



# Essays on the Role of Politics for Religious Affiliation and Identity

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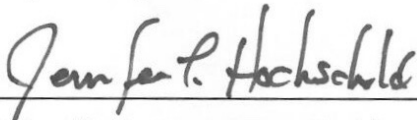
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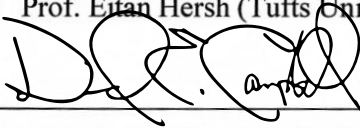
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Date: August 14, 2020



# Essays on the Role of Politics for Religious Affiliation and Identity

A dissertation presented

by

Gabrielle Elizabeth Malina

to

The Committee on Higher Degrees in Social Policy

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Government and Social Policy

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# Essays on the Role of Politics for Religious Affiliation and Identity

## **Abstract**

Political and religious identities are tightly intertwined in the U.S. today. Political attachments causally affect decisions to join and leave organized religion. While the effect of politics on broad religious affiliation is well-documented, the effect on churchgoers' decisions to join individual congregations, and the importance relative to other factors, is less clear.

In this dissertation, I argue that political factors are integral to churchgoers' decisions about congregation affiliation, though these factors do not influence all churchgoers' decisions explicitly. The explicit effect of political considerations depends on churchgoers' ideological orientation and perspective on the relevance of politics for religious practice and identity. For researchers, the extent and nature of political influence depends greatly on the methods chosen to study it.

The first essay focuses on the political relationship between U.S. clergy and the churchgoers they serve. Using original data on clergy's partisanship linked with mass surveys, neighborhood-level vote shares, and surveys of clergy's congregants, the chapter assesses the extent to which churchgoers' are lead by clergy who share their political affiliations. Congregants in mainline Protestant denominations are often lead by out-party clergy, while Catholics are more likely to be lead by co-partisan clergy.

While denomination-level analyses are illustrative, they obscure the processes by which churchgoers select into particular congregations. The second and third essays

focus on measuring churchgoers' demand for political fit with congregations. Chapter three uses quantitative and qualitative survey data to demonstrate that liberal churchgoers are much more likely to explicitly consider politics when choosing congregations, compared to conservative and moderates. However, I demonstrate that churchgoers are divided regarding the relevance of politics for religious practice and identity broadly, and that this divide cuts across ideological and theological lines.

Chapter four assesses the causal effect of politics on congregational choice using a conjoint experiment. I demonstrate that churchgoers are significantly more sensitive to avoiding politically incongruent congregational environments than selecting congruent environments. Importantly, churchgoers do not strongly prefer congruent congregations over politically neutral congregations. These results suggest that when churchgoers are given the option, they strongly prefer to avoid environments that cut against their political identity.

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# 1 | Introduction

“God is not political.”

“The call to action religiously should compel me to work toward social justice.”

“The abortion debate and religion and politics are all intertwined. I can’t separate those beliefs.”

The quotes above illustrate widely divergent perspectives on the appropriate relationship between religion and politics in the U.S. today. These quotes come from white Christians who attend church regularly. The philosophical tension between those who believe politics has no bearing on religion and those who believe the two to be intimately tied speaks to a larger tension between the principle of separation between church and state and the politically polarized nature of religious identity and practice in twenty-first century United States.

The constitutional principle of separation between church and state means that U.S. churches are forbidden from engaging in political campaigning, and, on average, Americans agree that churches should refrain from explicit political activity.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, religious identity in the United States is increasingly associated with political identity. Since the mid-twentieth century, attending church regularly evolved from a bipartisan

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<sup>1</sup>See “Americans Have Positive View About Religion’s Role in Society, But Want It Out of Politics”, Pew Research Center, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>

to highly partisan affair; today, Republicans are significantly more likely to identify as religious and attend church regularly compared to Democrats.

What is more, these trends are not simply correlational; the choice to identify or not with religion is causally related to political convictions. (Campbell et al. 2018; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Patrikios 2008, 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2012). While religious convictions were long thought to be a causal mover of political convictions, scholars have demonstrated the reverse to be true. These studies focus primarily on the influence of partisanship for religious identity and practice – for decisions to affiliate with a religious group or not, and the frequency of church attendance, for example.

Our understanding of the role of politics for decisions about affiliation with particular congregations, however, is much less clear. We do not know the extent of political sorting into congregations, or the extent to which individuals consider political factors when choosing congregations, and why some churchgoers care about political factors and others do not.

This dynamic is arguably the most important for assessing the implications of religious sorting. Local congregations are where connections between religious teachings and the social world are forged and are important contexts for political socialization among congregants (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Bjarnason and Welch 2004; Cavendish 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Gilbert 1993; Mulligan 2006; Smith 2005; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; Wald, Owen and Hill Jr 1990; Welch et al. 1993). The fluidity of the American religious marketplace allows churchgoers to select faith communities that fit their social, spiritual, and, in theory, political needs (Green and Guth 1993; Roof and McKinney 1987). If churchgoers make decisions about congregational affiliation based on political convictions, the connection between religious and political identities will only harden further.

In this dissertation, I seek to answer the questions above using three different method-



ological approaches. First, I operationalize “politics” as political fit – the extent to which individual churchgoers’ political views match other congregants’ or the ideological orientation of the congregation as a whole. Chapter two assesses the political fit between denominational adherents and pastors, asking: how well do the partisan leanings of pastors correlate with congregants’? Chapters three and four shift the focus from congregations and leaders to ordinary churchgoers, and tests the influence of political fit for decisions about congregational affiliation. Chapter three asks: how important is political fit for churchgoers’ decisions, and why do some churchgoers prioritize political fit and others do not? Chapter four tests causal importance of political fit for congregational choice, asking: what is the effect of political fit on churchgoers’ preferences for attending congregations?

The methodological approaches in this dissertation improve upon existing methods used to examine the extent of political sorting into religious communities. Most existing work relies on observational metrics to gauge the extent of political sorting and have concluded that widespread partisan sorting into congregations is rare (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988). With the exception of Putnam and Campbell (2012), existing work implicitly assumes that the observed metrics, like the partisan composition of a congregation, reflect the full extent of political influence on churchgoers’ decisions. In reality, churchgoers may consider political factors, but are unable, for various reasons, to join congregations that are a good fit politically. Like other domains of choice, choosing a congregation involves tradeoffs between multiple factors; even if political factors are not most churchgoers’ first priority, understanding their perspectives on the relevance of political factors for choices about congregational affiliation further illuminates influence of politics for basic decisions about religious affiliation and identity.

This introduction explains the theoretical justification for each question and ap-

proach, and summarizes the results from each chapter. I conclude by considering the implications of this thesis for our understanding of political sorting into congregations and the interplay between religion and politics more broadly, as well as the many questions raised by the analyses that signal promising avenues for future research.

## **1.1 Chapter 2 – Pastors and Political Fit**

Pastors are important spiritual and civic leaders. While clergy's primary focus is spiritual guidance and counseling, many clergy connect their theology with social and political issues, and feel that political leadership is an important part of their ministry (Brewer, Kersh and Petersen 2003; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017). Political messaging by clergy, from the pulpit or through other forms of pastoral communication, has the power to both reinforce and causally shape congregants' political attitudes (Beatty and Walter 1989; Djupe and Gilbert 2001; Guth 1997; Jelen 1992; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Olson 2000; Smith 2005; Welch et al. 1993; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988). Clergy's political leadership – the issues they choose to discuss and the stances they take – is shaped by their theological and ideological orientations, as well as their relationship, politically, to their congregations (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth 1997; Hadden 1969).

Chapter two (which is co-authored with Eitan Hersh) seeks to measure the congruence between clergy and congregants. This relationship is important for our understanding of the nature of political socialization that happens in congregations; while most studies assessing the relationship between clergy and congregants have focused on a single denomination or faith tradition, the analysis in Chapter two assesses the relationship across most major Christian and Jewish denominations in the United States.

The data collected for Chapter two come from publicly accessible denominational directories of clergy that we then link to pastors' voter registration records, yielding party affiliation data for 130,000 American pastors. We then compare pastors' affiliation to the self-reported political affiliations of their denominational adherents, providing a comprehensive assessment of political matches between clergy and their denomination's faithful. Mapping the political relationship between clergy and denominational adherents is a first step in assessing the extent to which clergy serve congregants who share their views. We find that pastors are significantly more politically polarized than their denomination's adherents. Clergy serving in theologically conservative denominations are majority Republican, while clergy serving in theologically progressive denominations are majority Democratic. Catholic clergy are evenly split between Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.

Each denomination's adherents are much less uniformly partisan compared to clergy. Importantly, however, we find that adherents' views on theologically salient issues, like abortion and gay marriage, are strongly correlated with the partisan affiliation of the denominations' clergy. This is an important point for our understanding of selection into religious groups. Evidence suggests many churchgoers do not know the denomination of their congregation, which echoes the general notion that the denominational affiliation is not that informative of individuals' religious identities (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Kellstedt et al. 1996; Newman 1993).<sup>2</sup> Most denominations attract socially and politically heterogeneous adherents, as our analysis confirms. However, we demonstrate that individuals do seem to end up in denominations whose stances on salient political and social issues align with their own views.

The analyses at the denomination level raise important questions about churchgo-

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<sup>2</sup>This obviously is not the case for all denominations. Catholics, for example, demonstrate much higher levels of "brand loyalty" than members of many Protestant denominations.

ers' selection into individual congregations. To understand how congregants relate to clergy, we must examine how individuals select into local congregations. The rest of the analyses zoom into progressively more local levels of analysis; we examine the relationship between clergy and their denominational adherents at the Census region level, the neighborhood level, and, finally, at the congregation level. We use the National Congregation Study to link pastors to the congregations they serve, allowing us to compare congregations' political views to the views of their clergy. We demonstrate that many pastors serve congregations' whose views differ from their own, especially in mainline Protestant denominations.

Understanding the relationship between clergy and their congregations are important for understanding clergy's leadership on political issues as well as the socialization dynamics within congregations. Existing studies have demonstrated that ideological differences between clergy and their their congregation sometimes encourages engagement on certain issues issues and discourages engagement on others (Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017; Djupe and Gilbert 2003). Most studies have examined these dynamics within the context of a single denomination or within a particular faith group. Our data provides a first attempt at mapping clergy's relationships across multiple denominations and faith traditions.

We are releasing our data for public access in hopes that researchers leverage the breadth of our clergy data to further explore and map the relationship between clergy and congregants. In particular, we urge researchers to explore how geography, demographics, and politics interact to shape clergy's relationship to congregants across and within denominations.

## **1.2 Chapters 3 and 4 – Focusing on Congregants’ Demand for Political Fit**

Chapters three and four pivot from studying the relationship between pastors and congregants to focusing on whether and how churchgoers’ prioritize political fit with congregations. These chapters study churchgoers’ demand for political fit, rather than measuring political fit at the denomination or congregation level. Understanding churchgoers’ perspectives on the relevance of political fit – and politics more generally – is critical for assessing the full picture of political influence on religious identity and behavior. Even if churchgoers cannot select congregations that fit their views politically, understanding whether they believe politics are a relevant and important consideration provides another indicator of the extent to which political identity shapes ostensibly non-political behaviors and preferences.

