Opiate or Stimulant? Religious Belief Systems and Political Engagement

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This work was supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant SES-1061245.
ABSTRACT

Political science research has shown that attending religious institutions promotes political participation by developing civic norms, skills, and networks. Fewer studies, however, examine what role religious beliefs play in promoting political participation. Inasmuch as religious beliefs are at the heart of what binds people to their religious institutions, it is also important to examine how variations in the way people conceptualize their religious duties affects their willingness to engage the political system. Thus, this article begins to fill this void by examining two religious belief systems: Prosperity Gospel, which emphasizes divine favor; and the Social Gospel, which emphasizes working to achieve a just society. Using original survey data, the analyses find that the Social Gospel is associated with higher levels of engagement and participation, while the Prosperity Gospel is associated with lower levels.

Keywords: Political Participation; Social Gospel; Prosperity Gospel, Black Church, Voting
There is a longstanding debate about the impact of religion on political activism. Some have argued that religion depresses feelings of engagement, with Karl Marx (1977) most famously asserting that religion is “the opium of the people” (131). Proponents of this argument contend that religion shifts citizens’ attention away from important social issues to otherworldly pursuits (Frazier 1964, Reed 1986, Marx 1967). In contrast, there are those who argue that religion promotes political engagement, as evidenced by the strong link between religion and politics seen during the civil rights movement (Morris 1984) and the emergence of the Religious Right (Wilcox 1996).

This debate has reemerged recently with the questioning of the contemporary relevancy of the Black church. The Black church has historically been the bedrock of African-American civic and political life. Nevertheless, Eddie Glaude, Jr., the William S. Tod Professor of Religion at Princeton University, published an obituary for the Black church in the Huffington Post in 2010 (Glaude 2010). Glaude’s declaration that “The Black Church is Dead” was based, in part, on the increased proliferation of the Prosperity Gospel throughout the Black community. Because the Prosperity Gospel emphasizes individual salvation, Glaude argues that it undermines the collective consciousness needed for Black churches to mobilize around issues important to the African-American community (Glaude 2015). While Glaude’s essay was met with a firestorm of rebuttal, many religious leaders and scholars agreed that the Prosperity Gospel was the antithesis to the Social Gospel preached by Dr. Martin Luther King and others, which was used as the catalyzing narrative to so much of the Black freedom struggle (Otis Moss et al. 2010). Yet, there is no empirical evidence to support this claim. Unknown is if and to what extent the Social Gospel can move African Americans towards political participation and whether the Prosperity Gospel can undermine its effect.
This poses an interesting question for political science research: What affect do religious belief systems have on political engagement? Decades of empirical evidence lends support to the positive role of religion, showing that religious engagement can help develop civic norms, skills, and networks that increase citizens’ involvement in politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, Harris 1999). While this research has demonstrated the various ways that interacting with religious institutions can promote participation, it offers little theoretical distinction from involvement in other organizations, such as book clubs or fraternal organizations. What distinguishes religion from other organizational affiliations is a desire to fulfill the wishes of a supernatural entity (Stark and Glock 1968). Variations in the interpretation of divine mandates serve as the source of differences in religious belief systems. We argue that this, in turn, has implications for political attitudes and behaviors.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to directly measure religious belief systems and examine how they relate to political participation. We focus on the political implications of the Prosperity and Social Gospels among Blacks, two distinct belief systems prominent in Afro-Christianity. Using data from a national survey that provides measures of support for both of these religious belief systems, we examine their relationship with multiple indicators of political engagement. We argue that the Prosperity Gospel, which emphasizes gaining divine favor to enjoy the good life on Earth, decreases political activity. In contrast, the Social Gospel, which emphasizes engaging the world to bring about equality, increases political engagement.

Understanding how religious belief systems affect political engagement is not only important for scholars interested in religion and politics but also for those interested in democratic theory. Numerous works have demonstrated the link between representation and participation, with politically engaged citizens more likely than the politically apathetic to exact
rewards from political elites (Hicks and Swank 1992, Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995, Hajnal and Trounstine 2005). Hence, it is important to understand how the beliefs advanced in civic institutions—beyond just religious organizations—facilitate or hinder engagement with the political system. Furthermore, if certain religious beliefs contribute to political apathy and abstention, we need to renew the discussion of the extent to which religion elevates or subverts basic democratic principles.

RELIGION, SKILLS AND NETWORKS

Religious service attendance remains a consistent predictor of voter turnout and civic engagement (Philpot, Shaw, and McGowen 2009, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In explaining this relationship, political science research has traditionally focused its attention on the role of religious institutions in developing the skills and networks that promote political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For example, Djupe and Gilbert (2006) find that the small working groups within congregations promote the development of civic skills that can be applied to politics. Further, Harris (1999) finds that congregations that elect denominational leaders provide a training ground for people to become involved in campaigns.

