

ACTS OF FAITH: Churches and Political Engagement

David E. Campbell

Many observers suggest that white evangelical Protestant churches serve to mobilize their members into politics, while others argue that they encourage withdrawal from political life. This paper reconciles these two claims. I hypothesize that the time members of evangelical Protestant denominations spend in service to their church comes at the expense of participation in the wider community, contrary to the way mainline Protestant and Catholic churches foster civic activity among their members. However, I further hypothesize that the tight social networks formed through this intensive church activity can at times facilitate rapid and intense political mobilization. Data from the Citizen Participation Study supports the first hypothesis, while applying King's method of ecological inference to two elections in Alabama supports the second.

Key words: political participation; churches; religion and politics.

The study of religion's role as a political force in American politics presents an intriguing puzzle. Why are conservative Christians perceived as such a potent electoral force when their rates of political participation are often lower than what is observed in the general population? From the writings of both political scientists and pundits, one might be led to believe that white evangelical Protestants¹ are a wildly participatory religious group. For example, the standard account of the recent history of how religion and politics intersect in the U.S. generally includes the assertion that evangelical Christians were awakened from political quiescence some time in the late 1970s (Dionne, 1991; Wald, 2003; Wilcox, 1996) In the words of Guth and Green, "The common view is that clergy and lay activists in theologically conservative

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Protestant churches represent a large, hyperactive and newly mobilized cadre of traditionalists” (1996, p. 118). However, while there has indisputably been a rise in the role religiously conservative groups play in contemporary politics, this has simply not been accompanied by an increase in the political participation of individual religious conservatives (Miller and Shanks, 1996, P. 231).

This paper argues that the political potency of white evangelical Protestants is found in their *potential* for mobilization, not in their actual mobilization. Indeed, evangelical Protestant denominations ask for so much of their members’ time and energy that they pull their members out of participation in the wider community. Frequent participation in church activities, however, thickens social networks that can be used sporadically for rapid and intensive political mobilization. The impression of evangelical churches as hotbeds of activism, therefore, stems from periodic bursts of mobilization, rather than a sustained effort.

This paper begins with the premise that churches can be understood as institutions that shape their members’ behavior. Specifically, different types of churches provide their members with varying behavioral incentives for participation in religious activity, which in turn have systematic implications for participation in political activity. This approach is similar in spirit to the work of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (VSB) in *Voice and Equality* (1995), as they also look to the organizational characteristics of churches to understand their impact on political participation. VSB focus on the opportunities for the development of civic skills, arguing that a church which is organized hierarchically (e.g. the Catholic church) will provide fewer opportunities for its members to develop such skills than a more congregationally-based organization (e.g., Protestant churches). By “civic skills,” VSB mean the capacity to engage in the prosaic activities by which people express voice in the political process—such as running meetings or giving speeches. In VSB’s civic voluntarism model, these skills are resources that facilitate political participation, as they can be employed in the pursuit of political ends.

VSB’s simple distinction among denominations based on their level of organizational hierarchy provides considerable analytical leverage. It underscores the utility in viewing churches as institutions, demonstrating that even a basic understanding of their different institutional characteristics can illuminate our understanding of how America’s churches affect political participation. However, VSB’s focus on how hierarchy relates to the development of civic skills only captures a single dimension of churches’ impact on political involvement. Other factors matter too. For example, Jones-Correa and Leal counter VSB’s emphasis on the link between hierarchy and civic skills, stressing instead that churches are civic associations and thus “important conduits of political information and recruitment” (2001, p. 754), regardless of their organizational structure.

Rather than the development of civic skills at church—which is a positive predictor of political participation—this paper focuses on the time commitment some churches ask of their members, which can deflate political engagement. And instead of the simple distinction between Catholics and Protestants, the analysis divides Protestantism into two branches: evangelical and mainline.

First, the paper outlines some institutional differences between mainline and evangelical Protestantism, and how those differences pertain to understanding political participation. Second, we see evidence for the first hypothesis derived from the theory – that more time spent in service to an evangelical Protestant church means less time spent in political activity. Third, the paper turns to a case study of a natural experiment that demonstrates both the de-mobilizing and mobilizing effects of evangelical churches.

EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS

A major challenge facing anyone studying the impact of religious organizations on political activity in the U.S. is the nation's sheer diversity of denominations. The codebook for the 2000 National election studies, for example, lists 130 possible denominations, a number that keeps growing with every extension of the NES time series. In recent years, scholars of religion and politics have made great strides in developing methods to group these myriad denominations into cohesive religious traditions with common historical roots, thus aiding analysts who wish to account for religious affiliation when modeling political behavior (Kellstedt and Green, 1993; Kellstedt et al., 1996; Steensland et al., 2000). This analysis builds on these classification systems by offering a theoretical perspective to explain why denominations in the different categories may vary in the degree to which they facilitate or inhibit political activity.

While there are many ways to distinguish among America's myriad religious denominations, one that has been demonstrated to have particular utility is the recognition that there is a sharp divide among Protestants between those who belong to evangelical and mainline denominations. The key differences are described by Steensland et al. (2000):

Mainline denominations have typically emphasized an accommodating stance toward modernity, a proactive view on issues of social and economic justice, and pluralism in their tolerance of varied individual beliefs. Evangelical denominations have typically sought to more separation from the broader culture, emphasized missionary activity and individual conversion, and taught strict adherence to particular religious doctrines. (p. 294)

Consequently, numerous authors have found that evangelical and mainline Protestants differ along an array of politically relevant dimensions (Kellstedt

and Green, 1993; Kellstedt et al., 1996; Kohut et al., 2000; Layman, 2001; Steensland et al., 2000).

Evangelical and mainline Protestants do not only differ in their theology. Another salient distinction is the extent to which their religious commitment shapes the contours of their personal lives. Scholars of religion who employ the assumptions and methods of rational choice theory have advanced a compelling theory regarding the institutional features of what have been labeled “strict” churches, or churches that impose significant costs on their members (Finke and Stark, 1992; Iannaccone, 1992, 1994, 1995; Kelley, 1977). According to the theory, strict churches are able to overcome collective action dilemmas because the costs of membership—abstinence from alcohol, a prohibition on dancing, regulation of sexual behavior, etc.—screen out free riders. These costs are borne, of course, because people who belong to these churches share a deep-seated faith in the correctness of their church’s tenets, leading to a sense of moral certainty.

