes by prompting discussion on social issues (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009), lay leaders may set the agenda for small group interaction.

We propose that lay religious leaders serve as political opinion leaders who help other members link their religious identity and belief to politics. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) argued there is a two-step process of influence between elites and mass publics, mediated by opinion leaders. It is these opinion leaders who reinforce elite messages within their personal networks, helping to communicate these frames and ideologies in relevant terms within everyday conversations. Compared to the general public, opinion leaders have clearer party images (Baumer and Gold, 2007), hold more coherent political ideologies (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008), and are more generally informed about politics (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). Lay religious leaders are well-positioned to serve as political opinion leaders because their organizational role designates them as authoritative members of their networks. We elaborate Katz and Lazarsfeld's classic concept of opinion leadership by considering how the organizational context of congregations shapes political influence. To make this theoretical refinement, we draw on three converging strands of research that point to an important political role for lay leaders.

First, congregational case studies have repeatedly found that lay leaders play a special role in interpreting their religious tradition in the context of local congregations. Ordained pastors generally have greater authority to interpret sacred texts or instruct the congregation in theology, helping laypeople to interpret public affairs through a theological lens (Djupe and Gilbert, 2003). But lay leaders often practice what Dawne Moon (2005) calls "everyday theology": drawing on their personal identity and experience to justify particular moral stances or political attitudes. This even occurs within conservative Protestant churches that put great value on "correct" theological belief and biblical interpretation (Becker, 1999). For example, a pastor might preach a sermon that characterizes abortion as a violation of biblical teaching, while a lay leader might reinforce this anti-abortion stance by sharing a personal narrative of postabortion regret and repentance (Ginsburg, 1989). Such personal narratives are central to pro-life religious activism (Munson, 2008), as they are to a wide variety of social movements (Polletta, 2006). Lay leaders speak with the authority of individual authenticity (Taylor, 1989), within a culture of *personalism* that prevails across American Christian traditions (Becker, 1999).

Second, lay leaders may serve as prototypes that define what it means to be a “good” evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Catholic for others in their tradition. Here, we draw on social identity theory as developed by Turner et al. (1987) and Tajfel (1981), the psychological perspective that informs much social science research on political identity. Social identity theory argues that people “tend to perceive as normative—and conform to—the stereotypical attributes defining some salient ingroup identity” (Turner et al., 1987:80). Religious groups such as “evangelical” or “Catholic” are not just defined by symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them,” but also by group prototypes that define the “true” or “authentic” member of a particular religious community (Hayward and Elliott, 2011). Within a fuzzy set of imagined group membership, some members are rated as better members of the category than others (Lakoff, 1987). Drawing on this insight, we propose that lay leaders are set apart by the associational structure of congregations as representative members of their tradition.

Because American congregations have a constituency-based leadership structure, lay leaders arguably have greater power to shape the stereotypical attributes at the core of group identity. Political scholars have criticized social identity theory for not explaining where group prototypes come from outside of laboratory settings, or why they have such stability (Huddy, 2001). Just as prototypes of racial and ethnic “authenticity” are shaped by leadership struggles within a group (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000), the content of religious “orthodoxy” is contested and debated over time between rival elites (Dillon, 1999). In religious congregations, lay leaders play a role that specifically identifies them as prototypes of good religious membership.

Third, if lay leaders signal certain political affiliations or attitudes, other members may be more likely to consider these attitudes as “authentic” or “essential” attributes of the group’s religious identity. There is growing evidence that political identity can affect religious identity, as much as the reverse. Research on religion and politics has generally treated religious affiliation as causally prior to partisanship and political attitudes, following prior studies of European social cleavage politics. But this assumption is not warranted within America’s vibrant religious economy (Finke and Stark, 1992), where people choose their religion on the basis of personal preferences (Roof and McKinney, 1987). According to Hout and Fischer (2002), increasing numbers of Americans report “no religion,” even though they ascribe to traditional religious beliefs. These “unchurched believers” are disproportionately ideologically liberals and moderates who reject the Christian Right. Patrikios (2008) finds that strong Republicans increased their attendance in evangelical churches during the 1990s and 2000s, while strong Democrats attended evangelical churches less. Similarly, Rhodes (2011) finds that evangelical Democrats attend church less than other evangelicals, even though their moral attitudes are more conservative than average Democrats.