This is especially pertinent for assessing the relationship between political and religious identities. Religion was long considered an important driver of political attitudes, and religious commitment a more foundational identity than partisanship (Layman 2001). However, social identities and associations are increasingly shaped by political identity (Bishop 2009; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mummolo and Nall 2017). Religious identity is not immune to these changes; decisions to affiliate with a religion, to leave religion, and one’s commitment to religion are increasingly shaped by one’s political convictions (Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018; Margolis 2018; Patrikios 2008, 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2012).

While existing studies have focused primarily on identity (affiliating with a particular religious group or denomination), only a handful examine the influence of politics on decisions about affiliation with particular congregations. Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey

(2018) demonstrate that political disagreement with a congregation drives disaffiliation among marginally attached evangelical churchgoers who disagree with the politics of the Religious Right movement. The authors provide convincing evidence of the causal role for politics in decisions about affiliation, but do not directly address the question of how politics affects the decision to join particular congregations.<sup>3</sup>

Putnam and Campbell (2012) address the question of political influence most directly by asking survey respondents to rank the importance of various factors for their decision to join their congregation. Theology and worship style were the factors most often ranked as respondents' primary concern, while respondents' own political and social views ranked near the bottom of the list. However, 25% of respondents listed their political views as the most important issue, which translates to a significant number of regular churchgoers who do, in fact, make decisions about congregational affiliation according to political considerations.

While valuable, these studies are limited in their ability to capture the full picture of political influence on congregational choice. Djupe et al. implicitly assume that the lack of correlation between partisan difference and service attendance means that congregants did not prioritize partisan fit when joining their congregations initially. In reality, it could be that congregants wished to find a politically compatible congregation, but could not, or chose the congregation according to a different measure, like ideological fit or a congregation's stance on particular issues. Putnam and Campbell's ranking measure similarly obscures the full extent of political influence, as second-order concerns may still affect preferences and decisions about congregational affiliation. Finally, these

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<sup>3</sup>Djupe et al. do demonstrate observational associations that speak to the question of sorting. In a two-wave survey that included current churchgoers, they find that frequency of church attendance in Wave 1 is uncorrelated with perceived partisan difference between the respondent and her congregation. The authors suggest this reinforces the idea that partisan fit with a congregation is not a primary factor for decisions to join congregations.

studies do not provide a clear indication of which types of churchgoers pay attention to politics; Djupe et al. find effects among marginally attached Republican evangelicals, while Putnam and Campbell find no differences according to faith tradition and do not mention potential effects according to ideology.

The analyses in Chapters three and four seek to better assess the full extent of churchgoers' demand for politically-similar congregations, and to understand why some churchgoers prioritize political fit and others do not. Both chapters rely on an original survey of white Christian churchgoers, but I employ different methodological approaches in each. Chapter three analyzes respondents' answers to survey questions that ask directly how important the political views of other members were for their decision to join their current congregation, and a follow-up question asking why politics did or did not matter. This analysis provides the clearest measure of the churchgoers' perspectives on the relevance of politics for their decisions, and, importantly, provides answers to the "why" of political influence.

Chapter four directly tests the causal impact of political fit on churchgoers' preferences. Rather than relying on self-reported attention to politics, this analysis uses a conjoint experiment to measure the effects of congregational political congruence, incongruence, and neutrality on respondents' likelihood of attending hypothetical congregations. The conjoint design allows me to measure the relative importance of political fit compared to other factors, like worship style and distance from home, that churchgoers are likely to consider.

The analysis in Chapter three demonstrates that slightly more than a third of respondents view the political climate of a congregation important for their decision to join. Liberals, however, are much more likely than conservatives and moderates to report that politics were important for their decision. The analysis of respondents' answers to the open-response question illuminates the range of perspectives regarding the appropri-

ate role of politics for congregational affiliation as well as religious identity and practice more generally. Specifically, a clear divide emerges between those who believe politics should play no role in religious affiliation or bear on religious identity, and those who clearly prefer to worship alongside those who share their political views, and, more generally, believe one's political identity is intimately tied to their understanding of Christianity. Importantly, this divide cuts across ideological and denominational lines.

The analysis in Chapter four provides a different perspective on the influence of politics for congregational affiliation. The conjoint design allows me to test churchgoers' sensitivity to political congruence, incongruence, and neutrality in hypothetical congregational profiles, as well as the ability to measure churchgoers' overall favorability toward each type of congregation. This is the first study, to the best of my knowledge, that directly measures the causal effect of political fit (or political factors generally) on preferences for congregational affiliation.

The key finding in this chapter is that all churchgoers, regardless of ideological orientation, partisan identity, and denominational affiliation, are much more sensitive to political incongruence than congruence; the causal effect of incongruence is negative and significant across all subgroups, while political congruence has no significant effect on favorability compared political neutrality. Importantly, this effect is stronger than other key factors, like distance from home, worship style, and the size of the congregation. Additionally, respondents' ordering of preferences is universal; regardless of faith or political identity, respondents strongly prefer neutral and congruent profiles over incongruent profiles, but demonstrate no significant preferences for congruence over politically neutrality.

Taken together, these analyses demonstrate clearly that political fit matters for churchgoers' decisions. However, the extent and nature of political influence depends on the methods used to measure it. When asked directly, churchgoers are largely split regard-



ing the importance of politics, and political factors are more important to liberals than conservatives or moderates. When given a choice, however, between congruence and incongruence, churchgoers' across the board prefer congruent environments to incongruent environments.

These findings advance our understanding of how political factors affect congregational affiliation. First, they speak to existing work suggesting that congregational environments are largely socially and politically homogenous (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Most churchgoers do not wish to worship in environments that run counter to their views, meaning they will select into compatible congregations when they have the option to do so, whether those decisions are driven consciously by political considerations or not. Liberals, however, are much more likely to explicitly consider politics compared to conservatives or moderates.

I theorize that, owing to their political minority status relative to the larger white Christian population, liberal churchgoers must consciously seek out political signals to avoid selecting into incompatible congregations. Because the white churchgoing population leans to heavily to the right, conservative and moderate churchgoers can easily assume congregations, even those that do not outwardly signal an ideological viewpoint, will share their views; liberals, on the other hand, must seek out signals of progressive theology and ideology if they wish to worship with like-minded people. Additionally, my findings echo existing work which demonstrates that homogeneously liberal congregations are more politically engaged than conservative congregations, together suggesting that white liberal Christians make more explicit connections between their faith and politics than conservatives and moderates (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Woofalk 2013).

Additionally, these results highlight churchgoers' vastly different perspectives on the relevance of politics for congregational affiliation, as well as religious behavior and identity more generally. Existing work has not clearly explored the implications of these

philosophical differences for shaping associations between religious and political variables. Churchgoers' stance on this question, more than their ideological orientation, likely drives selection into politically compatible congregations. If political views are integral to one's understanding of Christianity, then worshipping in a congregation that shares a similar understanding will likely be a central priority. On the other hand, those who see no connection between religious and political identities likely seek out clearly non-political congregations.

Finally, these results have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between religious and political identities. Ideological sorting, in the long run, will further crystalize connections between individuals' religious and political worlds. Given that disaffiliation from religion is primarily driven by perceived associations of organized religion with conservative politics, further entrenchment of political divisions within Christianity may accelerate disaffiliation from religion.

### **1.3 Future Research**

This dissertation has important implications for future research on the political sorting into congregations, and the broader interplay between politics and religious behavior. All three chapters seek to answer the same question through different methodological and theoretical lenses. Chapter one seeks to measure congruence between religious leaders' views and the views of those they serve. This is valuable indicator of fit for studying pastors' political engagement, but is less useful for understanding how the political climate of a congregation affects socialization among congregants.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus strictly on churchgoers' perspectives regarding the relevance of fit for decisions about congregational affiliation. This approach yields important findings regarding churchgoers' preferences, but I am unable to gauge the extent to which

individuals can act on these preferences when actually selecting into congregations. Generally speaking, we do not have a clear understanding of how common sorting is in reality.

We know that congregations in the U.S. skew conservative; Chaves et al. (2004) demonstrates that 61% of congregations lean conservative, 31% are considered moderate, while only 8% lean in the liberal direction. Results from the conjoint study would suggest, in theory, that liberals will join the 8% of liberal congregations, conservatives will join the conservative congregations, and, perhaps, moderates will be drawn to moderate congregations. Obviously, in reality, even well-defined preferences for political homogeneity will be outweighed by other concerns. One practical impediment to ideological sorting is whether ideologically distinct congregations are available to churchgoers. Do those who care about worshipping with like-minded people live in an area where they can choose among congregations with different ideological orientations? This answer will surely depend on the size of one's community, the size of a denomination's presence in a particular community, and the extent to which one feels attached to a particular denominational affiliation. Future work should examine how these variables affect the choices available to churchgoers.

Similarly, future work should examine whether those who do not prioritize or pay attention to political factors select into moderate or politically-mixed congregations. If they select into a politically homogenous congregation, what are the implications for their political attitudes? We know that congregations' political climates can influence congregants' political outlook (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Smith 2005; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988). Are those who select congregations without attention to political factors more susceptible to persuasion through socialization with other congregants or political cues from clergy?

Relatedly, future work should examine how the transmission of political information

differs in politically-mixed versus politically-homogenous congregations. Do these congregations avoid involvement with or discussion of politically-impinged issues? While the results from Chapter three demonstrate a large segment of churchgoers do not think politics are relevant for worship, results from the conjoint experiment suggest even for these individuals, theological statements or ministries that are politically-tinged risk engendering backlash from congregants. Clergy in mixed congregations are conscious of political divides, suggesting a need to moderate messages to avoid backlash (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). Are these congregations largely able to avoid political conflict or do inevitable disagreements lead to more conflict than within homogenous congregations?

Importantly, how do congregants' options for congregational choice impact dynamics within mixed congregations? The availability of distinct congregational environments will likely motivate some to seek congruence, while others will choose congregations based on other factors. Is conflict more prevalent in mixed congregations that serve an entire community, compared to mixed congregations in larger communities where churchgoers have greater choice among distinct congregational climates?

Additionally, and quite fundamentally, we do not have a clear understanding of what types of information and cues churchgoers' deem political. Overt political activity and cues are rare in worship settings; clergy largely deliver implicit political messages by discussing salient moral and social issues with political dimensions (Brewer, Kersh and Petersen 2003; Chaves et al. 2004; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; ?; Woofalk 2013). Much of this existing work focuses on clergy's perceptions of their own political speech, or relies on congregants' recollection whether they heard clergy discuss particular social and political issues. Existing work has not, to date, let congregants themselves define what they deem to be political. Future work should examine whether churchgoers associate theological information, like mission statements, with a particular ideological or political orientation.