Strict churches enforce compliance with the tenets of the faith by pulling their members into a tight social network composed of fellow believers. In Iannaccone’s words, strict churches

penalize or prohibit *alternative* activities that compete for members’ resources. In mixed populations, such penalties and prohibitions tend to screen out the less committed members. They act like entry fees and thus discourage anyone not seriously interested in buying the product. Only those willing to pay the price remain. (1994, p. 1187)

Members of strict churches are thus asked to make significant investments of time and energy into activities for their congregation, reinforcing these social networks. As a result, compared to the population in general “[t]hey are . . . less involved in competing activities. They hold fewer memberships in outside groups, contribute less to outside causes, and have fewer outside friends” (Iannaccone, 1994, p. 1197). Service within their church comes at the expense of voluntarism in the wider community. The key is not just that strict churches take a lot of their members’ time, but also that these faiths emphasize “separation from ‘the world’” (Wuthnow, 1999, p. 344).

White evangelical Protestants exemplify strictness as defined in this literature. Certainly, there are other examples of strict religious groups—orthodox Jews and Mormons for example—but owing to their numbers and political salience in the contemporary U.S., this paper focuses on white evangelical Protestants. In other words, this paper centers its analysis on evangelicals while adopting the insights of the literature on strict churches, which is a generalized theory extending beyond evangelicalism. The generality of the theory suggests that future research can test its application to political activity among other religious groups.

Note that this discussion will be limited mainly to the religious involvement of non-African-Americans only. Because of the unique role that black churches have historically played in facilitating the political activism of African-Americans, we should not expect the same causal mechanism linking church involvement and political activity to apply to both blacks and whites. This paper, then, complements studies like those of Harris (1999), where the focus is exclusively on the political engagement of African-Americans.

The claim that participation in an evangelical Protestant church diminishes participation in political activity diverges from the current literature in two ways. First, the general relationship between religious and political involvement is a strong positive correlation. Putnam succinctly states the conventional wisdom by noting that “churchgoers are substantially more likely to be involved in secular organizations, to vote and participate politically in other ways” (Putnam, 2000). Wald (2003) discusses a small library of studies which draw this conclusion (Cassel, 1999; Hougland and Christensen, 1983; Macaluso and Wanat, 1979; Martinson and Wilkening, 1987; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Such studies provide a number of complementary explanations for the positive relationship, including the development of civic skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995), experience in democratic decision-making (Peterson, 1992), and development of community attachments (Strate et al., 1989). Wald notes a unifying theme across these studies, however, that applies to this analysis as well, “Churches serve as social networks that seem to draw participants into public affairs” (2003, p. 37). The argument here is that while evangelicals’ tight social networks facilitate sporadic mobilization, the process by which those networks are formed can also serve to deflate their levels of political activity.

The hypothesis that there is a time trade-off between involvement in an evangelical church and political activity also runs counter to existing research on Americans’ use of time. Even though it seems intuitive that more time spent in one type of voluntarism means less time spent in another, the data suggest otherwise. In their exhaustive study of civic participation, VSB (1995) found no evidence of such a time trade-off among the general population.

It is important to stress that evangelical churches do not merely occupy an obscure niche in the American religious economy, as they have a substantial share of the church-going market. There are actually more members of evangelical than mainline denominations in the U.S. (25% vs. 23%).

The irony of involvement in evangelicalism is that the very feature which motivates their members to withdraw from civic involvement in the wider community, the fervency of their religious beliefs, can also be an impetus for intensive political mobilization. For example, in describing why evangelical Protestantism flourishes, Smith stresses that its membership “*thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat” (1998, p. 89, emphasis in original). Owing to this state of tension and conflict with the mores of a secular

society, evangelical Protestants can be spurred to political action when confronted with issues that threaten their beliefs. Recent examples of such mobilization include campaigns against same-sex marriage and, as discussed at length below, legalized gambling.

In addition to their deeply-held beliefs evangelicals also have tight social networks, which facilitate political recruitment and thus mobilization. Political mobilizers are most likely going to turn to people they know when seeking recruits (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, 1999; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Furthermore, this recruitment is likely to be successful because of the past experience fellow churchgoers have had with one another in church-based collective action. In other words, their intensive church involvement has formed a deep reservoir of social capital, or shared social networks that produce interpersonal trust. Networks of individuals who have developed trust in one another are able to overcome the dilemma of collective action, in a self-reinforcing process. Evangelical churches provide an institutional setting for such networks, as they are a venue for regularly occurring collective action. Their members thus have, in Putnam's words, a "template for future collaboration" (1993, p. 174).

CLASSIFYING DENOMINATIONS

Because this analysis rests on how denominations are classified, it is important to specify the method by which this has been done. As mentioned above, over the last decade careful research by both political scientists and sociologists has resulted in a system of classifying religious denominations with considerable analytical leverage. The system employed here is the one developed by Kellstedt et al. (1993, 1996) and Steensland et al. (2000), which although published separately share much common ground. The reader is referred to their work for a detailed justification of the specific classifications used. The source of data for the first stage of the analysis is the 1990 Citizen Participation Study (CPS), to which the classification system has been applied.² Table 1 lists the denominations classified as evangelical and mainline.³ Catholics are also classified as a separate group.

If this system of classifying denominations has theoretical utility, we should observe systematic behavioral differences among their members. Namely, evangelicals should manifest higher levels of religious commitment than mainline Protestants. To test whether this is the case, the CPS contains numerous measures of religious commitment, including frequency of church attendance, financial contributions, and religious salience. According to the CPS, evangelicals appear to display greater religious commitment than either mainline Protestants or Catholics. For example, 46% of evangelicals report attending religious services weekly, compared to only a third of mainline Protestants. (Catholics attend at about the same rate as evangelicals). Evan-

TABLE 1. Classification of Protestant Denominations in the Citizen Participation Study