Building on these three strands of research, we extend Katz and Lazarsfeld’s classic concept of opinion leadership to consider the political role of voluntary religious leaders in congregations. The politics of lay leaders are particularly significant because these individuals set the tone of small group interaction by teaching Sunday School, leading prayer groups, chairing committees, hosting social gatherings, or organizing community service activities.

Political Cohesion Within Religious Groups

We propose that, within religious traditions, politically mobilized lay leaders may anchor particular associations between religious identity and partisanship or ideological identity.

Comparing across traditions, lay leaders may be more consistently mobilized as political “opinion leaders” in the evangelical tradition than in the than mainline and Catholic traditions. Conversely, mainline and Catholic lay leaders may be more politically diverse and moderate, which diminishes the ability of local congregations to exert political influence on rank-and-file religious participants. The politics of lay leaders may be a mechanism that generates political and moral conformity within religious traditions.

By considering the politics of lay leaders, we challenge the assumption that evangelical churches are more politically homogenous because of their particularly *religious* beliefs and practices. White evangelical churches enforce a remarkable level of political conformity among their members. In 2004, 77.5 percent of white evangelicals supported the Republican candidate for president, and this support was unchanged in 2008 and 2010 (Dionne and Galston, 2010; Guth et al., 2006). By comparison, mainline and Catholic churches harbor more political diversity and have weaker effects on their member’s politics (Putnam and Campbell, 2010).

Previous work has focused on religious factors to explain differences in political cohesion across religious traditions. Wald, Owen, and Hill (1990) have argued that evangelical churches exert greater political influence because they practice “strictness,” or demand theological and behavioral conformity from their members (Iannaccone, 1994). “Strict” churches put greater demands on their members’ time and focus most of their social interactions within the congregation, drawing boundaries between “us” and “the world.” Evangelical churches also have a stronger expectation that religion should impact all aspects of one’s life. Accordingly, evangelicals are the most likely to report that their faith is important to their politics (Smith, 1998). Because the evangelical subculture commands greater moral, theological, and behavioral conformity, it can marshal greater political cohesion concerning how religious worldview should be applied to public life (Wald, Owen, and Hill, 1990).

By contrast, scholars argue that mainline Protestant churches accommodate greater diversity and personal choice with regards to belief and behavior (Roof and McKinney, 1987). In the Catholic tradition, the geographic organization of the local parish has historically brought together a greater mix of theological and political orientations (Smith, 2008). Mainline and Catholic traditions also encourage their members to get involved with civic efforts outside of their religious subculture, fostering what Putnam (2000) calls “bridging” as opposed to “bonding” social capital. This openness to the world fosters greater civic engagement outside of church, but makes it harder for these traditions to enforce a shared orientation toward politics.

While we find this dominant account convincing, we also find it incomplete. Political cohesion within traditions may also reflect dynamics of power and leadership within civic organizations, not simply religious factors of theology or sectarian strictness. Lay leadership may be an important mechanism that privileges certain political perspectives and silences others.

To explore the politics of lay leaders, we test four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Evangelical lay leaders are more mobilized around culture war issues than other evangelicals: more morally conservative in their attitudes, more politically active, and more strongly identified with the Republican Party.*

Hypothesis 2: *Lay leaders in all traditions are more politically active than members of their tradition.*

Hypothesis 3: *Mainline and Catholic lay leaders do not hold different moral attitudes than others in their tradition, on either moral or economic issues.*

Hypothesis 4: *Mainline and Catholic lay leaders value social justice more than others in their tradition, even though they do not differ in their policy attitudes toward economic redistribution.*

The last hypothesis serves to recognize differences in the content of theological “orthodoxy” across different Christian traditions. Here, we resist the tendency to make contemporary American evangelicalism into a universal standard of “orthodoxy” or “religiosity” (Edgell, 2012). Both the mainline Protestant (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002) and Catholic traditions (Windley-Daoust, and Kilmartin, 2001) have strong social justice teachings that enshrine progressive economic ideals as integral to religious orthodoxy.