Beyond civic skills, religious institutions also provide opportunities for political recruitment. As Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) note, many people do not participate because they have not been asked. Because religious institutions provide an environment in which individuals meet regularly and gain each other’s trust, they are effective vehicles through which citizens can be politically mobilized (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, Campbell 2013). For instance, the development of informal discussion networks within congregations reinforces civic norms and spurs congregants’ political engagement (McKenzie 2004). Additionally, those who
report receiving messages about politics from clergy or fellow church members are more likely to vote (Tate 1993, Calhoun-Brown 1996) and engage in other forms of participation (McClerking and McDaniel 2005, Brown and Brown 2003, Harris 1999).

As McDaniel (2008) indicates, however, there is quite a bit of variance in the political activity of churches, their clergy, and their congregants. This suggests that while religious institutions can foster the skills necessary for political engagement, it is not a given that those skills will be applied beyond church walls. What is it, then, that inspires citizens to employ the civic skills they have learned in their religious institutions to the political environment? We argue that political activism is not only dependent on the skills one learns within a religious institution, but also the types of religious belief systems that are likely to be heard within that organization. Indeed, there are religious institutions whose belief systems encourage their congregants to refrain from politics. In such cases, their connection to a religious institution will not translate into increased political activity. Therefore, by incorporating the examination of religious belief systems into the study of religion in politics, we gain a richer understanding of some of the motivating factors that mobilize congregants to be politically active.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PARTICIPATION

The presence of a belief system grounded in the supernatural and a commitment to carrying out divine will is what distinguishes religious institutions from secular organizations (Wald and Smidt 1993, Weber 1992, Stark 2001, Stark and Glock 1968). This, we argue, is what places religious institutions in a unique position to foster political activity in ways that secular organizations cannot. While the existing literature offers rich insights into how religious institutions increase political participation, however, the correlates with participation thus far
examined are not exclusive to religious institutions. The informal networks, working groups, political messages, and organizational structures found in religious institutions can also be found in secular organizations. Given that religious institutions are defined by their belief systems, it is important to think about how individuals interpret the divine mandates they receive from these institutions.

Extant research examining the connection between religious beliefs and participation, however, is inconclusive (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, McKenzie 2001, Becker and Dhingra 2001, Lam 2002). One potential explanation for these inconsistencies is that these studies have emphasized beliefs related to orthodoxy as opposed to implementing beliefs. Orthodoxy provides an assessment of how committed a person is to religious teachings and her belief in the inerrancy of religious texts. Alternatively, implementing beliefs refer to the way the person believes her religion should be carried out (Glock and Stark 1965, 25). Inasmuch as implementing beliefs are how citizens translate their orthodoxy into everyday real-world activities, we would expect implementing beliefs to provide a more precise measure (more so than orthodoxy) of how religious belief systems influence political engagement. Therefore, in addressing whether religious belief systems affect political participation, we argue that we must first identify particular implementing beliefs that are: 1) closely related to religious institutions; and 2) provides a framework for interacting with the world.

Two implementing beliefs that fit these criteria are the Prosperity and Social Gospels. Both emphasize a need to be engaged in the world, but they differ on the nature of this engagement. For example, the Social Gospel maintains that every Christian has an obligation to both herself and to society as a whole to work to achieve a just society (Curtis 2001, Musser and
Price 1992, Rauschenbusch 1918). This religious belief system developed during the political and humanitarian movement that occurred between the Civil War and World War I, known as the Progressive Era. Couched within American Protestantism, the Social Gospel movement grew, in part, as a response to the United States’ growing urbanization. Those who embraced Social Gospel launched a crusade against industrial depression through social justice (White 2002).

While aspects of the Social Gospel can be found in Black religion prior to the Civil War, the Black church became heavily influenced by the Social Gospel during this time, as African Americans experienced the collapse of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. As practiced in the Black community, Social Gospel adherents were obligated to uplift the race, particularly the urban poor, as a means of achieving salvation (Harris 2012). Black pastors embracing the Social Gospel utilized their churches as a vehicle to administer social services as well as to save souls. As White (2012) explains:

…many black pastors in post-Civil War America took responsibility for the whole life of their people. Living in a society where nearly all social institutions soon became strictly segregated, black churches became the central institution in black America. Although black religion has sometimes been depicted as “other worldly, in point of fact the racism within American society helped focus black pastors and lay leaders on this worldly ministry. Many black churches became “institutional churches,” that is, they offered a whole range of services denied blacks in the dominant white society (xxiv-xxv).

