

# How Religious Communities Affect Political Participation Among Latinos\*

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*Objective.* We revisit several longstanding controversies in the study of how religion affects political participation among Latinos, examining the influence of religious affiliation, church attendance, and involvement in the “ancillary” activities of the church on three types of participation: voting, community problem solving, and contacting public officials. *Methods.* Data from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey and hierarchical methods are used to test a comprehensive model of religious influence. *Results.* We find that involvement in church small groups and other church-based activities that take place outside of the sanctuary hall consistently affect all political activities. Importantly, performing a leadership role within the church, or taking part in some other skill-building activity only affects our nonelectoral form of participation for Latinos, but boosts participation across the board in the full sample. *Conclusions.* Our study lends some much-needed empirical confirmation to associational theories of political participation, but also sounds a note of caution about the universal applicability of such theories.

As the largest minority group in the United States, Latinos represent a key voting bloc that candidates from both political parties have eagerly tried to capture in recent years. Even with increased attention from the chief mobilizing forces in American politics, however, one crucial fact remains true: Latinos are less likely than other racial and ethnic groups to participate in the political process (e.g., DeSipio, 2007; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Much of the participatory gulf separating Latinos from Anglos and African Americans has been attributed to differences in socioeconomic status (Jackson, 2003). But the most controversy among academic studies of Latino political activity has centered on the effects of religion. Rooted in associational theories of political participation, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) focus on the high rates of Catholicism as an additional factor contributing to lower levels of political involvement among Latinos. A number of recent studies, however, have presented evidence to the contrary (DeSipio, 2007; Jones-Correa and

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Leal, 2001) and place attention on other religious variables such as church attendance. More than a decade has passed since Verba and colleagues' (1995) original study, and the debate over whether and how religion matters in explaining rates of political participation among Latinos is no closer to a resolution.

In this article, we employ data on church attenders that are especially well suited to confronting the longstanding controversy regarding religious influence on political participation. We use the U.S. Congregational Life Study (USCLS), which includes a more comprehensive set of religious measures than those employed in previous studies and utilizes a more appropriate congregation-centered research design. Using rigorous hierarchical modeling with these data, we aim to account for the existence of the divergent findings in the literature. In addition, we also endeavor to determine whether the same church-based predictors of political participation are significant across racial or ethnic categories, in accordance with associational theories of public action (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001).

The implications that this latter line of inquiry holds for the participatory prospects of minority groups are profound. Churches and other religious institutions have often been thought to supply churchgoers with the resources necessary to take part in the political arena, either by providing opportunities to develop civic skills or exposure to mobilization attempts (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Schwadel, 2005; Warren, 2001a, 2001b). According to associational theories of political participation, churches help to offset inequities in socioeconomic status and serve as the "great equalizers" in a democratic society. Importantly, these models hold that, to the extent that there are disparities across racial or ethnic groups with respect to the resources necessary to take part in the political process, they are rooted in "differences in participatory endowments rather than differences in the way that participatory factors translate into activity" (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001:299).

But, models of political participation do not always hold equally across racial or ethnic groups (Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999). Jackson (2003), for instance, finds that even socioeconomic factors do not structure the participation of Latinos in the same ways that they do for Anglos. In this article, we therefore examine the extent to which associational theories of political participation apply to Latinos. Our suspicion is that some aspects of the church environment may matter, but not others, and promote some forms of participation, but bear no relationship to other participatory acts. On this point, Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert argue: "alternative paths to the public square, such as churches, offer no simple solutions for achieving political equality" (2007:906; see also Djupe and Gilbert, 2006; Miller, 2010).

Much of the existing literature that has examined the connection between religious institutions and political participation among Latinos and other minority groups has treated individual churches as "black boxes." As such, previous studies have attempted to capture the effect of religious involve-

ment solely with measures of religious affiliation and church attendance (e.g., Hritzuk and Park, 2000; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Kelly and Kelly, 2005). To our knowledge only one previous study of Latinos has included explicit measures of the congregational context (Lee, Pachon, and Barreto, 2002; though see Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Djupe and Grant, 2001 for studies with other populations). As a result, existing studies have been unable to provide a faithful test of associational theories of political participation.

In stark contrast to the data analyzed in numerous previous studies, however, the data set that we employ contains detailed information on churchgoers' activities within the church that go far beyond more traditional measures of denominational affiliation and church attendance, thereby affording us the opportunity to examine the effects of skill-building opportunities and small group involvement. We also take advantage of the clustered sampling design of the USCLS in order to account for the impact that the church environment has on political participation. Thus, we make strides toward opening the black box by examining a comprehensive model of religious influence on three types of political participation: voting, working together to solve a community problem, and letter writing to elected officials.