<i>White Evangelical Protestants</i>	<i>Mainline Protestants</i>
American Baptist Association	Congregationalists
American Baptist Church	Episcopalian
Assemblies of God	Evangelical Lutheran/Lutheran/Other Lutheran
Baptist, not further specified	Friends (Quakers)
Christ Evangelical	Methodist (All)
Christian, not further specified	Presbyterian (All)
Church of Christ	Unitarian
Church of God	
Church of God in Christ ¹⁸	
Church of the Nazarene	
Evangelical	
Pentecostal	
Seventh Day Adventists	
Southern Baptist	
United Pentecostal	
Wisconsin Lutheran Evangelical	

gelicals also appear to contribute more money to their church than those in the other two categories—even though, on average, they have a lower household income.⁴ Similarly, evangelicals are the most likely to report that their religion is “very important” in their lives: 66% express this level of religious salience, compared to 51% of mainline Protestants and 54% of Catholics.⁵

A further test of whether the denominational classification employed here captures the relevant differences between evangelicals and mainline Protestants consists of measures that are thought to define evangelicalism. One is a question about an individual’s feeling toward the Bible. While 73% of evangelicals endorse the view that the “Bible is God’s word,” only 35% of mainline Protestants hold a similar view. Likewise, 64% of evangelicals describe themselves as “born again” Christians, compared to 24% of mainline Protestants. Since biblical inerrancy and a personal conversion experience are two defining elements of evangelicals’ beliefs, these results validate the denominational classification system.

Perhaps the biggest difference among members of the three groups is in the amount of time they commit to their church each week. Respondents were asked

If you average across the last 12 months, about how many hours per week did you give to (church/synagogue) work—aside from attending services?

TABLE 2. Time Spent in Church Service and Civic Skills

	Practicing Civic Skills at Church (%)	Church Service (hours per week)
White evangelical protestant	26.5	2.3
Mainline protestant	21	1.0
Catholic	10	0.86

Source: Citizen Participation Study.

In Table 2 we see that evangelicals report contributing over twice as much time per week to their church than do mainline Protestants: 2.3 hours per week, compared to just over one hour for mainline Protestants and just under an hour for Catholics. The two and a third hours that, on average, evangelicals spend in service to their church constitute roughly an evening per week—a considerable investment of time. Recall also that this is only an average and thus includes respondents who are only nominally members of their church. On average, evangelicals who report attending religious services weekly or more give just about three and a half hours per week to their church (again, in addition to time spent at a worship service).

Spending all of this time in church activity means that evangelicals have more opportunities to develop civic skills than members of other denominations. The CPS asked respondents whether they have exercised any of the following civic skills at church: written a letter, attended a meeting in which they participated in making decisions, planned or chaired a meeting, or given a presentation or speech. Table 2 displays the percentage in each denomination who report exercising at least one of these skills at church. We see that 26.5% of evangelicals report building civic skills at church, compared to 20% of mainline Protestants and only 10% of Catholics.

The bottom line, therefore, is that a focus on civic skills only would give the appearance that belonging to an evangelical church facilitates political participation. This perspective misses, however, the heavy time investment these churches ask of their members, which is hypothesized to draw them out of political activity.

HYPOTHESIS 1: EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND POLITICAL DEMOBILIZATION

Testing the claim that time spent in service to strict churches by their members comes at the expense of time spent in political activity requires accounting for other factors known to affect participation. To do so, VSB's

civic voluntarism model has been replicated with a set of variables added to test whether there is a tradeoff between involvement in an evangelical church and civic engagement.

For the specifics of VSB's model the reader is referred to their work, where it is developed at length. In its essentials, the model contains measures of resources, engagement, and opportunities, as each plays a role in facilitating civic participation. Resources include respondents' level of education, verbal aptitude, household income, job status, free time, and an additive index of civic skills. Engagement includes political knowledge, strength of partisanship, political efficacy, and political interest, while opportunities consists of affiliation with institutions like churches. Other demographic variables include a series of dummy variables for age cohorts (with age 35–44 as the excluded category). Also, the model controls for whether respondents are retired or currently employed, speak English as a first language, and hold U.S. citizenship.⁶

The critical measures for the purpose of testing whether membership in an evangelical church leads to a time tradeoff between religious and political activity are those that pertain to religion. The model thus accounts for the frequency of attendance at religious services, to separate its potential impact from that attributable to time spent in church-based voluntarism. It also includes an index of "evangelicalism," or evangelical beliefs, which combines religious salience, belief in the bible, and whether someone identifies as having been "born again."⁷ In addition, the model accounts for whether someone is a mainline Protestant, Catholic, or member of an evangelical denomination, as well as the amount of time each week that respondents spend performing church service (Church Time). Furthermore, there is a control for time spent in service to secular organizations per week.

Since the working hypothesis states that the impact of church service varies according to the type of church one attends, the variables of greatest theoretical interest are interaction terms between each type of denomination and church voluntarism (for example, Evangelical X Church Time). Operationally, the expectation is that for members of strict churches more time spent at church means less political participation; the coefficient for Evangelical X Church Time should be negative.

Table 3 displays two models. The dependent variable for the first is the same participation index used by VSB, an additive scale that includes the following participatory acts: working on a campaign, donating money to a political campaign, contacting an elected official, participating in a protest, belonging to a community board, working informally with others to deal with a community problem, and belonging to a political organization that takes political stands. The inclusion of this model is to underscore how concentrating on the time evangelicals spend in church service complements VSB's civic voluntarism model, which is concerned with forms of participation other

TABLE 3. Religious Involvement and Political Engagement Ordered Logit Estimates

	Participation Index	(S. e.)	Local Elections Scale	(S. e.)
Evangelical Protestant X Church time	-5.472***	(1.865)	-10.957*	(5.781)
Catholic X church time Church time	-2.599	(2.285)	-8.923	(7.265)
Evangelical Protestant	4.427***	(1.596)	11.472*	(6.811)
Catholic	0.398	(0.284)	0.052	(0.257)
Evangelicalism	0.243	(0.234)	0.115	(0.244)
Church attendance	-1.200**	(0.612)	-0.558	(0.509)
Civic skills	-0.199	(0.408)	0.549	(0.435)
Education	0.229***	(0.037)	0.024	(0.034)
Vocabulary index	0.706*	(0.371)	-0.061	(0.371)
Income	-0.204	(0.576)	0.030	(0.501)
Free time	0.988***	(0.439)	-0.369	(0.453)
Job level	-1.184**	(0.571)	-0.163	(0.633)
Political information	-0.387	(0.387)	-0.466	(0.368)
Partisan strength	0.677	(0.458)	1.524***	(0.459)
Political efficacy	0.607*	(0.307)	1.270***	(0.327)
Political interest	1.535***	(0.502)	1.168**	(0.522)
Age 18–24	2.323***	(0.436)	1.680***	(0.439)
Age 25–34	-0.780	(0.330)	-1.072	(0.473)
Age 45–54	-0.410	(0.250)	-0.604	(0.241)
Age 55–64	0.177	(0.295)	0.488**	(0.282)
Age over 65	0.177	(0.356)	0.565**	(0.284)
Retired	-0.566	(0.345)	1.001***	(0.295)
Working	0.984**	(0.385)	0.960***	(0.336)
Speak English	-0.897	(0.271)	0.848	(0.302)
US citizen	0.574	(0.393)	0.378	(0.428)
Organization time	0.631	(0.427)	0.068	(0.595)
Observations	4.800***	(1.671)	2.544	(2.509)
Log likelihood	857		825	
Pseudo-R ²	-925.81		-1063.62	
	0.17		0.13	