Moreover, the Social Gospel has allowed Blacks to connect a biblical justification to their resistance to segregation, discrimination, and racism. Black Social Gospel teachings emphasize the Old Testament’s lessons of freedom and collective deliverance along with the suffering and
ultimate triumph of Jesus Christ (Harris 2012). Black elites have used this narrative to mobilize African Americans, as seen during the civil rights movement and the recent Moral Mondays protests throughout several southern states (Butler 2014, Trip 2013, Morris 1984, King 1958, King 1998). Because the Social Gospel “commands that Christians transform the communities of the poor and acknowledge the existence of racial inequality “ (Harris 2012, 81), we would expect this religious belief system to spur political activism.

Serving as a contrast to the Social Gospel is the Prosperity Gospel. Ministers--such as T.D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar--have utilized a multitude of media sources to preach messages about how to achieve the good life to millions within and outside of the U.S. (Bowler 2013). Prosperity churches are not unique to the Black community, but African Americans represent a disproportionately larger percentage of the congregants attending them (Hladky 2012). Although the roots of the Prosperity Gospel date as far back as the nineteenth century, the rapid spread of the Prosperity Gospel throughout the Black community occurred during the consumer culture of the 1980s. During the decade defined by its opulence, the Prosperity Gospel offered a reason why everyone was not benefiting equally from Reaganomics: “The answer was that those people [especially born-again Christians] had not been taught what the Bible really says about wealth and who should possess it” (Harrison 2005, 151). Adherents of the Prosperity Gospel believe that one need not be concerned with systemic forces that create inequality. Rather, the individual, through tithing and positive thought, can bring about financial stability and good health. Further, the lack of a person’s “material success is attributed not to societal forces but to his or her lack of spiritual commitment” (Harris 2010, , 268). Thus, Blacks—particularly poor and working class Blacks—who continue to experience the economic, social, and political
legacies of Jim Crow, view the Prosperity Gospel as a path to socioeconomic upward mobility (Mitchem 2007, Harrison 2005).

With respect to political participation, we would expect the Prosperity Gospel to serve as an “opiate” because of its emphasis on receiving divine blessings rather than political struggle in order to advance one’s interests. The Prosperity Gospel further depresses political engagement by suggesting that the best way to fix problems is through increased religious activity, such as prayer or tithing, as opposed to increased political activity. Finally, the Prosperity Gospel provides the economically marginalized a nonpolitical explanation for their troubles (Aptheker 1968), which helps explain why the strongest supporters of the Prosperity Gospel come from low resource backgrounds (Schieman and Jung 2012, McDaniel 2016).

To sum, we hypothesize that the Social Gospel will pull people towards politics and the Prosperity Gospel will push people away from politics. These assumptions, however, are based largely on anecdotal evidence. To date, only a handful of studies have empirically examined the link between the Social (Harris-Lacewell 2007, Calhoun-Brown 1999, Reese, Brown, and Ivers 2007) and Prosperity Gospels (Driskell, Embry, and Lyon 2008, Koch 2009) and political behavior. Further, these studies have yielded varying results, suggesting the need for further clarity in this area. Therefore, in what follows, we utilize more refined measures of these two belief systems to examine their effects on African-American political participation. In doing so, we demonstrate that, beyond fostering the skills and networks needed to participate in politics, religious institutions provide citizens with worldviews that can either facilitate or hinder their engagement with the political environment.

DATA AND METHODS
To test our arguments, we utilize the 2012 Religious Worldviews Study (RWS), a stratified national sample of 547 registered and unregistered Black adults who identify as Christians. Using funding from the National Science Foundation, the RWS was administered by GfK Knowledge Networks\(^1\) between October 4 and October 17, 2012 and had a completion rate of 60\%.\(^2\) Most national surveys lack adequate measures of the religious belief systems under investigation. Even specialized religious surveys do not provide adequate measures of the Social and Prosperity Gospels. In contrast, the RWS provided a unique opportunity to operationalize the core concepts of concern and establish their relationships with political participation.

Religious Belief Systems

While there have been a handful of studies (e.g. Benson and Williams 1982, Guth et al. 1997, Mockabee, Wald, and Leege 2007) that have attempted to measure aspects of the Prosperity and Social Gospels, these measures have either had limited predictive power or have not fully captured the essence of these two religious belief systems. Therefore, we use these earlier works as a starting point to more precisely operationalize the Social and Prosperity

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\(^1\) Aware of the biases created by variation in internet access, GfK Knowledge Networks uses “address-based sampling” to select panelists and provides panelists with internet access if they do not already have it. This allows GfK Knowledge Networks to attain greater representation among special survey populations, such as minority groups.