To preview our main findings, we reinforce the conventional wisdom that Catholics, Latino and Anglo alike, are at a significant deficit when it comes to church-based opportunities to be exposed to mobilization attempts and learn politically relevant civic skills. After controlling for various aspects of the church environment, however, Catholic affiliation, in and of itself, actually has a positive effect on some forms of political participation among Latinos—a finding that once again raises questions as to what, precisely, variables tapping denominational affiliation are measuring. We also find that those who attend religious services with greater frequency are more likely to participate in some, but not all, forms of political involvement, while involvement in church small groups and other church-based activities that take place outside of the sanctuary hall consistently affect all political activities. Importantly, though, performing a leadership role within the church, or taking part in some other skill-building activity, only affects our nonelectoral form of participation for Latinos, but boosts participation across the board in the full sample. Our study therefore lends some much-needed empirical confirmation to associational theories of religious influence, but also sounds a note of caution about the universal applicability of such theories.

### **Religious Institutions and Political Participation**

Latino Protestants are often believed to have more opportunities than their Catholic counterparts to develop civic skills that can be translated into participatory resources (e.g., Espinosa, 2005; Wilson, 2008). This thesis has been advanced most prominently by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). They argue that Catholics are less likely on average to participate in politics due to

the top-down organizational structure of the Catholic Church, which restricts lay involvement in the kinds of “ancillary activities” where congregants are most likely to practice politically relevant skills (see also Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001; Wilson, 2008).

While others have reinforced Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s findings (Espinosa, 2005),<sup>1</sup> not everyone agrees with their assessment. A number of more recent studies have found that being Catholic, at worst, has no effect on participation rates among Latinos (e.g., DeSipio, 2007; Lee, Pachon, and Barreto, 2002; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Pantoja, Barreto, and Anderson, 2008). DeSipio, for instance, finds that “compared with Catholics, Latinos who practice other faiths are *less* likely to have voted by a margin of about 30 percent” (2007:173, emphasis in original). Explanations for the disparities between these findings vary to some extent. Most, however, emphasize the fact that Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) failed to account for the high rates of evangelical Protestantism among Latinos in their study (DeSipio, 2007).

Another point of controversy has developed surrounding the role that church attendance plays in promoting political participation among Latinos. Some scholars have argued that, all else equal, levels of political participation increase with the frequency of attendance at religious services (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). Others, however, such as Lee, Pachon, and Barreto (2002), find little evidence to suggest that higher rates of church attendance correspond to greater levels of political participation among Latinos. Indeed, they find that where church attendance is significant, it actually serves to drive down participation. Lee, Pachon, and Barreto (2002) therefore argue that church attendance is not sufficient to help produce political participation. Relatedly, Espinosa (2005) finds that while those who regularly attend church participate in politics at higher rates than those who never attend, those who attended services once a week or more were actually *less* likely to report that their church was active in politics (see also Campbell, 2004). Thus, we cannot assume that a positive relationship between church attendance and participation means that churches promote political activity.

One possible explanation for these contradictory findings is rooted in the fact that, to date, most studies that have sought to examine the impact of religion on political participation among Latinos (and others) have treated churches as an undifferentiated unit: “empirically, if not rhetorically, as a ‘black box’” (Djupe and Gilbert, 2006:117; though see Lee, Pachon, and Barreto, 2002). While extant research on how religious institutions help to promote Latino participation often suggests that churches “serve as important conduits of political information and recruitment” (Jones-Correa and Leal,

<sup>1</sup>One possible reason for the observed disparity between the findings of these studies may stem from the fact that the Catholic Church has begun training “lay parishioners to become ministerial leaders” as the number of priests and nuns has dropped in recent years (Warren, 2001b:196; see also Wilson, 2008). Thus, we cannot necessarily rule out the possibility that more recent studies are picking up on such changes.

2001:754; see also Hritzuk and Park, 2000), the bulk of these studies have, at least implicitly, adopted a static view of religious influence. According to this perspective, religion matters to the extent one is committed to it and the nature of religious belonging is captured exclusively by measures of religious identification and church attendance (see DeSipio, 2007; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Hritzuk and Park, 2000; Kelly and Kelly, 2005). Jones-Correa and Leal (2001), for instance, rely solely on such measures in their examination of the impact of religion on political participation. In their study they use religious affiliation as a proxy for civic skill acquisition, while a measure of church attendance is used as a stand-in for more direct measures tapping the key associational role that churches and other religious institutions are thought to play in developing the participatory capacity of attenders. Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) ultimately go on to argue that churches matter insofar as they serve a mobilizing function. They base this claim off of a positive and statistically significant coefficient on their church attendance measure, which at first would seem to be a reasonable conclusion: those who spend more time in church are probably more likely to be exposed to mobilization attempts.

But, as McKenzie observes, “current political analyses of church attendance measures do not fully ‘unpack’ the underlying theoretical meaning of frequency of attendance” (2001:480). Church attendance undoubtedly is correlated with some aspects of the nexus between participation in religious institutions and political involvement, but essentially all of the skill development and mobilization opportunities churches supply are located outside of worship (Djupe and Gilbert, 2006). Indeed, a surprising number of church members participate in the other activities of the church at much higher rates than they attend worship (see Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert, 2007). In other words, attending worship is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the practice of civic skills or exposure to entreaties from other churchgoers to take part in the political process (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Schwadel, 2005). As Schwadel notes, “simply attending religious services may not bring the same benefits” as involvement in church small groups (2005:160). And yet, most studies simply assume that measures of attendance fully capture the link between associational involvement and political participation.