However, Hypothesis 3 is informed by a recurring finding that rank-and-file mainline laypeople are often at odds with official mainline policy stances. Though mainline clergy have become highly active in social justice causes since the 1960s, they are often considerably more liberal than the majority of mainline members (Djupe and Gilbert, 2008). For example, the United Methodist Church and several other mainline denominations officially support affirmative action, despite the fact that this political issue is widely unpopular among members (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2007). In their attitudes toward economic redistribution, mainline congregations are often as politically diverse as their surrounding community (Hart, 1992). While mainline laypeople often appreciate a theological emphasis on the common good, they tend to ignore or oppose the official policy positions taken by their denomination.

In summary, we anticipate that mainline and Catholic lay leaders will be more informed by official theological pronouncements about social justice than rank-and-file members. But, we anticipate that lay leaders still represent a diversity of political views on economic redistribution. Hypotheses 3 and 4 propose that lay leaders are more “orthodox” than other members in their abstract commitment to social justice, but that this theological belief is not connected to particular social policies.

Data

The data used in this study come from the first wave of the BRS, which was fielded in 2005 by the Gallup Organization. The BRS is one of the few national surveys that provides in-depth measures of multiple dimensions of both religion and politics. The BRS is a random national sample of 1,721 U.S. citizens collected by the Gallup Organization. For an in-depth analysis of the methodology used in the BRS as well a comparison of the results to other nationally administered surveys, see Bader, Mencken, and Froese (2007). Using the modified RELTRAD typology of Steensland et al. (2000), we segregated the data by religious tradition and focused on the three largest groups: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic.

Analytic Strategy

Three models are run for each of our dependent variables: one each for evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics. Multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) models are used for our moral conservatism scale and for models with the dependent variable being “the federal government should distribute wealth more evenly.” Binary logistic regressions are used for the models predicting whether or not someone believes that it is very important to actively seek social and economic justice in order to be a good person. The distribution

TABLE 1

Poisson Regression Model of Political Participation Scale by Religious Tradition

	Model 1 Evangelicals	Model 2 Mainline Protestants	Model 3 Catholics
Intercept	0.991***	0.762**	0.762***
Female	-0.103*	-0.133**	-0.050
White, non-Hispanic	-0.032	0.086	0.050
Education	0.042*	0.068***	0.045*
Income	0.030	0.039	0.058*
Age	0.001	0.003	0.002
Married	0.015	-0.121*	0.005
South	0.025	-0.009	-0.001
Biblical literalist	-0.018	-0.125	-0.079
Church attendance	0.004	0.004	0.006
Lay leaders	0.128*	0.168*	0.171**
r^2	0.113	0.174	0.130
N	413	365	314

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

SOURCE: BRS (2005).

of the political participation dependent variable is nonnormative and positively skewed. Poisson models are used for all models with this dependent variable because its distribution does not meet the assumptions of traditional models, as it is a count of the rarity of special events.

Findings

Preliminary assessments within the evangelical tradition reveal that lay leaders have significantly higher mean levels of biblical literalism, party identification, political participation, moral conservatism, and economic conservatism than nonleaders within this tradition.² However, lay leaders are only found to be more politically active and morally conservative than nonleader attenders. This suggests two things. First, evangelical identification with the Republican Party is highly correlated with church attendance. Second, evangelical leaders are well-equipped to serve as opinion leaders as they are more politically active and informed than others in their religious tradition. The higher levels of political participation suggest that they are more likely to be politically engaged “Culture Warriors” who hold ideologically conservative stances on moral issues, despite their similar levels of political identification. However, the greater moral conservatism among lay leaders does not appear to be the result of higher levels of “orthodoxy,” as they do not significantly differ from regular attenders on levels of biblical literalism. Perhaps a more complex process of selection into leadership roles accounts for this greater moral conservatism.