To a certain extent, whether churchgoers perceive churches' belief or mission statements as an ideological statement or not does not affect the implications of ideological sorting; regardless of whether people select into ideologically-congruent congregations according to some explicit consideration political fit, homogeneous environments will nonetheless reinforce existing views. However, understanding what cognitive associations churchgoers make between theological information and their own political views is important for our understanding of just how intertwined faith and politics are in the minds of white Christians today.

This point has important implications for the durability and strength of partisan and religious identities; if theological information is consistently associated with particular ideological worldviews, then politically-motivated sorting is certainly more prevalent than existing work suggests. Furthermore, measuring the extent of theological and political entwinement would reveal the extent to which religious identity has become politicized. This, in turn, will help capture the true scope of political influence for our fundamental social identities.

## 2 | Partisan Pastor: The Politics of 130,000 American Religious Leaders

Co-authored with Eitan Hersh<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

Attitudes and behaviors of ordinary Americans are influenced by elites. Among these elites are not only politicians and media personalities, but also local leaders to whom citizens turn for moral and political guidance. Arguably, one industry in the U.S. incorporates moral leadership into its professional duties more than any other: congregational religious leaders. In spite of a decline in religious attendance and affiliation in recent years, it is still the case that millions of Americans (up to a quarter of the population) attend weekly church services.<sup>2</sup> At these services, and in pastoral duties throughout the week, congregational leaders probably have more opportunity than any other group of professionals in the U.S. to set political agendas, mobilize action, and influence opinion. Moreover, when religious communities make consequential political decisions - for example whether to provide sanctuary to undocumented immigrants - it is often up to

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<sup>2</sup>The exact percentage of Americans who attend weekly services is difficult to estimate because of mis-reporting. (Chaves 2011) suggests attendance might be 20-25% of Americans. See also: <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>

the clergy to decide how to act.

Prior research has both demonstrated and qualified the influence of religious leaders. The basic pressure to retain their jobs and keep their congregations afloat means that most clergy are limited in the extent to which they can, and desire to, influence the opinions of their congregation (Crawford and Olson 2001). Nevertheless, many religious leaders report a desire to engage in politics, with a substantial portion agreeing that it is an important part of their ministry (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017). Their decision to engage in politics depends on a number of factors, like ideological difference within their congregations and their congregation's social status in the local community, for example (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth 1997; Hadden 1969; Olson 2000).

In this paper, we focus on the political relationship between pastors and their congregations. We assess this relationship in a new light using original data that allows us to compare the party registration of pastors to the partisan affiliation of their congregations and denominational adherents. Most denominations in the U.S. have find-a-church websites where anyone can look up information about churches in their area. We scraped forty denominations' websites to compose a list of 186,000 Christian and Jewish pastors.<sup>3</sup> We then utilized the name of the pastor and the location of their congregation to find 130,000 of these individuals in public voter registration records. To our knowledge, this is the largest compilation of religious leaders ever assembled, and the first to link individual pastors to their reported party registration. We then linked this data on pastors' partisanship to surveys of the mass public to compare party affiliation between clergy and their congregants. Our effort collecting data on clergy follows recent work in assembling publicly accessible data sources to study politically-impinged

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<sup>3</sup>Throughout this essay, we use the term 'pastor' or 'clergy' as catch-all for priests, rabbis, reverends, and all other professional religious congregational leaders.

industries like medicine (Hersh and Goldenberg 2016) and law (Bonica, Chilton and Sen 2016).

These new data open up the investigation of several questions regarding pastors' political leadership and their relationship to their congregants. First, we examine how pastors' partisan affiliation varies across and within denomination, asking the extent to which a pastor's denomination is informative of their party affiliation and comparing this relationship to the mass public. We find that denomination is much more informative of a pastors' political affiliation than congregants'. Yet, congregants are still in denominations that align with their views on policy issues tied closely to personal morality.

The causal process that may lead denomination to bear a weak relationship to partisanship among ordinary citizens is unlikely to apply to pastors. Past literature suggests that pastors' denominational affiliation is closely tied with their theological, and in turn their political, orientations (Guth 1997). However, when it comes to the mass public, Putnam and Campbell (2012) show that "religious devotion has largely replaced religious denomination as a salient political dividing line (35)." In general, religiously engaged individuals are Republican and unaffiliated individuals are Democratic, but among the engaged mass public, denominational differences are less apparent than they once were. Religiously-affiliated Americans are intermarrying across denominations and choosing churches based not just on faith and theology but on social relationships and geography. As Margolis (2018) has recently shown, religious participation is also increasingly influenced by political considerations.

Our results suggest that denominations are politically homogenous for the clergy but heterogenous for congregants, implying that congregants are often led by opposite-party leaders. Reinforcing past work, we demonstrate that clergy often lead congregations that hold different views from their own (Hadden 1970; Quinley 1974). This leads to the second major question of our analysis: to what extent are congregants able to



select church leaders whose politics are consistent with their own if they wanted to?

Whether congregants are sorting into politically similar churches is a difficult empirical question to answer. Beginning with our dataset of pastors, we dig down to the regional level, metropolitan level, and finally congregation-level to examine homophily. Our evidence suggests that often times, congregants who wish to remain within their denomination have little choice about the partisanship of their leaders. For Catholics and Orthodox Jews who are bound by geographical constraints, our results demonstrate that, even if they wanted to, congregants could not stay within their denomination and find a church where the pastor's partisanship matches their own. Other structural features of specific denominations (e.g. how pastors are hired or placed into congregations) can inhibit or encourage political matches between clergy and congregations. Further, the extent of partisan mismatch is not uniform across denominations and faith traditions. Congregants regularly encounter leadership with a different political orientation from their own, particularly in ideologically and theologically conservative Mainline Protestant congregations.

In their leadership from the pulpit and in other pastoral activities, pastors translate theological teachings to real-world social and political issues of importance to their congregants' daily lives. In fulfilling their ministerial duties, pastors must balance role as moral leaders – reminding congregants of their commitment to a set of shared values – with their role as leaders of voluntary organizations, the health of which depend on congregants' financial and material contributions.. Our dataset and findings open new doors in understanding the political relationships between clergy and their congregants and clergy's calculus in political engagement.

## 2.2 Understanding Pastors' Political Engagement

Scholarly and public interest in the politics of pastors rests on the assumption that pastors can influence a substantial share of the American public. Prior work demonstrates that pastors are aware of their power as moral, spiritual, and political leaders and that this power has real consequences for congregants' political attitudes as well as their connections with local government officials (Beatty and Walter 1989; Djupe and Gilbert 2001; Guth 1997; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Olson 2000). Further, pastors have played an instrumental role, historically and contemporaneously, in mobilizing congregations across the theological spectrum on social and political issues.

Pastors' personal political views are but one of many factors that influence their decision to engage politically. Despite the fact that many pastors express a desire to engage with political issues, pastors' influence is constrained by a number of social, institutional, and cultural factors and the need to tread lightly on issues that may divide their communities (Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017; Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Crawford and Olson 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Hadden 1969; Jelen 2003). While theological differences were previously thought to structure political engagement of Protestant clergy, contemporary studies focus more on contextual factors like the socioeconomic status of the local community, the extent to which the congregation's theological worldview accords with the values of their wider community, and the opinions of important reference groups like congregants and denominational authorities (Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth 1997; Hadden 1969; Olson 2000; Smidt 2016). Pastors' political leadership cannot be understood in a vacuum; their decision to lead is shaped by interactions between personal and contextual factors.

Thus, we complement our data on the political views of pastors with data on the views of their denomination's adherents and congregants. The views of a pastor's con-

gregation affects the frequency of their leadership on political issues, and mismatches between clergy and congregations can, under certain conditions, affect clergy's propensity to discuss certain issues publicly (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Calfano 2010; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Hadden 1969). While most existing work has examined the political views of pastors for a subset of denominations, our research allows us to measure a set of personal and contextual factors for most major U.S. Christian and Jewish denominations. We examine descriptive relationships between clergy's political views and the views of those they lead. Our results reveal significant mismatches between the politics of a denominations' clergy and it's adherents. We then zoom into the regional and local level to examine whether this mismatch in the aggregate leads to a mismatch between clergy and the congregations they serve.

We focus on the relationship between clergy and congregants within particular denominations because denominations are important organizational structures. Without detailed and comprehensive data at the congregation level, collecting data at the denomination level is the clearest method to link clergy's political views to those they are likely to serve. However, we are cognizant of the fact that the social and political salience of denominational differences have weakened in the past half century among the mass public. An individual's decision to affiliate with a denomination today is less tied to ideological differences than in previous decades (Putnam and Campbell 2012). While theological views of a congregation are important to churchgoers', people choose congregations for a host of reasons, and many denominations within broad faith traditions share similar views, making it easier for individual to move between denominations. As denominational differences and loyalties have receded, and the religious marketplace has expanded, individuals are more likely to look for congregations that fit their specific needs rather than to prioritize a particular denominational affiliation.

Clergy, on the other hand, self-select into denominations in a different way (Djupe

and Gilbert 2009). While congregants may have the ability to select an individual church that comports with their ideological outlook, clergy generally do not have the same choice; clergy must decide among denominations, rather than among churches of various denominations. Thus, clergy's decision to affiliate with a particular denomination, and to enter seminary when applicable, will be more closely tied to their preexisting theological and ideological beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

The different processes by which congregants choose a church and by which pastors choose a denomination will lead to more within-denomination political homogeneity among pastors than congregants. These predictions echo previous work demonstrating political mismatches in Mainline denominations, where clergy have historically leaned more liberal than their congregants (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Hadden 1969; Jelen 1993; Quinley 1974).

While we expect political mismatches between clergy and congregants, congregants rank the theological views of the congregation at the top of their list for choosing their church (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Because the theological climate of a denomination bears on political values of individual congregations (Guth 1997; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988), we expect that denomination will predict the issue positions of congregants, particularly on moral issues often linked to religion, like abortion, even when denomination is less informative of congregants' party affiliations. While each denomination will have more diversity of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents than the clergy of that denomination will have within its ranks, we anticipate that denomination will predict the issue positions of congregants, above and beyond the variation in issue views that is explained by congregants' partisanship.

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<sup>4</sup>It is true that some clergy today have the freedom to serve in congregations within other denominations; a number of mainline Protestant denominations maintain Full Communion partnerships that allow clergy to serve within partner denominations. While statistics on this practice are hard to find, the number of clergy serving in other denominations is thought to be relatively rare.

While we predict general alignment between clergy and adherents on hot-button issues at the denomination level, denomination-level data alone cannot tell us how common political alignment is between clergy's views and those of their congregations, and these local-level mismatches can significantly impact clergy's leadership. Existing work has demonstrated that clergy in many of the largest Christian denominations face congregations with a diversity of political views (Calfano, Michelson and Oldmixon 2017). Political mismatches have been shown to impact clergy's political engagement, though the effect of mismatches appears to vary across issues and denominations (Calfano 2010; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Jelen 2003; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988).