Much the same can be said with regard to measures of denominational affiliation, as “it has never been clear whether such measures refer to ethnic histories, doctrinal beliefs, social status, or social group attachments” (Kellstedt and Green, 1993; see also DeSipio, 2007). The difference in findings across studies, therefore, may be dependent on what is included in the model. When a fuller account of the congregational context is specified, measures of church attendance and denominational affiliation lose their explanatory power (for evidence on this point, see Djupe and Gilbert, 2009). Employed as a proxy for the kinds of messages to which churchgoers are exposed, variables tapping the denominational affiliation of survey respondents are fraught with measurement error, as researchers adopting this approach have been forced to

assume that the church context varies appreciably between different religious traditions, but not within them (Kelly and Kelly, 2005).

For too long, though, have variables tapping church attendance and denominational affiliation done much of the heavy lifting in the literature. Both measures are proxies for the elements of churches that are believed to aid in producing active citizens (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Schwadel, 2005). As a consequence, a great deal of the work that has sought to examine the ways in which religious organizations affect the propensity of individuals to participate in politics has been theory rich and data poor. Previous works on Latino participation have often theorized that churches and other organizations serve to promote political participation among their members by exposing them to mobilization attempts and endowing them with the civic skills necessary to participate in politics gained through involvement in different activities within the church. Very few of these studies, however, have any direct measures of these variables. Our study, by contrast, permits a more faithful empirical test of existing theories.

### *Congregations as Complex Organizations*

“Even if we accept that the habits of participation in civic life translate to political activity,” Mark R. Warren writes, “we still need to identify the specific set of institutional mechanisms that can make that connection” (2001b:28). Along these lines scholars have highlighted a number of ways in which involvement in church small groups and other “ancillary” activities in the church promote political participation. For one, many have looked to the subunits of the church as serving a critical role in helping to generate the kinds of civic skills that are necessary for taking part in the political process (Djupe and Gilbert, 2006; Espinosa, 2005; Lee, Pachon, and Barreto, 2002; Leege, 1988; McKenzie, 2004; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Warren, 2001a; though see Djupe and Grant, 2001; Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert, 2007). According to this view, practicing a civic skill in church or another such voluntary association can help to balance out inequities in socioeconomic status and is one of the key ingredients of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Warren, 2001a). We therefore expect to see congregants who practice a leadership role in the congregation to participate in politics at higher rates than those who simply attend services, although the work of Verba and colleagues (1995) also leads us to suspect that skill-building opportunities may be most relevant for our nonelectoral measure of civic participation (community problem solving). Importantly, Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) find no evidence in support of this latter hypothesis.

Religious institutions are also thought to provide a number of different channels through which adherents can be mobilized (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Warren, 2001b). Direct appeals from clergy can certainly have an effect on members’ levels of political

engagement (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009). But as some observers have begun to note, calls to action from religious leaders are but one conduit through which churchgoers receive politically relevant information in church, and constitute only a small segment of the total universe of opportunities for political mobilization in church (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Lee, Pachon, and Barreto, 2002; Leighley, 1996; McKenzie, 2004; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Schwadel, 2005). Informal social ties, organized small groups, and adult education classes in church all have the potential to serve a mobilizing function among congregants (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; McKenzie, 2004; Warren, 2001b; Schwadel, 2005). We therefore hypothesize that church involvement apart from simply attending religious services will be associated with political participation to a greater extent than church attendance alone across all populations.

In addition to our stated desire to resolve some of the longstanding debates in the literature, we are concerned about the extent to which Latinos and other minorities are able to turn church-based mechanisms for mobilization and skill building into participatory resources. Few studies have compared the effects of church involvement across racial or ethnic groups using the same data set. Most scholars have simply assumed that models of political participation, including ones that highlight the role of institutional resources, hold the same amount of explanatory power regardless of race or ethnicity. Rarely have scholars attempted to make such comparisons, but those who have done so have found that models of political participation do not always apply across all subgroups (Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999; see also Djupe and Gilbert, 2006; Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert, 2007; Jackson, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Even *intragroup* comparisons have often been given short shrift in the literature (DeSipio, 2007); Jones-Correa and Leal (2001), for instance, drop those Latinos identifying as evangelical or Pentecostal from their analysis. Here, we examine the effects of lay leadership roles, church-based small groups, and other parachurch activities on political participation using a data set that permits detailed cross-group and intragroup comparisons.

As we shall see, one area that has been missing from the study of religious effects on political participation is the community (but see Djupe and Gilbert, 2009 for a nascent attempt), though scholars have long acknowledged the importance of the community for participation rates (e.g., Huckfeldt, 1979; Leighley, 1990). Churches may be islands in their community, providing a gathering place where a unique set of skills, experiences, and relationships may be gained. But churches may also be well integrated into the community and thus may be a place where existing relationships are continued and reinforced (see Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). In the latter case, church involvement indicates being thoroughly networked into the community majority, which should boost political activity, even while the church environment itself should have less of an effect on participation than when it exists to some degree independent of the surrounding community.