\(^2\) The response summary metrics were calculated using AAPOR RR6, which accounts for the multiple phases of survey recruitment and selection (for a detailed explanation see Callegaro and DiSogra 2008).
Gospels and examine their effects on political engagement. The Social Gospel is an eight-item measure which asks respondents about individualism vs. a religious duty to protect the less fortunate and to reduce inequalities (alpha=.63). The Prosperity Gospel is a six-item measure that asks respondents whether health and wealth can be achieved through the proper expression of faith and whether those who are unable to achieve these goals lack morality and/or faith (alpha=.67).3 The list of items for each of the measures can be found in Table One.4 Before

3 The measures of the Social and Prosperity Gospels included both positively and negatively worded items. Negatively worded items are regularly employed as a method to reduce acquiescence bias (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1991). However, the use of negatively worded items has been debated by scholars, with several noting that the use of these measures lowers the internal consistency of a measure (Woods 2006). Cognizant of this, we pre-tested an all positively worded measure of each belief system against the ones presented. While the measures presented had lower internal consistency, they demonstrated a stronger correlation between various measures of religious, social, and political attitudes. Because of this, we choose to use the measure with both positive and negatively worded items.

4 Given concerns regarding acquiescence bias when agree/disagree response items are used (Saris et al. 2010) and the possibility that responses to the items may be influenced by social desirability, we use a seven-point response scale that ranges from very bad to very good. Before applying this alternative to the 2012 RWS, we conducted a comparison using an undergraduate sample. We found that when the items were presented with a good/bad response scale, as opposed to the agree/disagree response scale, the measures had higher levels of internal consistency and reliability.
administering these items as part of the Religious Worldviews Study, their reliability was gauged in a separate study using a test-retest method with undergraduate respondents. With a .7 correlation between the test-retest responses administered three months apart, we are confident that the measures represent stable and coherent belief systems. Given that the items appear to measure singular underlying concepts, summary measures were calculated using the factor score from the principal components factor analysis of their items. For ease of interpretation, the measures are standardized to range from zero to one (Achen 1982, 71-72).

A comparison of the two religious belief systems demonstrates that the Prosperity Gospel has considerably less support among respondents than the Social Gospel. The Social Gospel measure has a mean of .55 (95% CI [.53, 56]). The strongest adherents of the Social Gospel (those in the 75th percentile) place .60 or higher on this measure. The Prosperity Gospel measure

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5 The internal validity of the measures was tested using Confirmatory Factor Analysis in Amos 16.0 (Arbuckle 2007). A method factor was added to account for correlated measurement error brought about by using reverse worded items (for detailed examples of this method see Nelson 1999, 340-343, Sears, Henry, and Kosterman 2000, 376). The method factor is uncorrelated with the religious ideology factors and their effects on the observed indicators are constrained to be equal. This construction allows the method factor to account for common variance in the observed measures due to question wording and response options. The results demonstrate that individual measures load well with their respective concept. Further, the fit statistics indicate that the model is well specified (Hu and Bentler 1999). The outcome from this analysis provides further evidence that these measures are internally consistent.
has a mean of .40 (95% CI [.38, .42]). The strongest supporters of the Prosperity Gospel place .50 or higher. These two measures correlate negatively with each other ($r=-.35$, p-value<.05). These results illustrate that the Prosperity Gospel and Social Gospel are distinct belief systems that find support among a meaningful proportion of Black religious adherents.

*Political Participation*

The analysis of participation focuses on two outcome variables: self-reported retrospective voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election and an additive index of political activities. Retrospective voter turnout measures responses to the following question, “Did you happen to vote in the 2008 presidential election?” Those who report “no” are coded as zero; those who report “yes” are coded as one. When asked in 2012 if they had voted in the 2008 presidential election, 87% of Blacks in this study reported voting, which is much higher than actual 2008 voter turnout for this group (64.7%) (File and Crissey 2012). The additive index of participation is comprised of a list of activities completed within the twelve months prior to respondents taking the survey. Respondents were presented with a list of eleven activities that asked if they had: attended a political protest or rally; contacted a government official; volunteered or worked for a presidential campaign; volunteered or worked for another political candidate, issue, or cause; given money to a presidential campaign; given money to another

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6 Overreporting of voting is common in most surveys. The studies that have examined the roots of it demonstrate that those who are generally more likely to vote are also more likely to provide a false report of voting, suggesting model estimates of voting are not biased (Silver, Abramson, and Anderson 1986, Belli, Traugott, and Beckmann 2001).
political candidate, issue, or cause; worked with others in their community to solve a problem; served on a community board; written a letter to the editor; commented about politics on a message board or Internet site; or held a publicly elected office. The most popular activity was working to solve a community problem; 13.8% reported taking part in this activity. The norm, however, was not to engage in any activities. About two-thirds (67%) reported engaging in no political activities in the twelve months prior to taking the survey.