The heterogeneous findings on clergy-congregation mismatches speak to the nuanced nature of clergy political leadership and to the importance of capturing and describing differences between clergy and congregants across a wide range of denominations. Denominations differ structurally in ways that may impact the prevalence, and effects of, mismatches between clergy and congregants. For example, clergy in the Catholic Church are placed in parishes by bishops, and often serve churches within the same diocese where they attend seminary. This hierarchical and regional focus of clergy placement may make it more likely that clergy share their congregants political views in the Catholic Church, compared to denominations where clergy are called from other states or regions. Additionally, mismatches may be less likely in denominations where pastors can be hired from the local community or congregation without formal seminary training – more common among smaller evangelical Protestant denominations – compared to more centralized denominations that use formalized recruitment and placement processes, like the United Methodist Church.

## 2.3 Data

In the spring and summer of 2016, we assembled a list of denominational websites through which we could scrape directories of churches.<sup>5</sup> Most of these websites are owned by the umbrella denomination. In a few cases, third party curators (e.g. `theblackchurches.org`) were used to supplement the denominational resources.

Given the highly decentralized nature of religion in the U.S., our list of denominations (see Table A.1) does not cover all religious congregations, but it does cover the largest umbrella groups among Christian and Jewish affiliates. Some missing denominations, like the Church of Latter Day Saints, are missing because online directories are not made available to the general public and because the church has only lay leaders. Other denominations, like Muslim communities, are not listed in reliable centralized directories. Based on the religious landscape assessed by the Pew Research Center, we estimate that our data collection covers at least two-thirds of all religious congregations in the US, and probably a larger share of religiously affiliated individuals (assuming the denominations included in the analysis have larger congregations on average than the smaller, less centralized denominations not included<sup>6</sup>).

Nearly all directories list the name, address, and other contact information for the churches. Several denominations list other useful information, such as the size of the church congregation. In most cases, the name of the pastor and other church staff members are listed in the directory. In about 4% of the cases, a pastor's home address is listed. In 0.05% of cases, a pastor's spouse is listed. In three denominations, lay leaders (e.g. congregational presidents) are also listed.

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<sup>5</sup>This research was approved by Yale University Institutional Review Board, Protocol Number 1606017891.

<sup>6</sup>Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 2015 report, <http://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

**Table 2.1: Denominations in Study**

Denomination	Churches	Pastors Named	Catalist Linked	Pct. IDed
AME	3,878	873	398	46
Adventist	5,425	5,330	2,700	51
American Baptist	4,959	3,407	1,737	51
Assemblies of God	12,703	12,042	9,904	82
Baptist General	1,423	1,371	1,015	74
Black Churches	2,533	1,954	1,130	58
Brethren	113	101	86	85
COG General Conf	462	462	419	91
COG Anderson	2,063	1,769	1,380	78
Catholic	18,435	16,439	10,783	66
Church of Christ	12,853	2,859	1,570	55
Church of God	5,957	5,347	4,127	77
Disciples of Christ	3,262	2,156	1,334	62
EFCA	1,561	1,339	990	74
ELCA	10,886	9,310	7,530	81
Episcopal	6,826	6,105	3,660	60
The Evang. Church	124	124	94	76
Foursquare	3,842	3,813	2,896	76
Fundamentalist Baptist	4,875	4,803	2,714	57
Greek Orthodox	664	618	311	50
Independent Baptist	7,846	7,249	5,016	69
Jewish, Conservative	530	527	436	83
Jewish, Orthodox	718	601	326	54
Jewish, Reform	1,446	1,445	972	67
Missouri Synod	7,182	6,238	5,218	84
Methodist	32,507	31,395	21,937	70
Nazarene	4,995	3,414	2,345	69
OCA	576	576	249	43
PCA	1,837	1,752	1,466	84
Pentecostal (PCG)	783	33	26	79
Pentecostal (UPCI)	4,416	4,285	3,134	73
Presbyterian	13,454	9,918	7,782	78
CRCNA	953	871	681	78
Reformed Presbyterian	265	238	150	63
Southern Baptist	51,944	24,113	16,392	68
UCC	5,138	4,535	3,240	71
Unitarian	1,412	1,272	724	57
Wisconsin Lutheran	1,207	1,143	996	87
Totals	240,053	179,827	125,868	71 (Med)

Note: In addition to denominations listed here, we also attempted to link COGIC churches and churches endorsed by Joel Olsteen. Both sets of records fail to match to the Catalist file. In addition, we exclude a database of Baptist World Alliance Churches, which only had 12 pastors' names available.

In five denominations, pastors' names were not listed in the online denominational directories in more than 90% of cases (American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, EFCA, Orthodox Jewish, and Nazarene). Several other denominations had missing pastor names for a sizeable share of the churches (AME: 31%; Black Churches: 58%; Church of Christ: 30%; Unitarian: 25%, and others with 1-15% of churches missing pastor information). For churches with missing pastor names, we hired Mechanical Turk workers to find the pastors' names. In many cases, they simply needed to click on the church's website URL (which we obtained from the directories), search for the pastor name, and enter it. In other cases, the Mechanical Turk workers conducted a web search for the church and the pastor. In total, we identified 25,000 additional pastors from listings that did not have pastor name by using Mechanical Turk.

The first two columns of data in Table C.1 lists the number of churches per denomination and the number of pastors' names we identified by denomination. In addition to the data listed in Table C.1, we also collected names of 2,967 faculty associated with 144 seminaries in addition to lay leaders listed in a few directories. We do not analyze those records here.

After creating this dataset, we performed a customized match of the name of the pastor and associated address to the voter file supplied by Catalist. The match is customized to leverage the benefits of working with a national data vendor while also maintaining maximum control to the researchers to perform the matching procedure ourselves. We asked Catalist to send us plausible matches on name of residents in a commuting distance to the church address. (For the small number of records that listed pastors' with their home address, we utilized home address). In 44% of cases, there was exactly one plausible match between a pastor and a voter registration address. These are individuals with unique names within their geographic area. We took a series of steps to identify matches among pastors who matched to multiple voter file records. If a pastor linked to



two potential voter file records but only one of these records matches the pastor exactly on first and last name, we counted that as a match. If the pastor's name contained a middle name or a suffix (e.g. Jr.) and only one of the potential voter file records contained that value, we counted that as a match. If a pastor linked to a record of a current registered voter and a record of someone who used to be a registered voter or is unlisted, we counted the registrant as a match, since this is likely to be the more up-to-date record.

Finally, we consider spatial distance from the church location. In some denominations, pastors live on the church property or very close by. For instance, because of the prohibition of driving on the Sabbath, all Orthodox Jewish congregational rabbis live in walking-distance of the synagogue location. For each denomination, we calculated the median distance between the registration address of unique matches to the church location. For the multiple matches, if only one match is closer than the median distance for that denomination, we counted it as a unique match.

This procedure resulted in a match rate of 70% to a unique Catalist record and a 63% match rate to a current registered voter. This is very similar to the match rate found using a similar methodology in (Hersh 2013) and (Hersh and Goldenberg 2016). The match rate is quite close to the national registration rate of 71%.<sup>7</sup> Some individuals do not match here because they are unregistered. Others would not match because, perhaps on account of a common name, they match to multiple records. The method generates very low rates of false positive matches, according to prior research.

The final column in Table C.1 shows the percent of all pastors for whom we sought voter file records who matched to a unique record. The median denomination had a match rate of 70%, but there is variation by denomination. This variation is likely attributable to the quality of the data in the original denominational directories. Some

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<sup>7</sup>US Census Bureau (2012) Reported voting and registration, by sex and single years of age, November 2012. Voting and Registration. Available at [www.census.gov/hhes/](http://www.census.gov/hhes/)

directories may be more up-to-date than others or contain more information (like middle names) than others.

Most pastors in our matched dataset (91.4%) are the sole pastors at their church. Six percent of pastors have a single co-pastor in the dataset at the same church location, 1.7% have two co-pastors, 0.8% have three co-pastors and 0.07% have between 4-9 co-pastors. We include all matched pastors in our study, even those who are part of a team of leaders at their church.

In a small number of cases (less than 2%), a single pastor at a single church location is listed under multiple denominations. Of the 2,151 records that have such a duplicate, 70% are duplicates of Fundamentalist Baptists and Independent Baptists. Another 5% represent overlaps between Southern Baptists and one of these first two groups of Baptists. Particular for Independent and Fundamentalist Baptists, such duplicates are expected; while we identified separate directories for these two denominations, they are typically considered as one in the same. Apart from these Baptist denominations, there seem to be a small number of church communities that have merged into single institutions, but fall under two different umbrella denominations. For all of these instances, we retain the duplicative records to maintain a comprehensive list by denomination. That is, if a pastor is listed in our database twice, once as a Southern Baptist pastor and once as a Fundamentalist Baptist pastor, we include his record for both denominations. In some analysis below, however, we combine these three Baptist denominations and note our decision to do so.

The key variables utilized in our study come from the Catalist voter file and typically originate in public voter registration records. We utilize party affiliation in the 29 states where registrants are asked to register with a party. We also utilize age and gender, available in voter files and consumer data. Finally, we utilize Catalist's geocoding of precinct, which situates each voter in their precinct and supplies the precinct two-party

vote share from the 2012 presidential election.

To study the mass public, we utilize pooled 2014 and 2016 CCES surveys, which ask detailed questions about denominational affiliation. We utilize self-reported party registration. We also use a variety of self-reported demographic characteristics available on the CCES surveys.

Party affiliation is a simple proxy for a pastor and congregant's political attitudes, but it is a powerful one. In recent years, about 90% of partisans vote for their party's candidates for nearly all offices. Partisanship is also a strong predictor of issue positions. For example, in the CCES, 74% of Democrats support abortion rights whereas 29% of Republicans do. Similarly, 82% of Democrats believe action should be taken to halt climate change, compared to only 25% percent of Republicans. In this research we assume that a pastor's party affiliation is broadly indicative of the issues and candidates they support. This is, of course, an assumption, and it is possible that pastors differ from the rest of the public in that their party is less informative of their general political worldview. However, given existing evidence of a tight link between theology and political ideology among pastors, as discussed above, and the fact that highly educated elites are more likely to hold ideologically consistent attitudes, we believe it is an appropriate assumption that pastors' partisanship is informative of their political attitudes.