## Data and Research Design

Research on the role that religious institutions play in promoting political engagement of Latinos has long been plagued by data problems. Either data sets have too few Latinos among whom to draw distinctions or too few appropriate religious measures to help parse out differences within the Latino community (see Jang, 2009; Kelly and Kelly, 2005; Kelly and Morgan, 2008). We draw on a resource that rectifies both problems. With a national sample of 115,000 individuals clustered within over 400 houses of worship drawn from a national random sample of U.S. adults, the USCLS (2001) has ample religious measures, appropriate political participation measures, as well as over 14,000 Latinos to analyze.<sup>2</sup>

All participants in the 2000 GSS who attended a house of worship at least once in the past year were asked by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) to identify the name and location of the congregation. NORC then invited identified congregations to participate in the study. Of the invited congregations, 61 percent agreed to participate and 54 percent of those congregations returned completed forms; this means that 33 percent of invited congregations returned completed surveys. The respondents were those worshippers over 15 who attended participating congregations on the weekend of April 29, 2001. Though the sample consists solely of church attenders, it is important to note that some previous studies have put levels of religious affiliation among Latinos as high as 95 percent (Fowler et al., 2004). Moreover, Djupe and Grant (2001) found that limiting their sample to those who attended church at some point in the past year did not alter their conclusions about church-based effects on participation. Lastly, our focus in this article is on unraveling the intricacies of church-based effects on Latino participation, which makes a representative church-attender sample the most appropriate. In total, 122,404 people in over 400 congregations participated in this “random attender” portion of the USCLS (there are other denomination-specific components as well). Weights are included with the USCLS for use of congregation and individual-level measures of interest.

Because the samples are conducted within congregational “clusters,” measures of the congregational context can be computed with survey results. In addition, a knowledgeable informant also completed a lengthy profile of the congregation’s facilities, staff, programs, and worship services. The “profile” data set can be tied to the random attender survey results and we take advantage of that possibility here.

Data clustered in some way, such as by congregation, violate the assumption that errors are uncorrelated across survey respondents. Standard errors tend to be depressed when clustering is not recognized, elevating the chances of a type I

<sup>2</sup>The data, gathered by Cynthia Woolever, Keith Wulff, Deborah Bruce, and Ida Smith-Williams, are publicly available at the Association of Religion Data Archives (<http://www.thearda.com>).



TABLE 1

The Distribution of Key Measures Across Race and Religious Groups (Means with Standard Deviations in Parentheses Below)

	Total Sample		Latinos	
	Non-Catholic	Catholic	Non-Catholic	Catholic
Church involvement	0.34 (0.34)	0.12 (0.21)	0.29 (0.33)	0.10 (0.20)
Church leadership	0.10 (0.14)	0.04 (0.08)	0.07 (0.12)	0.03 (0.07)
Hispanic prop. of congregation	0.03 (0.06)	0.13 (0.18)	0.23 (0.25)	0.50 (0.24)
Political participation mean	1.16 (0.20)	1.04 (0.23)	0.98 (0.26)	0.78 (0.22)

NOTE: All differences (between Catholics and non-Catholics in both samples, as well as between Latinos and non-Latinos within each religious group) are significant at  $p < 0.01$ .  
SOURCE: 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Study.

error (Gelman and Hill, 2007; Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). Of course, such clustering is not a statistical nuisance since we also wish to test whether there are effects of the clustering agent (congregation) on the individual. Therefore, we employ hierarchical modeling techniques where the nested features of the data are explicitly modeled. Specifically, we model individual political participation nested within churches.

### Findings

Table 1 displays the distribution of key measures of church involvement and participation across race and religious groups (see the on-line Appendix posted at either author’s webpage for variable coding). What is clear from this first table is that Catholics, Latino and not, exhibit lower mean levels of activity within the church, thereby lending some evidence in support of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) argument. While previous studies conflate small group involvement and the exercise of leadership, we are able to distinguish the two types of involvement. Still, Catholics are involved in fewer small group activities and hold fewer leadership positions in the church than non-Catholics.

At first blush, it also appears that those who have argued that Catholic affiliation drives down levels of political participation are correct. As Table 1 shows, Catholics are, on average, less likely to participate in politics than non-Catholics. This is especially true for Latinos. What remains to be seen, however, is the particular mix of congregational factors that influence political participation and whether they remain the same across groups. Few previous studies of the impact of religion on political participation among Latinos

have simultaneously considered the independent contributions of each of the measures detailed in Table 1. Only a fully specified multivariate model can begin to unpack religious influence to assess whether religious affiliation, attendance, congregational participation, leadership, and theology have an effect on political participation.

### **Multivariate Model Results**

We pursue three strategies for estimating the effects of religion on participation. First, we estimate a hierarchical nonlinear model (HNLM) for each of three available political participation variables: solving a community problem, contacting an elected official, and voting in presidential elections. We examine them individually because different modes of political participation, especially voting, have been found to depend on their own set of explanations (see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Second, we estimate models for the entire sample to assess the comparative effects of variables common to Latinos, like immigrant status and Catholic affiliation. Third, we estimate a set of models using solely the sizable Latino portion of the sample ( $n = 14,297$ ) to examine factors that differentiate Latinos, especially the difference between Catholics and Protestants, that might have been obscured in the whole sample.