Covariates

We base our analysis of political participation on Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model and include three categories of explanatory variables—resource, engagement, and recruitment. Resource variables are those that capture the time, money, and civic skills needed to participate in politics. These variables include the respondents’ income (18-category variable; scaled from 0=less than $5,000 to 1=$175,000 or more) and level of education (13-category variable; scaled from 0=no formal education to 1=professional or doctorate degree). We also include the respondents’ employment status (dichotomous variable; 0=not employed and 1=employed), age, and sex (male=0, female=1). As a proxy for the development of civic skills gleaned through participating in religious institutions, we include frequency of church attendance (6-category variable; scaled from 0=never to 1=more than once a week).

Engagement variables encompass the range of psychological predispositions that lead to political involvement. This includes respondents’ level of political interest, political efficacy, partisan strength, and sense of racial group consciousness. Political interest is measured using responses to the following question, “In general, how interested are you in politics and public
affairs?” This 4-category variable, scaled from 0 (not at all interested) to 1 (very interested), has a mean of .62 (95% CI [.59, .64]). Political efficacy is measured by combining the responses to the following two questions into an additive index (alpha=.61): “How much do government officials care what people like you think?” and “How much can people like you affect what the government does?” Respondents were originally given a five-category Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “a great deal” as their response options. These two items were combined and this variable was rescaled from zero (lowest level of efficacy) to one (highest level of efficacy). On average, respondents’ level of efficacy was .46 (95% CI [.44, .48]). Strength of partisanship is measured by collapsing the traditional 7-point party identification question in half so that the item ranges from 0 (non-partisans) to 1 (strong partisans). In general, the sample respondents are strong partisans (mean=.77; 95% CI [.75, .80]). The last engagement variable is racial group consciousness, measured by the question, “How much do you believe what happens to Blacks has something to do with what happens in your life?” Responses were measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (nothing at all) to 1 (a lot). Consistent with previous studies (Dawson 1994, Tate 1993, Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989), the mean level of group consciousness in this sample was .67 (95% CI [.63, .68]).

Lastly, we include recruitment variables that capture the extent to which respondents engage in non-political contexts that, nevertheless, expose them to political cues. In this study, survey respondents were asked two questions about how often the subject of politics came up at work and church or place of worship. Responses were coded on a 4-point scale that ranged from 0 (never) to 1 (a lot). About 62 percent of respondents report hearing about politics at work, while 65 percent of respondents report hearing about politics at their place of worship.
Our first set of analyses use logistic regression models to estimate the effect of the two religious belief systems on voting behavior. These results are presented in Table Two. Looking first at the Social Gospel, we see that the estimated effect is positive, as expected, but not statistically significant. In addition, as we expected, the effect of the Prosperity Gospel on voting is negative. This effect, however, is not statistically significant.

[Table 2 About Here]

For ease of interpretation, Figure 1 presents the predicted probability of voting for a hypothetical respondent as levels of Social Gospel and Prosperity Gospel vary.7 Figure 1 also includes error bars for each prediction, representing each estimate’s 90% confidence interval. As Figure 1 indicates, the results provide evidence to support our hypotheses that the Prosperity Gospel depresses political engagement, while the Social Gospel increases it. For example, when respondents exhibit low levels of support for the Social Gospel, their predicted probability of voting is .88 (90% CI [.72, 1.04]). When they have high levels of support for the Social Gospel, their predicted probability of voting increases to .95 (90% CI [.88, 1.01]). Likewise, respondents who exhibit low levels of support for the Prosperity Gospel have a predicted probability of voting of .96 (90% CI [.92, .99]), while those with high levels of support have a predicted probability of voting of .86 (90% CI [.70, 1.02]). Again, these differences are not statistically significant. Regardless of their levels of Social and Prosperity Gospel, respondents’ likelihood of voting was extremely high. This should not be surprising since the 2008 presidential election

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7 For this figure and all those that follow, the hypothetical respondent is a Black female, with mean levels of all other variables. Because the Prosperity and Social Gospels are the main variables of concern, they are the only variables displayed in the figures.
was the first with a Black candidate representing one of the two major parties. This election witnessed record levels of Black voter turnout and we see this reflected in respondents’ self-reported retrospective voting behavior.