Multivariate models reveal whether these bivariate relationships remain net of other factors, and they display how lay leaders in the mainline and Catholic traditions compare to the rest of their members. Table 1 reveals that lay leaders in all three traditions are significantly more politically active than others in their tradition, even controlling for regular attendance.

²For variables used, their descriptive statistics, and bivariate analysis, see Supporting Information.

TABLE 2

OLS Regression of Moral and Economic Conservatism on Lay Leaders by Religious Tradition

	Moral Conservatism			Economic Conservatism		
	Evangelical Protestants	Mainline Protestants	Catholics	Evangelical Protestants	Mainline Protestants	Catholics
Intercept	28.640***	19.347***	17.215***	0.784	1.542*	0.611
Female	-0.532	-0.420	-2.372*	-0.457**	-0.220	-0.101
White, non-Hispanic	-0.417	3.517	0.344	0.328	0.102	0.315
Education	-0.330	-0.940*	-0.545	0.197***	-0.067	0.102
Income	-0.729*	-1.647***	-1.174*	0.128*	0.191**	0.137*
Age	-0.066*	0.057	0.159***	0.006	0.013**	0.010
Married	2.159	4.204***	2.647*	0.019	0.049	0.336
South	0.275	3.769**	-0.063	0.279*	0.541**	0.262
Biblical literalist	7.718***	11.096***	10.200***	0.246	0.139	-0.027
Church attendance	9.390***	3.719**	9.418***	0.334	0.006	0.399*
Lay leaders	3.133**	2.537	1.202	0.137	-0.134	-0.442*
r^2	0.427	0.311	0.346	0.134	0.063	0.078
N	385	341	294	415	363	308

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

SOURCE: BRS (2005).

This is not surprising, given that lay leadership requires the same civic skills and motivations that enable political participation. Previous studies have found that the civic effects of religion are stronger for those who go beyond attending regular worship, and participate in small groups and committees that allow them to practice civic leadership (Djupe and Gilbert, 2006).

In Table 2, we evaluate whether lay leaders are more morally and economic conservative than other participants in their tradition. We find that biblical literalism and church attendance are both predictors of moral conservatism across all three traditions, while lay leaders are only significantly more morally conservative in the evangelical tradition. However, it is important not to equate a generic religious “orthodoxy” with moral conservatism, especially since economic and moral conservatism do not always go together within religious teachings (Wellman, 2008).

Table 2 also reveals that for evangelical and mainline Protestants, attendance and lay leadership are not significantly correlated with economic conservatism. However, Catholic lay leaders are more economically progressive than other Catholics. This is particularly interesting because regular attendance among Catholics is correlated with greater economic conservatism. Lay leadership is clearly distinct from regular church participation, since the two have opposite relationships with the economic attitudes of lay Catholics. Because mainline lay leaders do not model higher levels of “orthodoxy” with regards to economic redistribution, it may be harder for mainline pastors to teach members that these stances are essential aspects of Christian identity. By contrast, Catholic lay leaders are better informed by Catholic social teaching, and so they can help priests reinforce these messages among other laity as part of the group’s essential identity.

Finally, in Table 3, we compare respondent’s attitudes toward social justice. Respondents were asked how important they considered “actively seeking social and economic justice” was “in order to be a good person.” Here, the results are startling. Mainline lay leaders

TABLE 3

Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Thinking it is Very Important to “Actively Seek Social and Economic Justice” by Religious Tradition