### **Total Sample Results**

In Table 2, we present results from three hierarchical logit models of participation in solving a community problem, contacting a representative, and voting in presidential elections. Explanatory factors are separated by their level—the church or individual.<sup>3</sup> The results clearly ratify opening the lid of the church and recording the different experiences individuals may have in it—including mere attachment to a church is not sufficient to understand the full impact of religion on political participation. Nor is it sufficient to examine how individuals involve themselves in congregations since the congregation itself has an independent impact beyond individual-level variables. Furthermore, the religious variables vary predictably depending on the participatory act investigated.

Working as a substitute for community rootedness, the length of church membership predicts both solving a community problem and voting in presidential elections, but not contacting an official, which is less dependent on knowing a particular place. Worship attendance, on the other hand, predicts increased contacting and voting, but not community involvement.<sup>4</sup> Both

<sup>3</sup>The level 2 predictors were entered to predict the level 2 (church) intercept—this is called a “random intercepts” model.

<sup>4</sup>One limitation to this sample is that it undoubtedly inflates church attendance, so we have constrained variance in that variable and hence limited explanatory power with it. While



TABLE 2  
continued

Level 2 (Church) Variables	Solving a Community Problem		Contacting Elected Official		Voting in Presidential Election	
	Coeff.	$\Delta$	Coeff.	$\Delta$	Coeff.	$\Delta$
Church mean (intercept)	-2.022	***	-3.126	***	-0.412	***
Participation mean	1.418	***	2.153	***	2.087	***
Voter registration in church	0.035		0.062		0.126	
Prop. no leadership activity	0.035		-0.051		-0.991	*
Prop. no comm. outreach	-0.877	**	-0.112		1.089	**
Prop. no comm. groups	-1.191	***	-0.252		-0.465	
Prop. of Hispanics	-0.242		-0.168		-0.287	
Prop. of immigrants	0.899	**	0.758	*	0.124	
Catholic	0.296	***	0.181	***	0.097	
Evangelical	0.046		0.143	**	-0.044	
Jewish	0.092		-0.165		0.187	
Black Prot.	0.439	***	-0.007		0.942	***
Mormon (LDS)	0.277	***	-0.716	***	0.113	
Theology	0.063	*	-0.018		0.010	

NOTE: The " $\Delta$ " column refers to the predicted probability change produced by first differences—the difference in predictions from the centered mean minus the standard deviation to the centered mean plus the standard deviation.  
 Level 1 (individual)  $N = 122,742$ , Level 2 (congregation)  $N = 412$ .  
 SOURCE: 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Study. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.10$  (two-tailed tests)

stand in contrast to the strong and relatively consistent effects of church involvement and holding leadership positions in church, which positively affect all three participatory acts. In substantive terms, moving the church leadership variable from the mean minus one standard deviation to the mean plus one standard deviation while holding all other variables at their means increases the predicted probability of voting by 11 percent. Similarly, church involvement shifts the predicted probability of voting in a presidential election by 8 percent. By contrast, church attendance increases the predicted probability of voting by less than 5 percent through the same range. This is no surprise because involvement outside of worship is the context in which politically relevant skills are developed and where people stand out as good bets for recruiters (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009).

The remaining religious variables are generally inconsistent in their impact. Whether the spiritual needs of the member are met has no bearing on his or her participation in politics—a hypothesis generated from a long line of scholarship that suggests politics is a byproduct of satisfying religious needs first (see Djupe and Gilbert, 2008 for a review). Biblical literalists are less involved in their communities, but are not more or less likely to engage in contacting or voting, surely acknowledging the links forged to the national movement to mobilize evangelicals into politics (see also Lee and Pachon, 2007). The extent of private devotionism does have a consistent effect, however, serving to augment the likelihood of participation in all three acts. Few have found religious and political engagement to be a tradeoff, and this result may suggest how private prayer serves to remind the person of their responsibilities, which includes a basic level of political activism.<sup>5</sup>

Several congregation-level factors affect the likelihood of attenders' becoming involved in politics. The mean level of political participation in the congregational sample exerts a strong, positive influence driving up each form of participation. It is essential to realize that church influence on participation is not limited to taking skills from the church and receiving recruitment requests; attenders also absorb the norms of the congregation, which according to this result includes their political activity levels (see also Djupe and Gilbert, 2009). The proportion of the church that is not involved in leadership only bears on voting (decreasing it), while the lack of community outreach and the lack of congregational involvement in community groups predictably weaken community problem solving. Contacting is immune to these variables. The proportion of immigrants in the church strongly boosts involvement in community problem solving and contacting, surely as a reflection of the supply of problems to solve in the community and church-community partnerships (see, e.g., Owens, 2007; Warren, 2001b). The general lesson appears

we still believe that involvement outside of worship is the strongest influence on political participation, this particular test is not optimal for a comparison with worship attendance.