### **2.3.1 Link to the National Congregations Study**

To connect a subset of our pastors' dataset to information about their actual congregations, we linked our dataset to the nationally representative 2012 National Congregations Study (NCS). For sampling, the NCS utilizes self-reported congregation information provided by respondents to the General Social Survey (GSS) to produce a nationally representative sample of congregations. The GSS asks respondents who attend church

to report the name and address of their religious congregation. Because the GSS provides a random sample of Americans, this procedure provides a random sample of the congregations to which Americans belong. The 2012 NCS surveyed 1,422 religious congregations across 98 denominations (and many congregations with no denominational affiliation). The surveys were conducted in-person or by phone with one key informant, such as a pastor, rabbi, minister, or other staff member, for each congregation.

We matched our data to the NCS data by linking the church address provided by the NCS respondent to a matching church address and associated pastor in our dataset. There are several denominations included in the NCS for which we did not find or seek online directories; therefore, some NCS congregations did not match because their denominations were not included in our dataset. For example, we were unable to find a centralized directory for the National Baptist Convention, so this denomination was necessarily excluded from our dataset. As mentioned, we did not collect data on the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, the congregations provided by NCS respondents were associated with small, decentralized denominations which we did not include in our dataset, or they were part of denominations we did include, but did not match likely due to out-of-date directories (either the address did not match or the individual church was not listed in the directory). Finally, many NCS congregations fell under the “other” or “nondenominational” label, making it unlikely these churches would match to any churches in our dataset. In total, we matched 614 out of 1,422 NCS congregations to their pastors in our dataset.

Appendix tables A.2 and A.3 compare the representativeness of our NCS matched churches to the full NCS sample across faith traditions and ideological and theological orientations. Table A.2 compares the percent of congregations that fall under each faith

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<sup>8</sup>Similarly, Jehovah’s Witness and COGIC (Church of God in Christ) do not provide or maintain online directories.

tradition across our matched sample, the unmatched sample, and the entire NCS sample. As expected given the gaps in our original data, Black Protestants and non-Christian congregations are underrepresented in our matched sample, while Catholic and Main-line Protestant congregations are overrepresented. Despite these skews, our matched dataset is representative in terms of theology and ideology. Table A.3 displays the percent of congregations that fall under each ideological and theological category. The matched sample looks very similar to the full NCS in terms of ideological and theological distributions. The largest difference appears for ideologically moderate churches; our matched dataset is 5% less ideologically moderate than the nationally representative NCS sample.

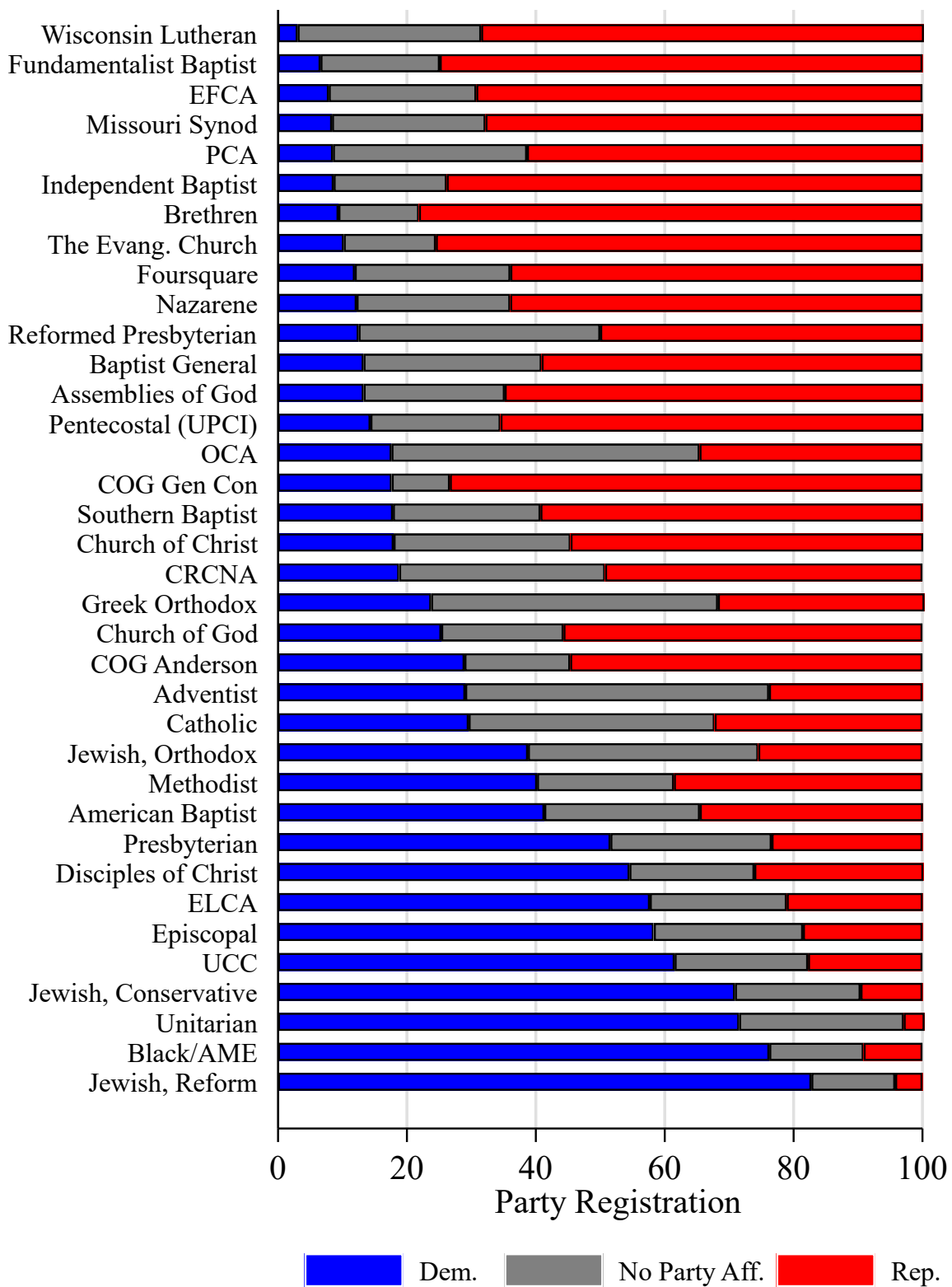
## 2.4 The Partisanship of Pastors

In Figure 2.1, we focus just on pastors who live in 29 party registration states.<sup>9</sup> In these states, voters can choose to register as Democratic, Republican, or independent. This designation becomes a public record. In the figure, we calculate the percentage of pastors who are Democratic, Republican, and no party affiliation. This third category includes a very small set of pastors (1.4%) who are listed with a third-party registration.

The diversity in partisanship among religious pastors is not unexpected, but it is dramatic. Denominations like Reform and Conservative Jews, Black churches, and Unitarian-Universalists have almost no Republican clergy. Pastors associated with Fundamentalist Baptist churches, Independent Baptist Churches, the Evangelical Church network, Brethren churches and others have almost no Democrats. Seventh Day Adventists, the Orthodox Church of America (OCA) and Greek Orthodox churches stand out in that

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<sup>9</sup>Party registration states are quite representative of the country as a whole (Hersh 2015). Further, while denominations are not evenly distributed across regions, the potential bias introduced by looking at only party registration states is unlikely to significantly skew our core results.



**Figure 2.1:** Party affiliation by Religious Denomination in Party Registration States

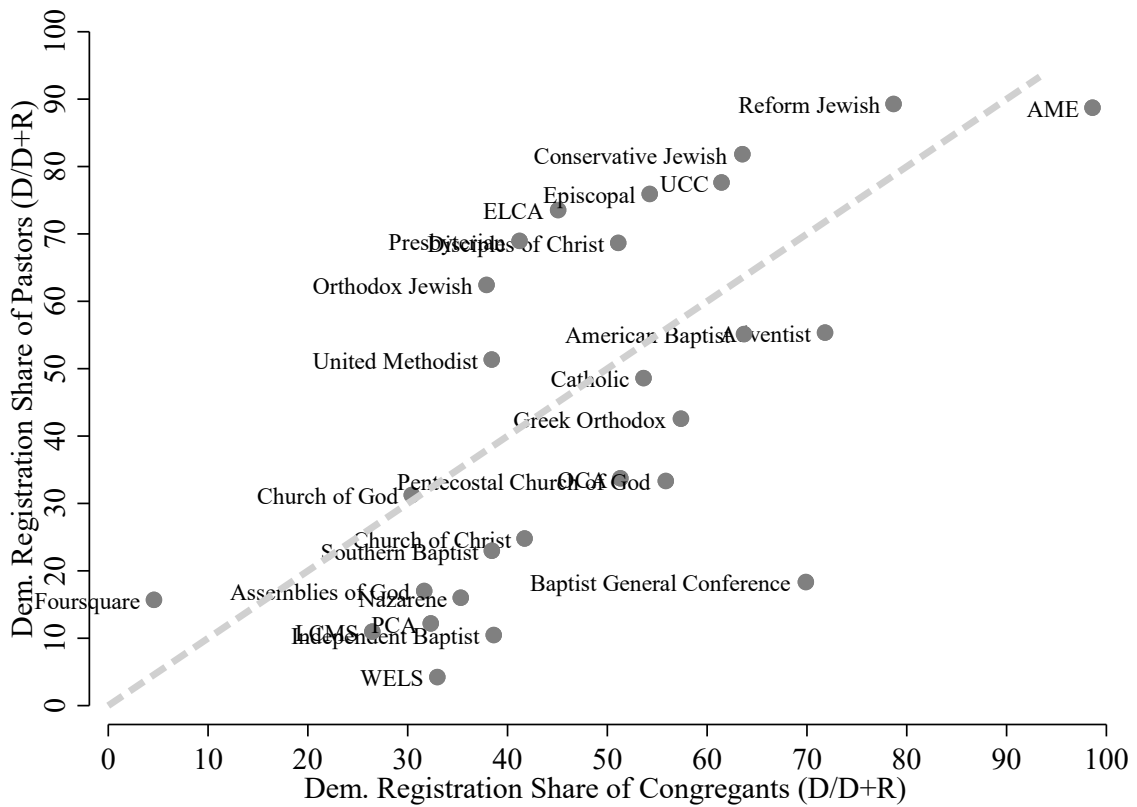
close to half of the pastors in these denominations are registered without a party.

The Democratic denominations also show other signs of liberalism, which aren't particularly surprising. For instance, whereas Republican denominations tend to be entirely staffed by male pastors, the most Democratic of the denominations are 20-60% female. In fact, two of the denominations at the bottom of Figure 2.1 have the greatest share of female pastors, with 45% of Reform Jewish rabbis and 57% of unitarian ministers listed as female. Overall in the population of pastors, only 16% are female.

Our assumption is that partisanship is a useful proxy for understanding a pastor's - and even a church's - views on political issues. Our data on United Church of Christ provides a confirmatory metric of churches' political views. Some UCC churches (31%, N=1,932) are listed in their directory as Open and Affirming, which means they are welcoming to LGBT congregants. Democratic pastors are four times more likely to be working at an Open and Affirming Church compared to Republicans (38% vs. 9%). Of course, this may be because the church community is liberal and hired a liberal pastor to reflect its views or because of a pastor imposing Democratic-aligned views on the congregation. Either way, partisanship is highly correlated with this religiously sensitive and politically sensitive policy issue, which is indicative of the political climate of these churches.