Table Two also presents the estimated effects of the two religious belief systems on other forms of political participation. 8 Looking at the second column in Table Two, we can see that the Social Gospel had a positive and statistically significant effect on political participation. In contrast, the model presented in the fourth column in Table Two indicates that the Prosperity Gospel had a negative and statistically significant effect on political participation. To assist with the interpretation of these results, Figure Two presents the estimated number of political activities in which a respondent will engage as levels of the two religious worldviews vary. Based on our hypothetical respondent described earlier, when Social Gospel adherence is low, the predicted number of political activities is .11 (90% CI [.03, .19]). When levels of Social Gospel adherence is high, the hypothetical respondent will engage in .56 (90% CI [.27, .85]) activities. This difference is small but statistically significant. On the other hand, when Prosperity Gospel adherence is low for our hypothetical respondent, the predicted number of political activities in which she will engage is .41 (90% CI [.26, .57]). This decreases to .12

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8 Given that the participation index is a count variable with the vast majority of respondents reporting zero activities, an OLS regression is inappropriate. Instead, we use a negative binomial regression to estimate the relationships between the religious belief systems and the participation index.
(90% CI [.05, .18]) when Prosperity Gospel adherence is at its highest level. As was the case with the Social Gospel, this difference is substantively small but statistically significant.

[Figure 2 About Here]

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the limitations of our analyses, given that they rely on self-reported political participation. To be sure, an alternative explanation for our findings is that the same social desirability that led respondents to over-report their voting also leads strong adherents of the Social Gospel to over-report their levels of political participation. Prosperity Gospel supporters, whose religious belief system does not emphasize social activism, do not feel similar levels of social desirability and are therefore less likely to over-report their political activities. While the Religious Worldviews Study has no way of verifying respondents’ participation, an earlier version of the Social and Prosperity Gospel measures\(^9\) was featured on

\(^9\) In this earlier study, the Social Gospel was measured by asking respondents their level of agreement (using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) to the following four statements: God instructs us to protect the poor; God is on the side of the oppressed; Every Christian has a dual obligation to himself and to society; and God commands us to lookout for one another (alpha=.66). Using the same response scale, the Prosperity Gospel was measured by asking respondents their level of agreement to the following four statements: God punishes those who have been immoral by taking their material possessions; God wants his followers to prosper financially; Expressing one’s faith will increase financial prosperity and physical well-being; and God rewards those who are faithful with material possessions (alpha=.57). In the 2008 CCES, the Social and Prosperity Gospels are positively correlated (r=.39, p<.05).
the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES), which validated voter turnout in the 2008 election. Hence, we can examine the relationship with these religious belief systems on actual voter turnout. These results are presented in Table Three.\(^{10}\) The first column of this table indicates that there was a positive and statistically significant relationship between voting and the Social Gospel. Consistent with our expectations, strong adherents of the Social Gospel were more likely to vote in 2008 than non-adherents of this religious worldview. Table Three indicates that there was also a positive relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and voting. However, this effect was not statistically significant. This is consistent with the 2012 RWS analyses that demonstrated that the Prosperity Gospel had a minimal effect on voting.

[Table 3 About Here]

CONCLUSION

Does religion serve as an opiate or stimulant when it comes to political participation? While social critics have argued that religion suppresses the desire to engage the political system, a large volume of scholarly research has shown religion to be a promoter of political engagement. In this article, we have attempted to reconcile these two perspectives. We argue that understanding the effect of religion on political engagement requires an examination of the

\(^{10}\) In order to make the two studies comparable, we restrict our analyses to just the Black Christians in the CCES sample. Unlike the RWS, however, the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study did not feature a large Black sample. Therefore, these findings are based only on 180 respondents. Also, questions related to political efficacy, racial group consciousness, and whether respondents heard political messages at work and/or at their places of worship were not asked as part of the 2008 CCES and, therefore, could not be included in the analyses.
distinguishing elements of religion. Like many civic organizations, belonging to religious organizations allows citizens to develop the civic skills and recruitment networks that foster participation in the political arena. Unlike secular organizations, however, religious organizations aspire to accomplish the wishes of a supernatural being. There is variance, however, in how people believe these wishes are to be fulfilled. Further, which belief system a citizen adheres ultimately has political ramifications. There are those religious belief systems, such as the Social Gospel, which stress actively working to achieve a just society. Adherents of such a belief system are more likely to engage the political process. Religious belief systems, such as the Prosperity Gospel, emphasize good faith and divine favor. Adherents of religious belief systems like the Prosperity Gospel are more likely to forgo political activities in favor of activities directed at achieving individual salvation. Hence, the answer to whether religion serves as an opiate or a stimulant to political activism depends on the types of belief systems predominate within congregants’ religious institutions.