Robust standard errors in parentheses. All independent variables coded 0–1.
* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

than voting. However, voting (particularly in local elections) should also be affected. This not so much because voting itself requires a lot of time, but rather because the process of learning about state and local elections can be time consuming. It is difficult to model turnout in a given local election with a national sample, since the timing of elections varies across the country. Respondents were thus asked about the general involvement in local elections: “Now, thinking about the local elections that have been held since you were

old enough to vote, have you voted in all of them, most of them, in some of them, rarely voted in them, or have you never voted in a local election?" This variable, coded from 1 (never) to 5 (all), is the dependent variable in the second model.

Ordered logit is used as the estimator, as the dependent variables have multiple ordered categories. (The substantive results are unchanged when OLS is employed.) All of the independent variables have been standardized on a 0–1 scale, which facilitates a comparison of magnitude across each variable's total range. Robust standard errors are estimated, using the Huber/White correction. Note that the model only includes respondents who are evangelicals, mainline Protestants, or Catholics; mainline Protestant is the baseline category.

In Table 3, we see that the evangelicalism scale has a negative, statistically significant coefficient in model 1; a higher score on this scale corresponds to a lower level of political activity. This means that any effect observed for church time is over and above an individual's level of evangelical beliefs. In other words, it is not only what you *believe* that has an impact on political engagement, but also what you *do*. The relationship is in the same direction for the local elections scale, but does not reach statistical significance. Consistent with the conventional wisdom that participation at church leads to participation in the community, the coefficient for time spent in church-based voluntarism is positive and significant in both models. Of greatest theoretical interest, however, is the interaction between membership in an evangelical denomination and church-based voluntarism. As hypothesized, evangelical X church time is statistically significant and negative in both models. In other words, while time spent in church service has a generally positive impact on political participation, that relationship is negative for evangelicals. This is true for both turnout in local elections (which has particular relevance for the second half of this paper) and nonelectoral participation.

Because Table 3 displays coefficients from maximum likelihood estimation, their substantive significance is difficult to interpret. Figure 1, therefore, displays predicted scores on the participation index generated from the coefficients in the model, comparing members of evangelical denominations to mainline Protestants. Each line shows the change in the participation index (scored from 0 to 7) as church-based voluntarism moves from its minimum to maximum, for mainline Protestants and evangelicals, respectively. It is important to stress, however, that the range for both groups is exactly the same (that is, both the minimum and maximum values for strict church members and mainline Protestants are identical). All of the control variables have been set to their means. We see that at a minimal level of church-based voluntarism, members of both groups participate at essentially the same level. As their time spent in service to their church increases, evangelicals participate in politics at a slightly lower rate—moving from an average of one participatory

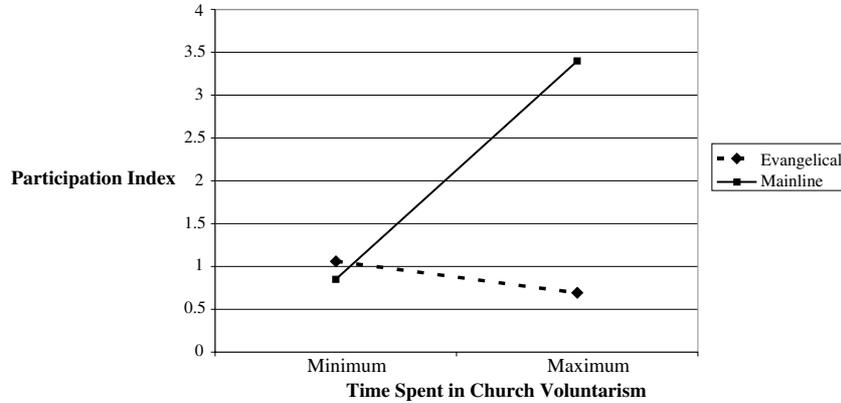


FIG. 1. Church service and political participation index. Change in predicted value of Participation Index as Church Time changes. All control variables set to their means.

act to about “half” of a participatory act. This is in sharp contrast to mainline Protestants, whose participation increases to almost 3.5 acts. At the maximum level of church service, therefore, we see a considerable gap between members of the two groups. Figure 2 is a similar display for turnout in local elections. Since a numerical value for the local elections index is not terribly informative, the figure plots the changing probability that an evangelical and mainline Protestant, respectively, reports voting in “some” “most” or “all” local elections (and is thus the inverse of saying that one “rarely” or “never” votes in such contests). Again, we see the same pattern as in Figure 1. The more evangelicals participate at church, the less likely they are to participate in local elections, while the opposite is true for mainline Protestants. When church time is at its minimum value, the two groups do not differ. At its maximum value, however, there is a gap of roughly 15% points. In sum, these models provide evidence for the hypothesis that the heavy time demands placed on members of evangelical denominations draws them out of political activity. While many authors have speculated that this is the case, empirical support for a negative relationship has been lacking. Wuthnow, for example, notes the absence of evidence showing that “religion has a negative effect on civic engagement” (1999, p. 357).

Owing to the fact that evangelicals’ heavy church commitment is driven by a sense of separation from the world, it seems likely that this negative relationship entails more than simply a time trade-off. Rather, the time spent in church service is indicative of a conscious withdrawal from the wider community.