In the next figure, we compare pastors' partisanship with the partisanship of the mass public. Figure 2.2 plots the Democratic share of pastors registered either Democratic or Republican against the Democratic share of CCES respondents (2014, 2016, pooled and weighted) by denomination. We focus only on CCES respondents in the same set of party registration states. We include all denominations for which we have at least twenty party-identifying respondents in the CCES.

Figure 2.2 illustrates a clear relationship between partisanship of pastors and partisanship of congregants for denominations. In denominations that lean Republican, the pastors are Republican; in denominations that lean Democratic, the pastors are Demo-



**Figure 2.2:** Party Affiliation of Pastors vs. Adherents in the Mass Public

Note: Forty-five degree line indicates equal share of partisans among congregants and pastors.



cratic.<sup>10</sup>

Pastors are also clearly more one-sidedly partisan by denomination compared to the mass public. That is, in the more liberal denominations, where about half of the partisans are Democrats, 60-80% of the pastors are Democratic. For example, in ELCA churches, 46% of the members are Democratic while 73% of the pastors are registered Democrats. In the more conservative denominations, where 20-40% of congregants are registered Democrats, pastors tend to be 0-20% Democratic. The median denomination in Figure 2.2 exhibits an absolute difference between pastors and congregants of 19 percentage points.

Figure 2 summarizes partisanship by focusing on Democrats and Republicans (leaving out independents). But the one-sidedness in party affiliation among pastors compared to congregants does not appear to be related to the rates at which pastors or congregants identify as independent. Among pastors, 24% are not registered Democratic or Republican. Among CCES respondents affiliated with a denomination, 23% are not registered Democratic or Republican. What Figure 2.2 is showing, then, is that within any given denomination, adherents will be much less homogeneously partisan than pastors.

One simple way to summarize how informative denomination is of a pastor's party affiliation compared to a member of the public's is through a basic regression analysis. Consider an OLS regression where a binary variable for partisanship (1 for Democrats, 0 for Republicans) is predicted by age, gender, and race (categorical variables for Black,

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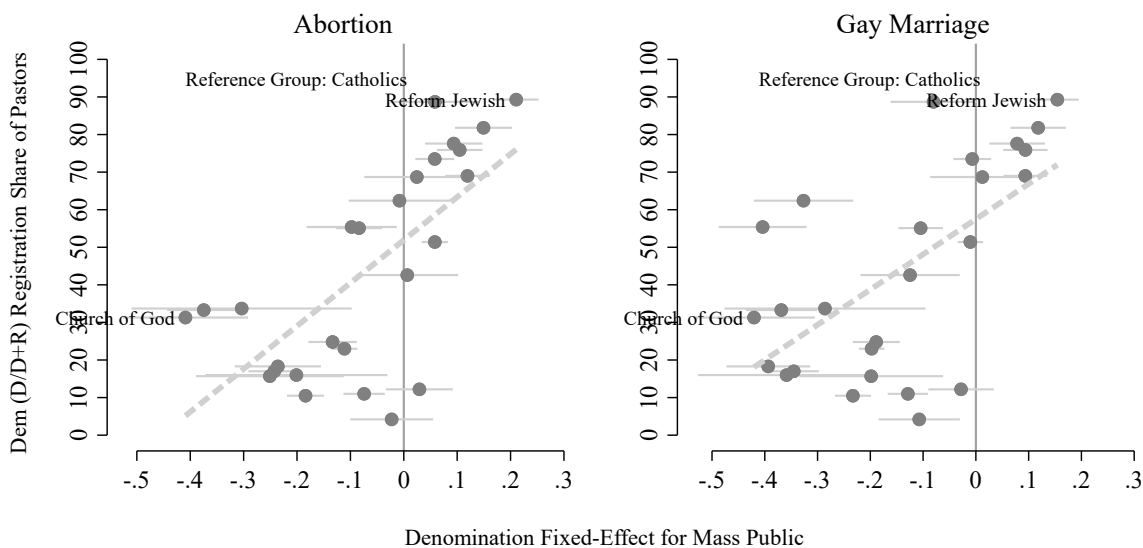
<sup>10</sup>The biggest exceptions to this pattern are the Pentecostal denomination and Baptist General Conference, where the church members are quite Democratic but the pastors are quite Republican. This is likely due to the fact that nearly 30% of Pentecostals in the CCES data are African American, the majority of whom identify as a Democrat, while our clergy data contains no black Pentecostal pastors. For Baptist General Conference, nearly 40% of CCES respondents are African American, while only 9% of pastors are African American. This imbalance suggests two possibilities; first, pastors may be politically out of touch with their congregants if these Pentecostal and Baptist churches are racially integrated. Alternatively, the Pentecostal and the Baptist General Conference directories may fail to include black churches and our separate database of black churches does not make up for the holes in these databases.

Hispanic, and other nonwhite), including state fixed-effects. For CCES respondents, the  $R^2$  from this model is 0.16 (N=17,197) and for pastors, the  $R^2$  is also 0.16 (N=45,430). Now, if we add fixed-effects for denomination, the  $R^2$  for the mass public rises only from 0.16 to 0.20, but the  $R^2$  for pastors doubles from 0.16 to 0.33. Simply put, once accounting for age, race, gender, and state, denomination does not explain much variation in partisanship among the mass public. For pastors, however, denomination adds a good deal of explanatory power, beyond demographics and state of residence.

## 2.5 The Policy Link

Consider two political issues that are thought to be related to religious views: abortion and gay marriage. In the 2014 and 2016 CCES surveys, respondents were asked if they think abortion ought to be always a matter of personal choice and they were asked if they think gays and lesbians ought to be allowed to legally marry. The country is nearly evenly divided on these questions as asked: about 55% support the liberal position in both cases. While these positions are highly correlated with partisanship, a quarter to a third of Democrats and Republicans hold the opposite position from what would be predicted by their party affiliation.

The question is: does religious denomination, which only modestly distinguishes Democrats from Republicans in the mass public, distinguish views on these moral policy matters? We model positions on these questions with an OLS regression. The liberal position (abortion should be available as a matter of personal choice; gays and lesbians should be legally allowed to marry) is predicted for Democratic and Republican respondents by party affiliation, age, gender, race (dummy variables each for blacks, Hispanics, and other non-whites), state of residence, and by denomination fixed effects. Catholics are the excluded category.

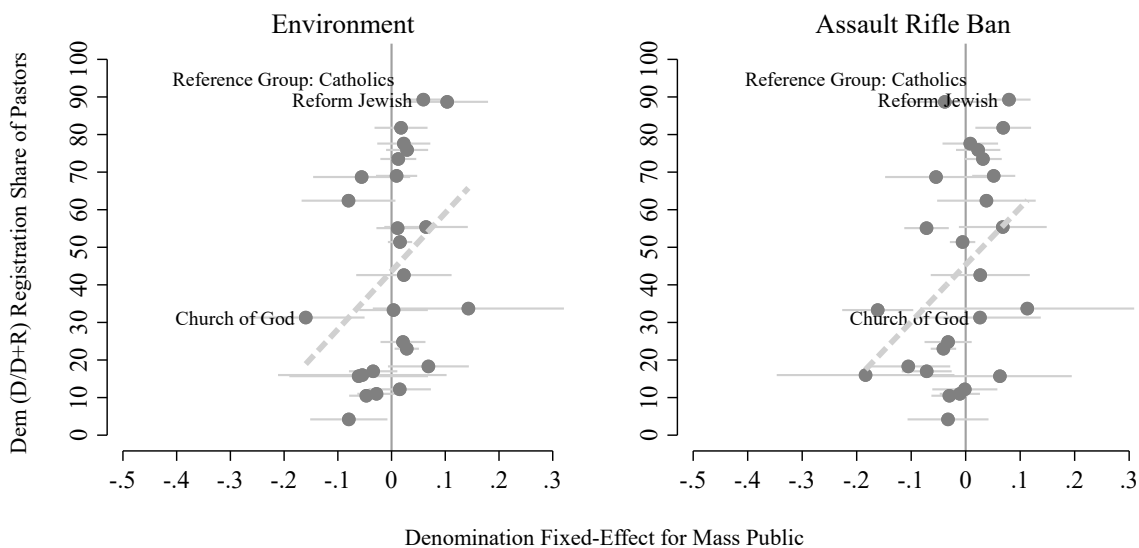


**Figure 2.3:** Party Affiliation of Pastors vs. Adherents in the Mass Public

Note: Forty-five degree line indicates fixed effect is proportional to Democratic share of denominations' pastors.

Figure 2.3 plots the fixed effect for each denomination, with 95% confidence intervals against pastors' party affiliations. Denominations with positive fixed effects have more liberal views compared to Catholics and denominations with negative values have more conservative views (about 55% of Catholics support woman's right to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice). The y-axis presents denominations' share of pastors registered as Democrats. Each graph shows labels for the Church of God and Reform Jewish denominations, which are the extreme positions relative to Catholics on both abortion and gay marriage.

This figure tells us that - even when controlling for party affiliation (and state, and age, gender and race) - denominational affiliation explains variation in policy views in the mass public. Furthermore, the denominations where partisans tend to hold unusually liberal or conservative views on gay marriage and abortion are ones where the pastors in the that denomination are one-sidedly Democratic and Republican.



**Figure 2.4:** Party Affiliation of Pastors vs. Adherents in the Mass Public

Note: Forty-five degree line indicates fixed effect is proportional to Democratic share of denominations' pastors.

In contrast to Figure 2.3, see Figure 2.4. Here, we perform the same exercise but for policy issues that are generally thought to be less connected to religious values: the environment and gun control. To be sure, these issues can be connected to religious values, but they aren't part of culture war fights in the same way. We focus on questions of whether the EPA should regulate carbon dioxide emissions and whether the country should ban assault rifles. On both these questions, respondents are fairly split (61% hold the liberal position on guns; 68% hold the liberal position on the environment). And about 20-30% of each party's respondents hold the view that wouldn't be expected based on their party affiliation alone.

Unlike in Figure 2.3, Figure 2.4 shows that once one controls for basic demographics, state of residence, and most importantly party affiliation, religious denomination does little to distinguish liberal from conservative respondents on these issues.<sup>11</sup> It is on the

<sup>11</sup>For another illustration of this relationship, see Figures A.1 and A.2 in the Appendix. In these graphs, we plot pastors' partisanship against adherents' views on the same policy issues. These graphs demon-

perennial issues of personal morality, abortion and homosexuality, that we see denomination holding predictive power. While we do not know, from this analysis, whether the relationship arises from individuals' sorting into denominations that align with their views versus the persuasive power of pastors and their church communities, other work suggests it is unlikely that pastors are moving their congregants' views in line with their own (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Smith 2005). Instead, it is more likely the case that a significant portion of religious individuals select denominations with theological climates, proxied by pastors' partisanship, that align with their own views on important issues related to personal morality.