Our evidence suggests that religious belief systems more consistently affected citizens’ willingness to engage in more costly forms of participation while it had very little effect on voting, with the exception being the Social Gospel on the validated vote. This seems counterintuitive since we would expect the religious belief systems to, at a minimum, have an effect on voting before all other forms of political participation. In any other election, this might be the case. Nevertheless, a rational choice approach to understanding the calculus to voting helps to understand why this election was different. From the rational choice standpoint, a likely voter weighs whether the perceived benefits of voting sufficiently justifies the perceived costs (Downs 1957, Riker and Ordeshook 1968). One of the costs associated with voting is possessing the necessary information in order to cast a ballot. Because Barack H. Obama—the first
African-American major party presidential candidate—occupied the top of the Democratic ticket during the 2008 presidential election, this election was highly salient—particularly for Blacks. Thus, the nature of the election had already lowered the costs of voting for many Blacks, which is why we witnessed such unprecedented turnout.

Alternatively, other more labor-intensive forms of participation required an additional emphasis on the perceived *benefits* to political participation, provided by (in part) religious worldviews. For instance, the Social Gospel emphasizes the importance of political activism and the benefits that ensue. The calls for action from contemporary Black leaders, such as the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, stresses the need to be actively involved in governmental affairs in order to bring about equality and justice. Unlike the Prosperity Gospel, the Social Gospel intertwines individual salvation and collective deliverance, thereby highlighting the benefit to political activism. Thus, our research demonstrates that religion need not necessarily affect individuals’ levels of resources (including efficacy, interest, and civic skills) to increase political participation. Religion can increase political participation by independently affecting citizens’ perceived benefit to engaging the political system.

In contrast, strong adherents of the Prosperity Gospel participate less in politics because this religious belief system deemphasizes the benefits of political participation. While Prosperity Gospel adherents engage the material world, they attribute their ability to enjoy the good life to divine favor rather than the result of a political power struggle. Creflo Dollar, one of the prominent Black figures in the Prosperity Gospel movement, has even admonished Blacks for seeking redress from the government for slavery and discrimination. Instead, he has argued: “I don’t want payment from the government. I don’t want to say that a man made me rich. I want God to pay me back” (Dollar 1997, 157).
In practical terms, this study has implications for gauging the healthy functioning of democracy. The importance of religion to politics cannot be overstated. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) note, “Compared with citizens in other countries, Americans are more likely to be affiliated with a religious institution, to attend services, and to take part in educational, charitable, or social activities in conjunction with their churches” (18). Yet, our analyses demonstrate that the Prosperity Gospel can undermine religious institutions’ ability to facilitate citizens’ entry into and engagement with the political environment. Moreover, the strongest Prosperity Gospel supporters are those with few resources or skills, which means that this religious belief system may further push to the fringes a group already politically marginalized.

Finally, as the study of the role of religion in politics advances, it is imperative that scholars continue to examine how religious beliefs influence citizens’ attitudes and participation. As we have demonstrated, the impact of religion on political participation varies by individuals’ perceptions of how to serve the divine. Religion serves as a guiding force in people’s lives; it helps individuals understand how the world works, their purpose in it and how they ought to behave—in their daily behaviors and in the political system. By understanding the content of a person’s religion, we can better understand where she believes she should invest her time, including time that could be spent engaged in political activities. We have examined two prominent religious belief systems in this article, but by no means have we exhausted the range of religious beliefs. There is a host of other religious belief systems across religious traditions that provide a similar push and pull when it comes to politics. Future research should continue to develop measures that tap into the psychological aspects of religion. Doing so will further illustrate the nuances of the role of religion in fostering political participation.
References


AMOS 16. 0 [Computer software] Amos Development Corporation.


Original edition, 1843.


Trip, Gabriel. 2013. "Protests Aim At One Man Who Moved State to Right." *The New York Times*, Section A; Column 0; National Desk; Pg. 11.