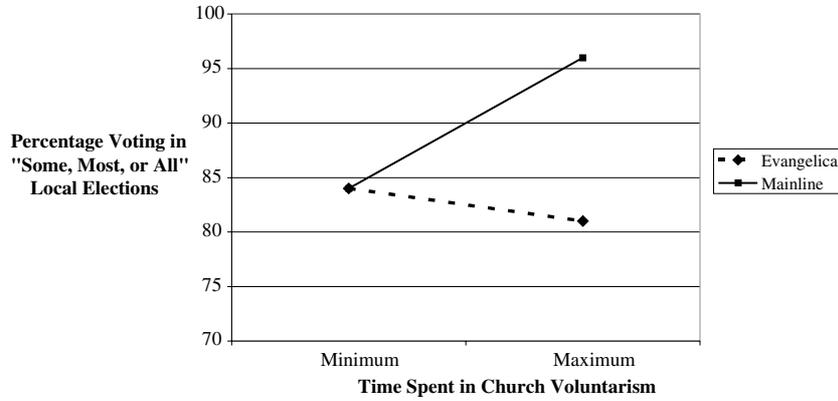


FIG. 2. Church service and participation in local elections. Change in predicated value of voting in local elections as Church Time changes. All control variables set to their means.

HYPOTHESIS 2: EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

The institutional characteristics of strict churches lead to a second hypothesis: members of evangelical churches have the potential for rapid and intense, if infrequent, political mobilization. Indeed, the very activities which occupy so much time also serve to build strong social networks that can facilitate mobilization. If this is the case, then we should observe that people who belong to evangelical denominations are enmeshed in tight social networks with other members of their church. Because the CPS did not collect any data on social networks, the four-state Church Involvement Study (Hammond and Roof, 1988) is used to test whether this is the case. This was a survey conducted by Hammond and Roof in 1988 of 2,620 randomly chosen respondents in four states. Using the same system of classifying denominations as in the CPS, respondents are grouped into the categories of evangelical, mainline, and Catholic. Respondents who attend a church were asked

Now I'd like to ask you to think about people you feel really close to, people you could confide in. How about the people you know at your church/synagogue? How many of them do you feel very close to: many, a few, or hardly any?

Fifty-six percent of evangelicals report that they feel close to "many" of the people at their church, compared to 25% of mainline Protestants and 21% of Catholics. Similarly, respondents were asked about their "really close friends,

relatives, co-workers, friends from school and church, and so forth. How many of them attend your church/synagogue on a regular basis?" Again, members of evangelical churches top the list: 27% of them report that "most" or "nearly all" of their close friends attend the same church that they do, compared to only 12% of mainline Protestants and 17% of Catholics.

These tight social networks imply that members of evangelical churches are likely to turn to their fellow churchgoers for political recruitment, since past research has found that "political prospectors" seek people with experience engaging in collective action (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999). Furthermore, members of evangelical congregations have greater political cohesiveness than mainline Protestants (Wald, Owen, and Samuel, 1990). Data from the CPS indicate that personalized mobilization is indeed more common in evangelical churches. Compared to mainline Protestants, three times as many evangelicals report being encouraged by a fellow church member to vote a certain way—18% vs. 6%. Similarly, almost half of evangelicals who received a request to get involved in politics were recruited by someone at their church, compared to less than a third (31%) of mainline Protestants. Interestingly, this church-based political recruitment is not because clergy in strict churches are more political than their mainline counterparts. In fact, according to the CPS you are more likely to hear a political sermon at a mainline church than over the pulpit of an evangelical one. Twenty-eight percent of mainline Protestants report hearing their clergy speak about politics "sometimes" or "frequently," compared to 20.5% of evangelicals.⁸

While they can hint at the mobilization potential of strict denominations, data from a single cross-sectional survey are inadequate to test what is really a dynamic process. Evangelicals' tight social networks and intense religious beliefs may be necessary for their political mobilization, but they are not sufficient. The political context matters. In other words, neither evangelicals' individual dispositions nor their political context alone is enough to explain their mobilization. Together, the two interact in a manner consistent with the "cognitive-interactionist" perspective in social psychology. "Rather than explain decisions in terms of types of people or situations [this perspective] specifies how different types of people perceive, interpret, and weigh options in different types of situations" (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser, 1999, p. 554). Under normal circumstances, evangelicals are not unusually active in politics. When elites make an issue salient that speaks to their deep-seated moral beliefs, however, their tight-knit church networks facilitate rapid mobilization.

We should expect evangelicals to be mobilized into political action when confronted with a controversy over "morality politics" (Meier, 1994), and thus when their "deep-seated moral values" are threatened (Sharp, 1999). Such issues are typically defined by elites in stark terms, leaving little room for compromise. As a consequence, these issues are highly salient to the general public. In describing the nature of morality politics, Sharp also notes that

mobilization on such issues differs from what is observed for “politics as usual” in that it is not “organized according to territorial interests, that is, neighborhood associations or similar residence-based groups” (4). Instead, moral and religious groups form coalitions across geographic boundaries.

A natural experiment of sorts occurred in Alabama that allows for a test of the twin hypotheses regarding members of evangelical churches. In 1999, there was a state-wide referendum to determine whether the Alabama constitution should be amended to permit a state-run lottery. This is a textbook example of morality politics. For one, the issue was explicitly framed by religious leaders in the state as moral in nature. This was made easier by the fact that as a referendum the contest did not have a partisan coloring, umorning voters from party cues and requiring them to use other criteria when taking a position on the issue. Also, the issue itself had no nuance and thus no room for compromise—one was either for the lottery or against it. Furthermore, the scope of the conflict was not defined in territorial terms; opponents of the lottery based their opposition on moral grounds.

In sum, the confluence of multiple factors made the Alabama lottery referendum an ideal opportunity for mobilization among evangelical Protestants. These conditions, coupled with increasingly activist clergy within evangelical churches (Guth et al., 1997) ignited massive church-based political mobilization. As reported in the *Birmingham News*:

Alabama voters responded against the lottery with an evangelistic fervor that peaked as Tuesday’s referendum approached. They erected anti-lottery signs, made anti-lottery T-shirts, held anti-lottery rallies, hosted prayer vigils and listened to pastors preach anti-lottery sermons. (Garrison, 1999)

News coverage of the referendum uniformly stressed the significant role churches played in the anti-lottery movement, as evidenced by the headlines on newspapers’ lottery stories: “Lottery Vote Shows Power of Church” (Garrison, 1999); “Lottery Opponents Begin 24-Hour Prayer Vigil” (Saunders, 1999); “Religious Leaders Prevail as Alabama Shuns Lottery” (Firestone, 1999). The amendment was defeated, garnering only 46% of the vote.