	Model 1 Evangelicals		Model 2 Mainline Protestants		Model 3 Catholics	
	<i>b</i>	Odds Ratio	<i>b</i>	Odds Ratio	<i>b</i>	Odds Ratio
Intercept	-2.874**	—	-2.332*	—	-1.776*	—
Female	0.306	—	0.077	—	0.101	—
White, non-Hispanic	0.976	—	-0.529	—	-0.973*	0.378
Education	-0.001	—	0.128	—	0.081	—
Income	0.021	—	0.050	—	0.041	—
Age	0.020**	1.020	0.030***	1.030	0.028**	1.029
Married	-0.244	—	-0.302	—	-0.334	—
South	0.018	—	-0.516	—	-0.204	—
Biblical literalist	-0.160	—	0.102	—	0.778	—
Church attendance	-0.046	—	-0.469	—	-0.241	—
Lay leaders	0.212	—	0.917**	2.502	1.004***	2.729
<i>r</i> ²		0.034		0.105		0.126
<i>N</i>		415		360		312

****p* < 0.001; ***p* < 0.01; **p* < 0.05.

SOURCE: BRS (2005).

value social and economic justice more than nonleader members (2.5 times greater odds). Among Catholics, church attendance has no effect, while lay leaders have 2.7 times greater odds of valuing social and economic justice. For both traditions, lay leaders seem to be the strongest advocates for social justice, while regular attenders do not put greater emphasis on social justice. By contrast, there are not significant differences between evangelical attenders or leaders in how much value they place on seeking “social and economic justice.” This is not to say that evangelicals do not care about issues of poverty or fairness; rather, it is more likely that evangelicals associate phrases such as “social justice” with theological liberalism and social outgroups (Wellman, 2008).

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that lay leaders represent a distinct group who are well-positioned to serve as opinion leaders within local congregations. Previous work focused on the divide between the political stances of clergy and denominational elites and the attitudes of rank-and-file members. But our findings point to a three-way relationship between pastors, rank-and-file members, and lay leaders, who can either reinforce or undermine the pastor’s social message. In evangelical, mainline, and Catholic traditions, lay leaders are more politically active than other members. Furthermore, lay leaders in all three traditions demonstrate a distinct profile of political attitudes that are different from others who identify with their tradition.

In the evangelical tradition, lay leaders present a united political front, establishing conservative politics as an essential part of evangelical identity within local religious life. Within evangelical churches, a typical lay leader is even more conservative on moral issues than a typical faithful attender, and follows political affairs with greater attention. While evangelical lay leaders do not differ from regular attenders in their party identification, they

are more likely to be politically engaged “Culture Warriors” who ascribe to ideologically consistent, conservative moral stances. These stances do not simply flow from greater “orthodoxy”; lay leaders share similar beliefs and levels of religious commitment with regular attenders, yet are even more politically conservative. Lay leadership may play an important role in politicizing evangelical identity by linking local religious concerns to culture war ideology and partisanship.

By comparison, mainline lay leaders stand in the gap that separates their progressive, activist clergy from other members. Our findings are consistent with Evans’s (2003) argument that mainline Protestants flourish by cultivating a distinctive subcultural identity, defined in tension with both secularism and religious fundamentalism. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), churches are strongest in regions where members are both more theologically orthodox yet have the strongest identity as theological liberals. Analogously, mainline lay leaders embody a certain prototype of “strong” or “good” mainline Christian identity, exhibiting moderate views on moral issues along with a strong commitment to social justice. Thus, mainline lay leaders may help foster greater civic engagement among other members, by embodying a “churchly” concern for the common good, and reinforcing theological messages from the pulpit. But this prototype of mainline Protestant membership is not associated with particular policy attitudes or party identification, which arguably hampers the efforts of mainline pastors to rally the faithful for political action.

Our results also help explain why American Catholicism sustains such political diversity. While Catholics have historically been affiliated with the Democratic Party, they are more recently known as critical swing voters (Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 2007). Within a “Culture War” framework, one might expect Catholics to be politically divided between more and less “orthodox” members of the church. Political commentators often assume that regular attenders at mass are more politically conservative, while less-observant Catholics are more politically liberal, invoking this generalization to claim that politically conservative Catholics speak more authentically for the faith (D’Antonio, 2007). But, we find that Catholics are not simply divided between more or less “orthodox” members—rather, Catholic laypeople are politically split between different streams of active church participation. While regular attendance is associated with moral and economic conservatism, lay leadership is associated with support for economic redistribution and social justice. This means that Catholic laypeople encounter at least two distinct prototypes for what it means to be a “good Catholic,” associated with very different political identities. The tradition’s most visible laypeople embody the internal complexity of the Catholic “social imagination,” a rich tradition of church teaching and activism that is distinct from both evangelical and mainline Protestantism (Palacios, 2007). These competing prototypes may reinforce the political diversity for which the Catholic Church is known.