<sup>5</sup>In contrast, Djupe and Gilbert (2009:197–208) find modestly negative or insignificant effects of a religious commitment index on participation, but this measure combines attendance and devotionism.

to be that the more widespread member involvement is in the congregation and the more widespread the congregational connections are to the community, the more likely that those attached to congregations receive cues to get further involved. This set of findings stands in contrast to one earlier study that employed similar methods and found congregational measures to have little effect on civic activity outside the church (Schwadel, 2005; but see Djupe and Gilbert, 2009).

Compared to the excluded category of mainline Protestants, attending a Catholic church boosts the probability of solving a community problem and contacting, but has no effect on voting. These positive effects should be understood to come only after many things are controlled that serve to reduce participation among Catholics, a point to which we will return. Evangelicals are more likely to contact elected officials, while black Protestants are more likely to vote and solve a community problem. That said, whites and Hispanics are more likely to be involved in all activities compared to the excluded categories (Asians and smaller groups). Immigrants (whether current citizens now or not) are not more or less likely to be involved in the community or contact, but are less likely to vote. Those whose first language is English, however, are more likely to contact and vote, but are not more or less likely to get involved in community affairs—a finding that serves to highlight the importance of examining a variety of participatory acts.

### *Latino Sample Results*

In Table 3, the results of nearly the same model as in Table 2 are presented solely for the Latino portion of the sample. The primary difference is the lack of controls for multiple religious traditions, which serves to focus our attention on whether attending a Catholic parish affects the likelihood of political participation. Happily, this is where the literature has focused its attention as well. Many of the individual intersections with church have almost the same effects as they did in the full sample models. Length of membership predicts the same activities, though attendance predicts community involvement and voting, not contacting and voting as in Table 2. Still, as before, the same hardy force—church involvement—compels greater amounts of all three political activities.

Yet, some striking differences emerge in Table 3. Whereas the exercise of church leadership was a strong predictor of all political activity in Table 2, it only predicts greater probabilities of community involvement for Latinos.<sup>6</sup> We suspect that while involvement in church small groups builds skills and

<sup>6</sup>We also estimated the effect of an interaction between Catholic and the exercise of leadership in the church for each political activity. It was insignificant for community involvement and contacting, but significant for voting. The result suggests that leadership in a Catholic church can matter quite a bit more than in a non-Catholic church, perhaps because it is a relatively rare event.

TABLE 3  
HNLM of the Predictors of Political Participation for Latino "Random Attenders"

Level 1 Variables	Solving a Community Problem		Contacting Elected Official		Voting in Presidential Election	
	Coeff.	$\Delta$	Coeff.	$\Delta$	Coeff.	$\Delta$
Length church membership	0.054	**	0.015		0.064	***
Church attendance	0.086	**	0.039		0.195	***
Church involvement	0.499	*	0.932	***	0.692	***
Church leadership	3.491	***	0.797		1.065	
Community service oriented	0.017		0.275	**	0.089	*
Spiritual needs met	-0.030		-0.058		-0.033	
Private prayer	-0.093	***	-0.077	**	-0.091	***
Biblical literalist	-0.066		-0.267	**	0.011	
Immigrant	-0.185	*	-0.436	***	-0.643	***
English language	-0.078		0.035		0.153	
Age	-0.010	***	0.009	***	0.040	***
Kids at home	-0.203	*	-0.004		0.097	
Education	0.203	***	0.257	***	0.233	***
Income	-0.032		0.080		0.183	***
Employed	0.215	**	0.160		0.609	***
Male	0.066		0.319	***	-0.188	***
				0.020		-0.046

TABLE 3  
continued

Level 2 Variables	Solving a Community Problem		Contacting Elected Official		Voting in Presidential Election	
	Coeff.	$\Delta$	Coeff.	$\Delta$	Coeff.	$\Delta$
Church mean (intercept)	-2.021	***	-3.099	***	-0.013	
Catholic	0.981	*	0.519		0.561	
Participation mean	1.114		3.597	***	4.840	***
Voter registration in church	-0.026		0.161		0.208	
No leadership	-2.932		-2.165		-1.475	
No community outreach	1.821		3.019		-0.611	
No community groups	-0.886		3.572		1.421	
Hispanic mean	-0.410		-0.911		0.663	
Immigrant mean	1.078		1.511		3.582	**
Theology	-0.060		-0.103		-0.094	0.133

NOTE: The " $\Delta$ " column refers to the predicted probability change produced by first differences—the difference in predictions from the centered mean minus the standard deviation to the centered mean plus the standard deviation.

Level 1 (individual)  $N = 14,298$ , Level 2 (congregation)  $N = 227$ .

SOURCE: 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Study. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.10$  (two-tailed tests)



recruitment attempts, congregational leadership positions are not quite as prominent of positions in the Latino community as they might be in the broader, largely Protestant society. We have more to say about the place of the church in Latino communities below. Interestingly, this finding comports well with Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) work on the subject, but stands in direct contrast to Jones-Correa and Leal's (2001) conclusions, as they used a denominational proxy as a stand-in for civic skill development. Here, with a more direct measure of church-based skill-building opportunities—a measure that provides a closer match to the theory being evaluated—we find evidence to support the hypothesis in *Voice and Equality* that civic skill development aids in the practice of nonelectoral forms of participation but is less important in promoting more explicitly political activities, such as voting and letter writing, among Latinos.