The lottery referendum can be described as a natural experiment simply because the amount of church-based political mobilization in 1999 dwarfed that in a similar state-wide election in 1998, while the short period of time between the elections means that other significant factors driving political activity can be assumed to have remained constant. A number of features of this case make it amenable to testing the two hypotheses at hand. First, Alabama is home to a large number of white evangelical Protestants. Yet across the state there is considerable variation in the proportion of the population who belong to an evangelical denomination, from Macon county with 14.8% to Clay county with 78.5%. Second, while there were two other issues

on the ballot in 1999, the lottery amendment was the primary draw for voters. In no county did more people cast a ballot for either of the other amendments on the ballot, as neither issue generated nearly the same level of interest as the lottery referendum.⁹ Most importantly, there were no statewide offices to be filled, which means that there were no candidates mobilizing turnout across the state independent of the referenda. This combination of factors makes the Alabama case particularly illuminating, as multiple issues and candidates on a single ballot normally make it impossible to infer that any given line on the ballot has mobilized voters.

The reader may wonder whether it is plausible to characterize the 1998 elections in Alabama as devoid of church-based mobilization. After all, the Republican incumbent governor, Fob James, actively courted conservative Christian voters with a spirited defense of a judge who had posted the Ten Commandments in his courtroom (he threatened to call out the National guard to ensure that the Ten Commandments remained on display), advocacy of school prayer, and opposition to teaching evolution in the public schools. James memorably demonstrated his contempt for evolutionary biology by “parading around a stage during a speech to the state board of education with his back hunched over in an attempt to mimic a monkey” (Stanley and Grose, 2000, p. 147). Furthermore, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate and eventual victor, Don Siegelman, based his 1998 campaign on advocating a lottery. However, while James was supported by the *political* machinery of the Christian Right, there is little to no evidence that there was much mobilization on his behalf in many Alabama churches *per se*. The real political power of churches lies in their ability to mobilize people to vote who would not otherwise be politically active, which is distinct from political organizations encouraging their supporters—who by definition are already politically active—to vote a certain way. Undoubtedly James was able to benefit from some church-based political activity on his behalf, which only makes this a more difficult test of the hypotheses at hand. Notwithstanding the appeal James may have had to conservative Christian voters, the hypothesis remains that in 1998 (an election without much church-based mobilization in evangelical congregations) activity in an evangelical church led to political demobilization. In contrast, in 1999 we would expect a positive relationship between evangelicalism and turnout for the lottery referendum.

The test of the twin hypotheses employs aggregate-level data from Alabama’s 67 counties in both the 1998 and 1999 elections. While individual-level survey data would be superior, they do not exist. By using King’s (1997) approach to ecological inference (EI), however, it is possible to make inferences about individual-level behavior from aggregate-level information.¹⁰ As has been long noted, linear regression in this context is subject to the ecological fallacy, whereby the behavior of individuals is inferred from ecological

data (Achen and Shively, 1995; Robinson, 1950). King's EI relies on the method of bounds, whereby the estimates for each county are constrained to fall within their logical parameters. With this information, the EI software creates a tomography plot to determine the most likely point estimates (the area in which most of the lines for each county intersect). Standard errors for the point estimates are also generated through simulation and resampling. This analysis uses state-wide estimates, which the EI software weights to account for the varying populations of Alabama's counties.

Although King's method of ecological inference has been employed in numerous studies, it nonetheless remains controversial (Cho and Gaines, 2004). Fortunately, this analysis proceeds with a reasonably strong micro-level theory, one of the "conditions amenable to ecological inference", according to Cho and Gaines, two of King's most vociferous critics. In addition, the estimates are not used in second-stage regressions, which Herron and Shotts (2004) suggest is particularly problematic. Nonetheless, owing to the ongoing discussion regarding the utility of King's method of ecological inference, these results should be considered more suggestive than definitive.

The data on the religious composition of Alabama's counties is derived from *Religious Congregations and Membership In the U.S. 2000*, a census of religious bodies conducted by the Glenmary Research Center, the most comprehensive accounting of church membership in the U.S. (Glenmary Research Center, 2002). Evangelical Protestant churches have been classified by researchers affiliated with the American Religion Data Archive using the same classification system employed in the above analysis.¹¹ This category thus consists of all the denominations coded as evangelical in the CPS, as well as a number of other denominations not included in that dataset. For each county, the percentage of the population who are adherents of an evangelical denomination has been calculated.¹²

Using EI, the percentage of strict church members who voted against the lottery was estimated, in order to establish the extent of their opposition. According to the EI estimates 81% of evangelicals in Alabama opposed the lottery, compared to just over 25% of Alabama voters who do not belong to an evangelical church.¹³

An alternative hypothesis to explain the vote on the referendum is that opposition to the lottery was driven by political ideology rather than religious beliefs. A proxy for conservative political ideology is the percentage of a county's voters who cast a ballot for Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential election. EI was thus used to estimate the percentage of 1996 Dole voters who voted against the lottery in 1998. The results are very similar to the estimates for evangelicals: 82% of Dole voters opposed the lottery (s.e. = 5.3). Given the congruence between the results for evangelicals on the one hand, and Dole voters on the other, it is admittedly not clear that religious beliefs—as distinct from political ideology—were the primary factor driving *vote choice* on the

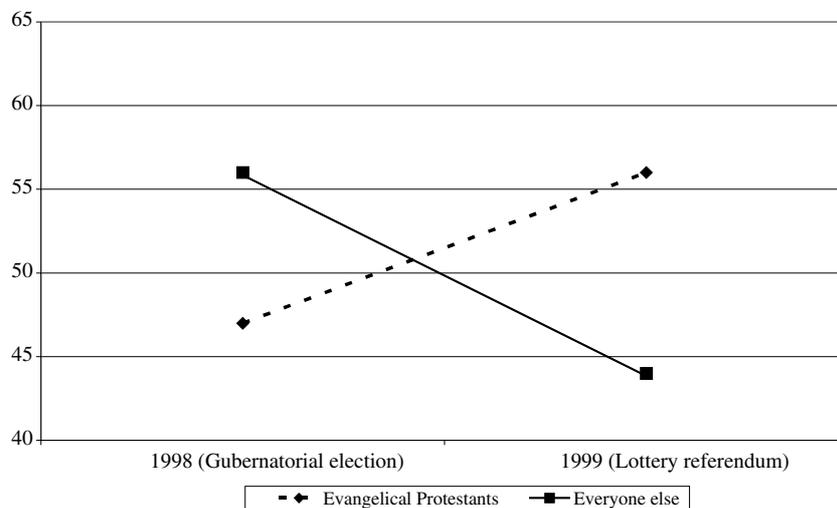


FIG. 3. Turnout in Alabama elections (results from ecological inference).

referendum. We will see, however, that this is not the case when we look at factors influencing *turnout* for the referendum.