## **2.6 Evidence of Homophily**

Across denominations, pastors are more homogeneously partisan than their denominational affiliates, but how frequently are clergy actually politically mismatched from their own congregations? In some of the more lopsided denominations, Figure 2.2 makes clear that many congregants must be led by pastors of the opposite party. Consider, for instance, that a third of party-identifying Conservative Jews are Republican and a third of party-identifying Wisconsin Lutherans are Democratic. But there are hardly any Conservative Rabbis who are Republican or Wisconsin Lutheran ministers who are Democratic. Given geographic constraints, it is essentially impossible that most of these Jewish Republicans or Democratic Lutherans could plausibly attend a congregation with a like-minded leader even if they wanted to.

For the larger and more diverse denominations, we need more detailed information to understand the extent to which pastors and their congregants identify with the same

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strate how pastors' partisanship tracks adherents' views on personal morality issues, but are unrelated to views on less theologically salient issues.

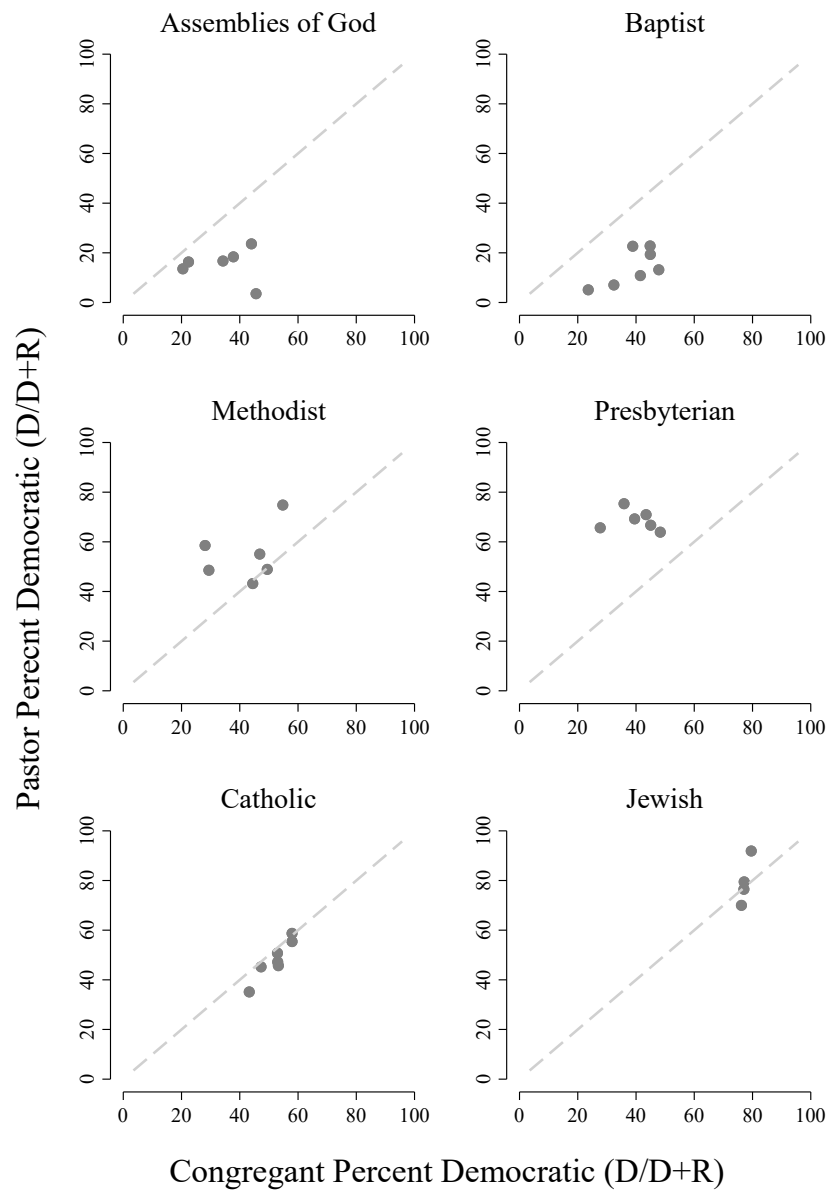
party. We will examine the evidence by zooming in to the regional level, metropolitan level, and finally congregation level. It is worth noting before we proceed that each of these analyses has limitations. In the regional analysis we use the pooled-CCES data to assess the party affiliation of, for example, Presbyterian respondents from the northeast. This probably stretches the CCES data too thinly as the CCES was not designed to be representative at this level of disaggregation. Our second cut at the data uses the pastor's precinct-level Democratic vote share as a proxy for the partisan disposition of the community in which the church is situated. The limitation here is the standard problem of ecological analysis, which is that the precinct vote share may not be indicative of the congregational attendees worshipping in or near these areas. Finally, we observe the pastors who we linked to their actual congregations through the NCS survey. This allows us to most directly compare pastor partisanship with congregation-level political disposition. The drawback is that for this analysis our sample size is in the hundreds rather than in the tens of thousands. Thus, as we explore partisan homophily in these three ways, readers should be attentive to the assumptions and trade-offs that are required in each case.

For ease of interpretation, this section focuses on six groups of faith traditions: Evangelical Protestants represented by Assemblies of God and Baptist;<sup>12</sup> Mainline Protestants represented by United Methodists and Presbyterians<sup>13</sup>; Catholics; and Jews, for which we combine Conservative and Reform denominations and exclude Orthodox. Per Figures 1 and 2, Conservative and Reform denominations are similar in the partisanship of rabbis and congregants, and they differ from the Orthodox.

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<sup>12</sup>We combine Fundamentalist Baptist, Independent Baptist, and Southern Baptists for this category.

<sup>13</sup>When we refer to Presbyterian throughout this section, we are referring to the Presbyterian Church (USA), which is the mainline Protestant denomination; the other two included in our analysis – Presbyterian Church in America and Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church are much smaller, evangelical Protestant denominations.



**Figure 2.5:** Party affiliation of Pastors vs. Adherents Across US Census Regions

Note: Each dot represents a Census region.

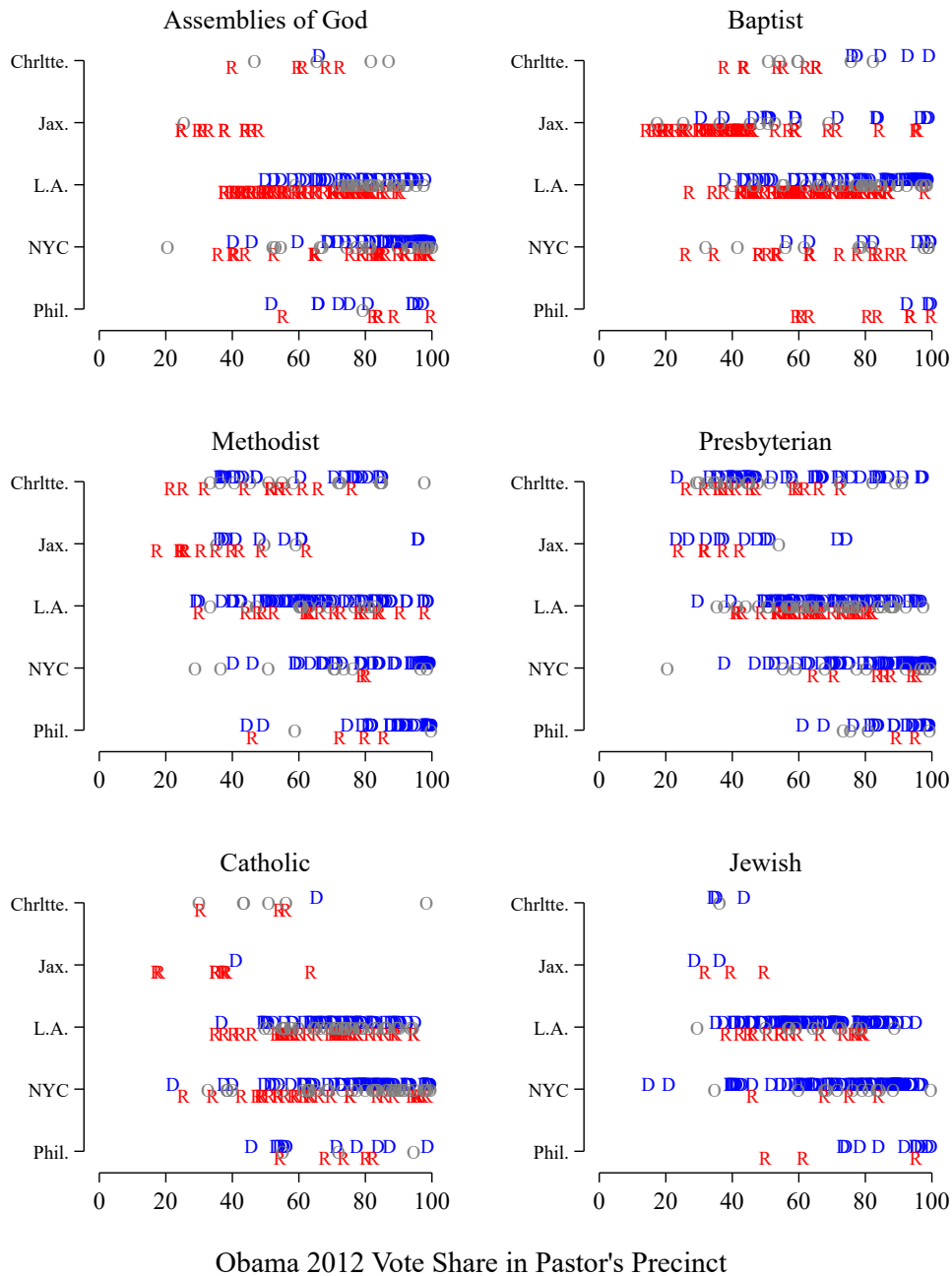
In Figure 2.5, we use the pooled CCES data to estimate the partisanship of denominational adherents within each U.S. Census region. Each dot represents a Census region, and we only include regions for which we have at least twenty or more respondents and twenty or more pastors per denomination.

Pastors are more lopsidedly partisan than congregants in the national analysis; here we examine whether this is generally true within region. In all denominations except the Catholic Church, the partisanship of the congregants in the region bears no systematic relationship to the partisanship of the pastors. We do not see evidence, then, that churches are recruiting pastors who reflect the regional disposition of their denominations' members.