Also in contrast to the results of the full model presented in Table 2, church involvement has a substantive impact on voting that is on par with (rather than greater than) the effect of church attendance for Latinos. While the results still comport with our hypothesis that church involvement matters, involvement has a bit less of an effect on voting than church attendance for Latinos. Moving the church involvement variable through  $\pm$  one standard deviation from the mean increases the predicted probability of voting by just under 8 percent, which is almost identical to the results in Table 2, while church attendance alone increases the probability of voting in the presidential election by almost 9 percent, double what we report in Table 2. We should once again note, though, that this estimate may be somewhat deflated given that our sample consists solely of church attenders. To be sure, such findings are consistent with the existing literature on the factors driving political participation among Latinos. Diaz, for instance, notes that “the impact on political participation from organizational membership for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans was found even for those who report *inactive* membership in a single organization” (1996:169, emphasis added). It seems clear that the effects of church attendance are not uniform across all racial or ethnic groups, a finding that questions uniform understandings of the place of a congregation in the community. In the broader, more Protestant society, the congregation is an independent community through which members make ties and acquire skills. In Latino communities, on the other hand, the congregation is often better integrated into the community. Hence, attachment to a church in a Latino community helps the member to tap into community networks.

Consistent with the full sample results in Table 2, a higher degree of private devotionism predicts a higher probability of participation in all three acts. However, Latinos who take a literal view of the Bible are less likely to contact a public official, which is nearly the opposite finding as in the full sample model where literalists were only less likely to involve themselves in their community. Evidently, Latino literalists have not been made part of a national movement that would motivate contacting and campaigning, despite

potentially augmented support from Latinos to help George W. Bush make “Un Nuevo Dia” in 2004 (Leal et al., 2005; see also Lee and Pachon, 2007).

The effects at the church level (level 2) differ substantially from those in the full sample model. The mean participation rate in the church boosts the probability of contacting and voting, but has no effect on community involvement. Many of the other congregation-level variables have little to no effect on Latino participation. The degree to which the congregation is involved in leadership is immaterial, as is the congregation’s orientation toward community service, community group involvement, and whether the congregation sponsored a voter registration drive.

Contrary to what group identity theorists might predict (for a review, see Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999), the proportion of the congregation that is Hispanic has no effect on participation rates, nor does the proportion of immigrants in the church, with one important exception. Working against the negative individual-level effect of being an immigrant, the congregational share of immigrants serves to boost the probability of voting. We suspect that clergy in such congregations work harder to get members to exercise the franchise (see Wilson, 2008). This is the same dynamic Djupe and Gilbert (2003) found among mainline Protestant clergy, who became more politically active to counter the relative underinvolvement of the congregation. Our findings with respect to the effect that the overall representation of Latinos in the congregation has on individual participation also appear to contradict the results of one recent study, which found that the size of the minority group in question, measured at the county level, increases the individual likelihood of voting (Jang, 2009). Conceptualized as the proportion of Latinos in the surrounding congregation, however, we find little evidence to support just such a “group consciousness” theory of political participation. But as we go on to note below, the difference between our study and Jang’s (2009) may depend upon whether one operationalizes the contextual factors that influence political participation at the group level as opposed to the community level.

One particularly important test is the effect of attending a Catholic church. There is considerable disagreement in the literature about the role of the Catholic parish in generating politically relevant resources and political activity. Here, attending a Catholic parish boosts the probability of participating in the community, owing to the dominance of the Catholic Church in Latino communities. But, attending a Catholic parish has no effect on the other two forms of activity, due, perhaps, to the fragmented nature of the Catholic Church nationally. Frankly, we did not expect a difference between Catholics and non-Catholics after such a fully specified model. From our descriptive presentation earlier (see Table 1), it is clear that Catholic churches (Latino and not) host many fewer members participating in the church in politically relevant ways. Once these direct conduits of citizenship training and norming are accounted for, few differences are left to explain by reference to a religious tradition. What our model did not account for, and perhaps what this variable is picking up here, is a sense of the organizational service networks in a

community. Since the Catholic Church is an important part of that network, parishes would help draw in members as volunteers.

From these results, we still claim that the diffusion of participatory norms plays an important role in the churches Latinos attend. However, aside from that form of norming, the particular mix of church involvement of the people with whom Latinos attend church appears to matter little. We can reconcile these findings by thinking about the place of the church in the community. We suspect that Latino church networks are nearly coincident with their community networks, so that the congregation has little independent effect on individual participation aside from the skills members take away from church small group involvement. The one exception is where (presumably) church-community organizational ties would serve to channel people to participate in community problem solving. So, the integration of the church into the Latino community likely means that the congregation will have little collective effect on individual involvement.

Many of the individual attributes work similarly as in the full sample models; however, several important ones differ. Having English as a first language promotes contacting and voting in the full sample, but, not surprisingly, has no effect in the Latino models because of the social and organizational links to politics in the Latino community. Immigrant status among Latinos drives down the likelihood of all three forms of political activity, especially given the focus of anti-illegal immigration efforts centered on Latinos, but only depresses voting in the full sample. Income promotes all three forms of activity in the full sample, but only boosts voting among Latinos.