To examine the impact of religious affiliation on turnout, we can compare estimates for the 1998 gubernatorial election to results from the 1999 lottery referendum.¹⁴ Figure 3 displays the EI estimates for turnout of evangelicals and non-evangelicals in 1998 and 1999. Consistent with the results from the individual-level survey data presented above, in 1998 we see that evangelicals had a lower rate of turnout than Alabama residents who do not share this religious affiliation: 47% vs. 56%. In 1999, however, evangelicals were more likely to turn out—56% vs. 44%.¹⁵ In other words, not only did evangelical Protestants turn out at a higher rate than the rest of the population in 1999, they also turned out at a higher rate than they did in 1998. This increase in turnout is in spite of the fact that there is every reason to expect turnout to have dropped precipitously in 1999. For one thing, this was a special election, with only referenda on the statewide ballot. Further lowering our expectations for voter turnout, the election was held in an off-year and at an unusual time, in October rather than November. As expected, from 1998 to 1999 overall turnout declined a full 12% points, from 57% to 45%.

Analysis of voter turnout for these two groups in the 1996 presidential election confirms that it is 1999 and not 1998 that is atypical. As in 1998, evangelicals have a lower rate of turnout: 52% vs. 70%.¹⁶ Furthermore, the increase in turnout among evangelicals does not appear to be due to political ideology. Turnout of 1996 Dole voters in both 1998 and 1999 shows essentially no change, as displayed in Figure 4. In both years, it is 44%. Furthermore, in

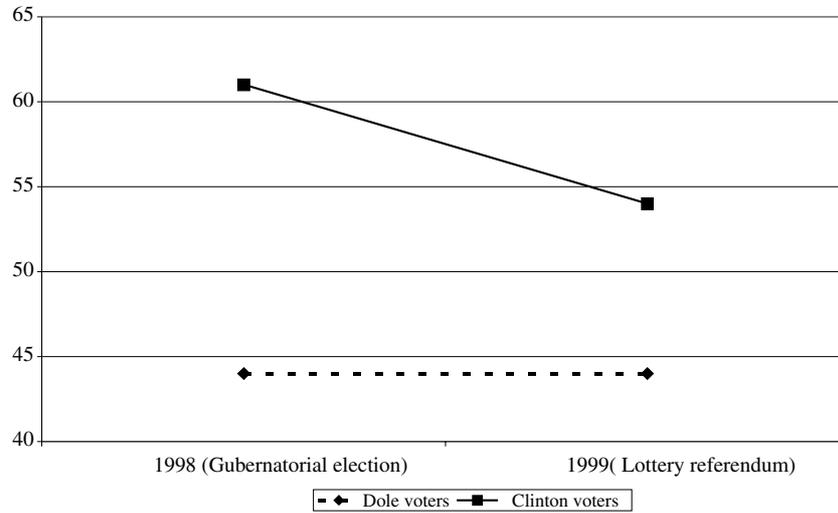


FIG. 4. Turnout in Alabama elections (results from ecological inference).

both years Dole voters were less likely to turn out than Clinton voters.¹⁷ In other words, voter mobilization in the 1999 referendum is better explained by religious than political affiliation.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with twin hypotheses, both of which find support from disparate sources of data. From a national survey designed to measure multiple facets of political participation, we find that for members of evangelical churches the heavy commitment they make to voluntarism within their church is negatively related to political participation. This negative relationship occurs in spite of church involvement's general effect as a positive predictor of political activity. However, we have also seen evidence that under the right conditions, evangelicals can be successfully mobilized. From aggregate county-level data on church membership and voter turnout, we find that evangelicals were more likely than other Alabamans to turn out for a referendum on a state lottery, even though their levels of turnout were lower in previous elections. The reader should note that the Alabama data allow for only a partial test of the relationships revealed in the CPS data, as the only aggregate measure available for the key independent variable is *membership in* rather than *commitment to* particular denominations. The CPS data show that simple denominational affiliation is superseded by other measures of

religious involvement. Similarly, on the left-hand side of the equation we can only observe turnout at the aggregate level, even though we would expect the same causal mechanism to apply to other political acts. That the hypothesized results were obtained using aggregate data suggests that they would hold up in more refined data.

A focus on the “costs” of membership imposed by evangelical denominations is meant to explain only one facet of church-based mobilization, as it (like organizational hierarchy) is just a single relevant dimension of a religious organization. Nonetheless, it appears to have some theoretical utility and empirical support. One obvious extension is to the political involvement of other religious groups generally defined as “strict” and thus with high costs of membership, like orthodox Jews and Mormons. The theory outlined here can certainly be refined further by testing it in other contexts using data specifically designed for that purpose, incorporating factors not included in these elementary tests. Given religion’s enduring influence on American politics, plenty of such opportunities will undoubtedly arise.

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APPENDIX: RELIGIOUS MEASURES IN THE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION STUDY

Church Time

If you average across the last 12 months, about how many hours per week did you give to (church/synagogue) work—aside from attending services? If necessary probe: for example, participating in educational, charitable or social activities or in other church affairs.

Religious Service Attendance

Now I would like to ask you a few questions about your religious activity. How often do you attend religious services? (never, Less than once a year, Once or twice a year, Several times a year, About once a month, 2–3 times a month, nearly every week, every week, more than once a week).

Religious Salience

How important is religion in your life? (not at all important, somewhat important, very important).

Beliefs about the Bible

Here are four statements about the Bible. I'd like you to tell me which is closest to your own view. Just give me the number of your choice.