Table One: Components of the Religious Belief System Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>% Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Gospel</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God instructs us to protect the poor.</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to confront social unfairness is a sin.</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social justice is at the heart of the Gospel.</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and economic fairness are the core teachings of Christ.</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is more concerned about individual morality than social inequalities.*</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing social issues distracts people from achieving salvation.*</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building the kingdom of God on earth is only about bringing people to Christ, not changing social structures.*</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should only be concerned about bringing people to Christ, not equality.*</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach's alpha</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prosperity Gospel</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God rewards those who live moral lives with material possessions.</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God punishes those who have been immoral by taking their material possessions.</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reason why people of faith fail is because they do not express their faith correctly.</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and illness are indications of sinful behavior.</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your faith only provides spiritual growth, not earthly rewards.*</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether or not you are faithful, the risks in life are still the same.*</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach's alpha</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2012 Religious Worldviews Study.
Note: Values are unweighted percentages. Response categories are 7-point Likert scales ranging from extremely bad to extremely good. % Good includes slightly good, moderately good, and extremely good. Starred items are reverse worded.
Table Two: The Effect of Religious Belief Systems on Political Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social Gospel</th>
<th></th>
<th>Prosperity Gospel</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voted in 2008</td>
<td># of Political Activities</td>
<td>Voted in 2008</td>
<td># of Political Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Belief System</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td>1.622*</td>
<td>-1.287</td>
<td>-1.248*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
<td>(.68)</td>
<td>(1.16)</td>
<td>(.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>.747</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.714</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td>(.41)</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td>(.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>2.696*</td>
<td>-.472</td>
<td>2.112*</td>
<td>-.397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.92)</td>
<td>(.43)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2.119</td>
<td>1.854*</td>
<td>2.691*</td>
<td>1.915*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.332*</td>
<td>.369</td>
<td>.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.57)</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
<td>(.56)</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.029*</td>
<td>.035*</td>
<td>.031*</td>
<td>.033*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.321</td>
<td>-.249</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>-.194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.45)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.46)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>1.635*</td>
<td>1.427*</td>
<td>1.548*</td>
<td>1.874*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td>(.35)</td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td>(.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.676</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td>(.64)</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td>(.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Partisanship</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>-.678*</td>
<td>.532</td>
<td>-.614*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td>(.37)</td>
<td>(.75)</td>
<td>(.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Group Consciousness</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td>-.160</td>
<td>.408</td>
<td>-.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.62)</td>
<td>(.38)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hears Political Messages at Work</td>
<td>-.192</td>
<td>.168</td>
<td>-.645</td>
<td>.329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.69)</td>
<td>(.26)</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
<td>(.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hears Political Messages at Place of Worship</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>1.053*</td>
<td>1.718*</td>
<td>.949*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.92)</td>
<td>(.36)</td>
<td>(.95)</td>
<td>(.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-5.366*</td>
<td>-5.938*</td>
<td>-4.405*</td>
<td>-4.846*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.76)</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td>(1.68)</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-132.48</td>
<td>-357.17</td>
<td>-124.71</td>
<td>-357.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-square</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2012 Religious Worldviews Study.

Note: Self-reported retrospective voting behavior in the 2008 presidential election is coded zero (did not vote) and one (voted) and is estimated using logistic regression with applied sample weight. The number of political activities in which R engaged in the last 12 months ranges from zero (min possible) to 11 (max possible) and is estimated using a negative binomial regression with applied sample weight. Robust standard errors appear in parentheses. Religious worldviews are coded from zero (least adherent) to one (most adherent). Starred coefficients are statistically significant at the p < .10 level (two-tailed test).
### Table Three: The Effect of Religious Belief Systems on Validated Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Belief System</th>
<th>Social Gospel</th>
<th>Prosperity Gospel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.464*</td>
<td>1.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.58)</td>
<td>(1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>-1.081</td>
<td>-1.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.16)</td>
<td>(1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-3.423*</td>
<td>-3.398*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.67)</td>
<td>(1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2.228*</td>
<td>2.198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.35)</td>
<td>(1.339)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>.280</td>
<td>.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.57)</td>
<td>(.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.047*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.387*</td>
<td>1.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.68)</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>2.144*</td>
<td>2.220*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.12)</td>
<td>(1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Partisanship</td>
<td>-1.421</td>
<td>-1.450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.95)</td>
<td>(.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.739*</td>
<td>-2.416*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.57)</td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-61.50</td>
<td>-61.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-square</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Note: Validated vote is coded 0 (R did not vote/vote could not be validated) and one (R’s vote was validated) and is estimated using logistic regression with applied sample weight. Robust standard errors appear in parentheses. Religious worldviews are coded from zero (least adherent) to one (most adherent). Starred coefficients are statistically significant at the p < .10 level (two-tailed test).
Figure 1

Predicted Probability of Voting in 2008, by Religious Worldview

Predicted Probability of Voting

Social Gospel

Properity Gospel

Low

High

Religious Worldview
Figure 2

Predicted Number of Political Activities, by Religious Worldview

- Social Gospel
  - Low
  - High

- Prosperity Gospel
  - Low
  - High