Taken together, these findings suggest that particular linkages between religion and politics are reinforced by lay leadership as well as by pastors and national political elites. We propose that the politics of lay leaders is a key mechanism that contributes to political cohesion within religious traditions. An alternative explanation is that lay leaders are being selected and empowered based on attitudes and political identities that represent the majority opinion in their tradition. However, it would be a mistake to interpret the attributes of lay leaders as simply reflecting the political distribution of their tradition, for two reasons.

First, lay leaders are significantly more politically sophisticated and engaged than other regular attenders. Even if their attitudes “represent” the majority in their tradition, lay leaders are equipped to provide more coherent and ideological reasons for these attitudes, helping members who might otherwise hold these attitudes in a rather loose and incoherent

form. Second, lay leaders are set apart as prototypical members of their religious community, and so they help set boundaries on legitimate diversity. For example, lay leadership may be an important mechanism by which conservative politics becomes part of what it means to be a “good evangelical Christian.” If lay leaders signal certain political affiliations or attitudes, other members are more likely to define these attitudes as central to the group’s religious identity, rather than as nonessential matters of conscience.

Conclusion

By establishing that lay leaders are a politically distinctive group, we provide empirical warrant to study their political influence in religious traditions. This article introduces a new measure of lay leadership, a contribution that makes it possible for scholars to explore power inequalities between different types of religious participants. The BRS, like most national surveys used in political research, can only tell us the political attitudes of lay leaders within traditions, taken as a whole. It is essential to collect multilevel data that embed individuals within particular congregations to assess how laypeople in different leadership roles influence the political climate within their congregation. Building on these findings, we call for ethnographic and survey research that examines the political role of lay leaders in local congregations, to better understand their impact on American public religion.

Future research might profitably use this framework to understand how voluntary group leaders set the context for political talk in other civic organizations. We challenge the theoretical assumption that civic organizations are prepolitical or nonpartisan spaces where individuals learn skills and virtues for political participation (Fung, 2003; Mische, 2008). Political theorists have praised civic organizations as spaces that facilitate open, civic-minded deliberation about public problems, ideally in ways that bracket social inequalities among participants (Cohen and Arato, 1992). But within a civic organization’s own constituency-based leadership structure, some voices are privileged over others. Our findings suggest that lay leaders serve as key political opinion leaders who help bridge the gap between national political elites and local church life.

Finally, the quality of local, voluntary leadership may help explain why some civic organizations have greater political presence in American public life (Han et al., 2010). Particularly in the evangelical tradition, lay opinion leaders may help normally inward-focused religious networks to turn outward for political action. Campbell argued that the political potency of white evangelical churches lies in their potential for sudden, intermittent mobilization, not in their continuous engagement with public life (2004). In their day-to-day practice, white evangelical churches actually pull their members away from broader civic and political participation by placing high demands on their members’ time and focusing inward (Edgell, 2006). Future research should examine the role of lay leaders in mobilizing their religious social networks for intermittent political action.

This case demonstrates why scholars need a broader conception of civic leadership that moves beyond the civic skill development framework of *Voice and Equality*. Since the 1960s, mainline Protestants have declined in public influence, but not because they have failed to inculcate their members with the skills and motivations to participate in public life (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002). What the mainline tradition lacks is a broad base of politically united lay leaders who can help link religious identity to policy attitudes. The recruitment and formation of voluntary group leaders is analytically distinct from better-studied religious factors, such as “strictness” or theology. Building on this framework, future

work should consider the development of civic leadership as an important mechanism by which voluntary associations impact public life.

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