We should underscore that even though Catholic affiliation has no effect on two types of political participation and is actually associated with higher levels of involvement in the community after controlling for a host of potential confounders at both the individual and congregational level, on average, Latino Catholics are still less likely to participate in politics. To illustrate this we calculated the predicted probability of engaging in each form of participation for Catholic and non-Catholic Latinos in an idealized case, represented here by an average individual nested within a typical church environment. The average non-Catholic Latino had a predicted probability of working together with others to solve a community problem of 0.26. By comparison, the average Catholic Latino only had a predicted probability of 0.11 of working toward solving a community problem.

This same basic pattern appears with respect to other forms of participation as well, with non-Catholic Latinos being more likely to participate in politics than Catholic Latinos across the board. For instance, a non-Catholic Latino with all individual-level characteristics held at their means, who attends a church that is likewise average across all dimensions has a predicted probability of voting of 0.73. For Catholic Latinos, the corresponding probability is only 0.47. Similarly, a non-Catholic Latino had a predicted probability of contacting an elected official of 0.12, while the average Catholic Latino

situated within a typical church environment only has a predicted probability of 0.04.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have endeavored to resolve some of the longstanding controversies in the literature by looking inside the church, using more detailed measures of the church context to open up the “black box” and examine the precise mechanisms that promote political participation in churches. Much of the previous work in this area has used measures of religious affiliation and attendance in an attempt to parse out the effects of religion on a host of political outcomes (e.g., Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Hritzuk and Park, 2000). As we have demonstrated, however, such measures only begin to scratch the surface of what is going on inside individual congregations. The pattern of results we find echoes earlier work on the religious roots of political activism among African Americans, which argued that “it matters less whether the church is Protestant or Catholic, than whether the specific church . . . encourages lay participation and leadership” (Cavendish, 2000:372). But, we also find in a more fully specified model that includes measures of congregant involvement in the ancillary activities of the church, Catholic identification, where significant, has a small positive impact on political participation. That should not obscure the significant resource deficit that Catholic parishioners have compared to others; Catholics, whether Latino or not, simply do not have significant opportunities to develop leadership skills and be recruited into politics through the church.

Our findings also add a great deal of nuance to the literature. As others have suspected but have been unable to demonstrate for various reasons (e.g., Jang, 2009), we find that certain forms of church involvement have an impact on particular kinds of political participation but not others, and for some groups but not other ones. Consistent with our expectations, however, the practice of leadership in the congregation and involvement in small groups within the church effectively boost political participation across the board in the whole sample. Importantly, these “ancillary” activities seem to matter a little less for Latinos, thereby lending some validation to worries about the differential effects of civic skill-building opportunities across groups (e.g., Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert, 2007; Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999; Miller, 2010) and giving some credence to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) conjecture that skill development in voluntary associations may be most relevant for nonelectoral forms of civic engagement.

This study represents an important step forward in a literature that has suffered from a number of measurement shortcomings and has been plagued by inconsistent findings. Our study has afforded a nearly unparalleled look into the various ways in which the church context works to shape Latino political behavior. The results strongly suggest that religious influence should be understood as organizational in nature, with the work of training democrats

occurring in church networks. When people are brought together in networks to accomplish tasks, members are chosen to lead and make connections with each other that may be consequential for public life. Though there are other facets to religious life that affect political behavior, they pale in comparison to the effects of involvement in church networks. Therefore, models of religious influence on political participation that fail to test for the effects of church networks cannot possibly give us an accurate glimpse of the role of churches in the sustenance of democracy.

Nevertheless, there is still much left to be done to explore the other important components of church networks. Two things are conspicuously missing from this treatment. First, it is missing measures of the political messages that individual congregants encounter in church through a variety of different formal and informal channels (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009). Future research in this area should therefore look to the content of political talk within the church and how entreaties for political action from clergy as well as other parishioners influence the degree to which Latinos and other minorities take part in the political process.

The second missing element is the connection of the church to the community. Many of the church-level variables were insignificant for Latinos in a way that suggested to us the presence of missing variables. In particular, we suspect that the role of the Catholic Church in supporting community social service delivery plays an important part in connecting congregants to “community problem solving” activity. Others have shown how such “parachurch” groups as ministerial organizations promote the political activity of clergy member churches (e.g., Owens, 2007). Thus, we need to take seriously the multiple levels of networks in which the church and its members are involved, all of which are potentially consequential (see Djupe and Olson, 2007). As Schwadel notes, “nested data, which contains information on individuals, their congregations, and their denominations, should be the preferred form of data for empirical inquiries into civic activity or other outcomes associated with religion” (2005:168). While statistical methods were at one point not able to accommodate multiple-level analyses, that certainly can no longer serve as an excuse (see, e.g., Gelman and Hill, 2007; Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). We therefore end with a call for further study of the nexus between the individual and his or her environment, illuminating the social ties that form such linkages and mapping the religious connections that bind individuals, formal and informal social networks, voluntary associations, and the broader community in politically relevant ways.

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