The Bible is God's word and all it says is true.

The Bible was written by men inspired by God, but it contains some human errors.

The Bible is a good book because it was written by wise men, but God had nothing to do with it.

The Bible was written by men who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today.

Born Again

Would you say that you have been "born again" or have had a "born again" experience (that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ)?

NOTES

1. Accurate nomenclature is problematic. Scholars of religion draw distinctions between "evangelical" and "fundamentalist" denominations, sometimes grouping them together under the term "conservative Protestants." For the most part, however, the literature refers to white evangelical Protestants as a single group encompassing both fundamentalist and evangelical denominations, the practice followed here.
2. The Citizen Participation Study consists of two stages. In the first, 15,000 randomly selected respondents completed a 20 minute telephone interview about their civic and political engagement. In the second stage, 2,517 of the original group of respondents were selected for a longer, face-to-face interview. In this second group political activists were oversampled, as well as African-Americans and Latinos. The results reported here are derived from this second set of interviews, with the appropriate weights applied to the data to account for the oversampling.
3. By no means is any system of classifying denominations into religious traditions fool-proof. Indeed, there are slight differences between the system proposed by Kellstedt et al. (1993) and Steensland et al. (2000). Furthermore, the denominational codes in the Citizen Participation Study are not as detailed as in the National Election Study (at least since 1990) nor the General Social Survey. For example, the NES and GSS distinguish between the mainline Presbyterian Church in the USA and the evangelical Presbyterian Church in America. In the CPS, the options are simply "Presbyterian," "United Presbyterian," "Other Presbyterian," and "Presbyterian, don't know which." Without being able to differentiate between the Presbyterian denominations generally considered to be evangelical and mainline, this analysis groups all Presbyterians in the mainline category. Similarly, a handful of respondents do not specify a denomination beyond "Christian." Because many

evangelical churches are non-denominational these ambiguous Christians have been coded as evangelicals. In other classification systems, behavioral measures are used to identify evangelicals who do not identify with a denomination. This is not possible in this case, since the behavioral measures are themselves included in the model as control variables. To the extent that this classification is incorrect, it biases the analysis against the hypotheses, since these respondents would only be adding noise to the evangelical category. Finally, note that although it otherwise meets the criteria for an evangelical denomination, the Church of God in Christ is a historically African American denomination, but three white respondents nonetheless reported belonging to it. It could be that these respondents misidentified their denomination (for example, they might belong to the "Church of God in Christ, Mennonite," a white evangelical denomination). Or it could be that they actually do belong to this denomination, since it is not inconceivable that a white belongs to a predominantly African-American denomination. The wisest course seemed to be to keep them in the evangelical category.

4. According to the CPS, strict church members donate an average of \$700 annually to their church, nearly \$200 more than mainline Protestants and twice as much as Catholics. These means are approximate, as they are calculated by taking the mid-point of the categories used in the CPS in the question about donations to religious organizations. The average household income of strict church members only falls between \$25,000 and \$29,999 while the average income of mainline Protestants and Catholics is between \$30,000 and \$34,999 (in 1989 dollars).
5. It is important to note that these measures of religious involvement are far more normative in evangelical than mainline denominations or among Catholics. Thus, there may be a greater social desirability bias among evangelicals than mainline Protestants or Catholics when responding to these questions. Even if this is the case, though, it nonetheless supports the general claim that these behaviors are strongly encouraged within evangelical denominations.
6. Readers are referred to VSB's *Voice and Equality* for details about the coding of these variables.
7. The alpha reliability coefficient for the scale = 0.63.
8. Note that these results could also be explained by a different interpretation of what constitutes political talk among evangelicals and mainline Protestants. Evangelicals may be more likely to draw a bright line between "moral" and "political" sermonizing than are mainline Protestants.
9. One asked whether the state should "phase out the supernumerary system for public officials and to provide for the participation of public officials in the Employees' Retirement System of Alabama." The other was to determine whether the state legislature could permit city boards of education to be elected. Three counties also had referenda that applied only to that county, and a few municipalities had local elections.
10. The results reported here have been generated using the software "EzI" (Benoit and King, 2001).
11. This category thus includes large denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God as well as smaller ones like the Church of God of Prophecy. The complete list of denominations classified as evangelical Protestant can be found at <http://www.thearda.com> [accessed 3-27-04].
12. Note that as used by the compilers of these data "adherent" refers to both adults and children, and is thus different than "member," which refers only to "all individuals with full membership status," the requirements for which vary from denomination to denomination. Using adherents maximizes comparability and is the only measure reported by all denominations in the study. Also, note that since the religious membership data are for the population as a whole but the

analysis estimates voter turnout, the analysis is premised on the explicit assumption that the religious composition of the voting age population is identical to the general population.

- 13. Standard errors for the estimates are 6.1 and 2.7, respectively.
- 14. Turnout rate is calculated as the percentage of registered voters who cast a ballot, as reported by the Alabama Secretary of State's website: <http://www.sos.state.al.us/election/index.cfm> [accessed 4-18-03].
- 15. Following are the EI estimates, complete with standard errors in parentheses:

	1998	1999
Evangelical Protestants	47 (4.8)	56 (6.6)
Everyone else	56 (3.3)	44 (4.5)

On the question of whether these differences are statistically significant, one rough approximation of a 95% confidence interval is to multiply the s.e. by 2. By this standard, these differences are not statistically significant at the conventional .05 level. However, King notes that this standard rests on the assumption that the distribution of the point estimates is normal, which is not the case (since they are truncated). A superior method of testing for statistical significance is to examine the posterior distributions of the estimates of turnout. Inspection of the posterior distributions of each estimate as generated by EzI reveal them to be substantially different from one another. Interested readers can contact the author for more detail, including the output.

- 16. S.e. = 5.1 and 3.5, respectively.
- 17. Following are the EI estimates, complete with standard errors in parentheses:

	1998	1999
Dole voters	44 (5.0)	44 (7.3)
Clinton voters	61 (5.1)	54 (7.4)

Note that the category labeled "Clinton voters" should more accurately be called "non-Dole voters," since it also includes third party votes, which were not substantial in 1996 (roughly 6% of the presidential vote statewide).

- 18. This is generally considered an African American congregation and thus not classified with white evangelical Protestants. However, as discussed in the text, three white respondents reported membership in this denomination.

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