The Catholic Church stands out in Figure 2.5 as an exception to this rule. In each region of the country, the partisanship of priests tracks almost perfectly with the partisanship of the CCES Catholic respondents. Two distinctive features of the Catholic Church likely contribute to this remarkably tight relationship: first, the Catholic Church is different from other denominations in the top-down placement of priests into local churches; second, priests typically serve churches within their home diocese. These structural factors likely make matches between clergy and their congregations more likely, due to bishop oversight of placement decisions, and because clergy likely look politically similar to the congregants in their home diocese.

For a different take, we zoom in to conduct a much more granular geographic analysis. In Figure 2.6, we focus on five large illustrative metropolitan areas: Charlotte, Jacksonville, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia. For each metro area, we situate pastors in their residential voting precinct. The figure shows the precinct-level two-party Obama vote share from 2012 on the x-axis with the party affiliation of each pastor plotted for each metro area arrayed along the y-axis; the Ds Rs and Os represent the party affiliation (O is independent/other) of individual pastors





**Figure 2.6:** Pastor's Party and their Precinct's Obama Vote Share

Note: Ds Rs and Os represent the party affiliation (O is independent/other) of individual pastors, situated in voting precincts based on their home address.

Assume for a moment that the precinct in which the pastor lives is representative of their congregation's politics. The strength of this assumption varies by denomination; in some denominations, the pastor almost always lives in the neighborhood of the church and this neighborhood would appropriately reflect the party disposition of congregants. Given that priests often live on site and that Catholic churches are often neighborhood churches, this assumption may hold for Catholics. In other denominations, we are less confident about this assumption, though existing data suggests it is plausible for white Protestant denominations.<sup>14</sup>

Consider the case of Baptists in Charlotte. The Baptist pastors live in a range of slightly Republican to very Democratic precincts. In the more Republican precincts, the pastors themselves are Republican. In the more Democratic precincts, the pastors are Democrats. We see similar sorting among rabbis in Philadelphia and Methodists in Charlotte.

However, like Catholics in the previous figure, these examples are largely the exception rather than the rule. In most denominations in most cities, the pastors live (and work) in a diverse set of neighborhoods. And the partisanship of those neighborhoods, as measured by Obama vote, does not bear a strong relationship to the pastor's party affiliation. That is, supposing that the precinct is representative of the congregants and supposing that congregants cannot or do not travel to a different neighborhood to attend a church they find more appealing, then many congregants who are partisans of one party are attending churches with pastors who are partisans of the other party.

While Figures 2.5 and 2.6 offer insights into regional variation within denominations, to really understand the extent to which congregants encounter opposite-minded pas-

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<sup>14</sup> Survey data suggest that most regular church attenders do not travel very far to their houses of worship; 68% of Christians report traveling 15 minutes or less to their house of worship; roughly 50% of evangelical and and mainline Protestants travel 15 minutes or less. See <https://www.baylor.edu/baylorreligionsurvey/doc.php/292546.pdf>

tors, we must look at the level of the individual church. To do this, we link our data to the National Congregations Study, giving us data on the political characteristics of pastors own congregations.

The church representative who responded to the NCS survey (in some cases a member of the clergy, in other cases administrative staff) was asked to identify the congregation as ideologically liberal, moderate, or conservative. The respondent was also asked to classify the congregation as theologically liberal, moderate, or conservative. Table 2.2 presents the percentage of Democratic, Republican, and “Other” pastors serving churches classified by their ideological and theological orientations.

**Table 2.2:** Partisan Diversity of Congregations Within Theological and Ideological Orientations

<b>Pastor Party</b>	<i>Church Theology</i>			<i>Church Ideology</i>		
	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal
% Democrat	18	58	87	20	42	87
% Republican	58	21	3	52	44	2
% Other	24	21	10	28	14	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	225	65	44	189	106	34

Note: column entries represent the partisan distribution within a given theological or ideological orientation. Partisan distribution by faith tradition is found in Appendix Table A.4.

The most notable finding is that liberal churches are overwhelmingly led by Democratic pastors, while moderate and conservative churches are led by more politically diverse clergy. For example, among ideologically conservative churches, only 50% are led by Republican pastors, while a full 86% of liberal churches are led by Democratic pastors. The partisan breakdown is similar for theological orientation, with 57% of conservative churches led by Republican pastors and 87% of liberal churches led by Democrats. Importantly, these trends appear to be driven by mismatches among Mainline Protestant churches, where conservative congregations are often led by more liberal clergy<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>See Table A4 in the Appendix for a breakdown of pastors’ ideological orientation across faith traditions.

(Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Hadden 1969). Clearly, pastors are not mirror images of their congregations in terms of political leanings.

Let us summarize what we have learned. Pastors within denominations tend to be more homogenous in their party affiliation than members of the mass public who identify with the denomination, yet pastors' partisanship is strongly correlated with adherents' views on theologically-relevant issues like gay marriage and abortion. We have also learned that the partisan differences between clergy and adherents tend to hold even within geographic region. Whether one lives and worships in a conservative or liberal area of the country or a conservative or liberal neighborhood within a city does not provide a strong indication of the political affinity of one's local religious leader, once controlling for denomination. Third, we have shown in a representative sample of churches the rate at which congregations are led by pastors whose partisan affiliation is different from the congregation. Most strikingly, a fifth of congregations that identify as theologically or ideologically conservative are led by Democratic pastors. Another quarter to third are led by registered Independents. This occurs much less frequently for liberal churches, close to 90% of which are led by registered Democrats.

## **2.7 Discussion**

Fewer than 20% of church attenders say that they chose their congregation for its political or social views (Putnam and Campbell 2012). More than twice as many claim that the style of worship or the preferences of their spouse were important to their decision. This may translate into similar rates of Democrats and Republicans across a range of denominations. If politics is not why congregants choose a particular church or denomination, the fact that there is quite a lot of partisan heterogeneity is unsurprising.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude from data on the mass public that de-

nomination is not an important signal of a church's political orientation. Our data on pastors' political affiliations provide support for the hypothesis that denomination is a powerful proxy for the political affinities of pastors. Different religious denominations have profoundly different orientations toward politics; such differences are likely due to theological traditions and orthodoxy, as well as denomination-specific norms surrounding politics and political behavior. Furthermore, denominational adherents' views on theologically relevant social issues are strongly correlated with the partisanship of their denomination's clergy, suggesting that while partisanship *per se* may or may not be driving individuals' decisions to affiliate with denominations, their decisions do appear to be motivated by broad theological concerns closely tied up with politics.

These patterns in party affiliation and policy views among pastors and their congregants suggest important questions regarding the nature of pastors' political influence and how this influence might vary by denomination. Denominations that are comprised of congregants who exhibit a wide range of party affiliations, but are led by pastors who overwhelmingly identify with one party, provide the context for cross-party interactions at church. Our data suggest these mismatches are common across the theological spectrum, but especially among theologically conservative mainline Protestant denominations. Catholic clergy, on the other hand, more closely resemble the views of their local adherents. Partisan and ideological differences between the pulpit and the pews have important implications for clergy's leadership, in some instances disincentivizing public speech about political issues, and in some cases encouraging speech and activism.

With the release of our data accompanying this article, we hope future scholarship on the intersection of religion and politics can examine pastoral leadership and the political relationship between clergy and their congregants in even greater detail. Scholars of religion and American politics should examine how congruence between clergy and congregations varies by community size. Are mismatches more likely in smaller towns,

where all local Catholics must attend the same parish, for example, compared to urban areas where residents can choose between several congregations within the same denomination? Do clergy face different incentives and constraints on their political leadership in these contexts? Furthermore, on specific issues where pastors are deciding, perhaps unilaterally or perhaps with consultation of their congregation, about whether to take political action like providing a sanctuary for immigrants, future studies with these data could help shed light on the kinds of leaders and communities that make different decisions on such matters.

### **3 | “God is not political”; Understanding White Christians’ Views on the Relevance of Politics for Religious Affiliation and Identity**

Americans by and large agree that politics should be kept out of church. Regular churchgoers express little demand for overt political activity at church, and existing evidence suggests that a minority of churchgoers attend congregations where explicit political activity occurs regularly (Chaves et al. 2004; Putnam and Campbell 2012). However, American religion is increasingly structured, and divided, along political lines. Churchgoing Americans are overwhelmingly Republican, while the growing share of non-religious Americans is overwhelmingly Democratic. These seemingly divergent trends point to an important tension in Americans’ philosophy and practice of religion and politics. Our deeply held belief in the separation of church and state belies the intimate connection between religious and political identities.

Scholars have identified the causal impact of political views in shaping individuals’ decisions about whether to return to religion as well as their decisions to disaffiliate with religious communities or groups. However, the impact of political considerations for individuals’ decisions to join congregations is less clear. Scholars have reached divergent conclusions regarding the extent of political and partisan sorting into congregations, largely relying on observational associations and metrics of partisan sorting in congregations within a handful of denominations or a particular faith tradition. The study of

religious affiliation with congregations is undertheorized relative to the study of religious disaffiliation and deidentification.

In this paper, I reexamine both theoretically and methodologically the extent to which political considerations guide churchgoers' decisions about congregational affiliation. Rather than relying on observational measures of political influence, I field an original survey of white Protestant and Catholic churchgoers and directly ask respondents about the importance of political factors for their decision to join their current congregation. First, I embed a simple priming manipulation to test whether concerns about social desirability affect respondents' self-reported attention to political factors. I find that priming has a null effect on respondents' reported attention to politics, though the direction of the effect suggests a slight backlash when primed to consider the influence of politics on religious behavior.

Secondly, I test the hypothesis that the importance of politics differs according to ideological orientation and levels of religiosity. Specifically, I examine differences between liberals and conservatives and highly religious versus less religious churchgoers in reported attention to political factors. I find that liberals are significantly more likely than conservatives to say that politics were important for their decision, and that more important religion is to churchgoers' lives, the more they feel politics are important for decisions about congregational affiliation.

I theorize that ideological differences stem from liberals' status as political minorities among the white religious population, conditioning them to value cues about the political orientation of potential congregations more than conservatives and moderates. Secondly, I theorize that highly religious individuals more fully intergrate their religious views with their political views than less religious individuals, motivating them to value a political climate that accords with their ideological worldview more than individuals for whom religion and politics are less integrally linked.



Finally, I include an open-response prompt which asks respondents to explain why political considerations did or did not affect their decision to join their congregation. Qualitative analysis of respondents' reasoning demonstrates that liberals are more likely to discuss their reasoning in explicitly political terms than conservatives or moderates, complementing the findings from the close-ended analysis. Additionally, analysis of respondents' reasoning highlights the range of perspectives around the proper relationship between religion and politics more generally. Churchgoers hold dramatically different views regarding the relevance of politics for worship and fellowship within congregations specifically, and for religious identity and practice, broadly. Importantly, this divide cuts across ideological lines, and is obscured when relying on survey data alone.

Examining congregational choice from churchgoers' perspective is important for our understanding of the interplay between religious and political identities. If churchgoers are making decisions about their local religious context according to political beliefs, existing partisan and religious divides will only deepen. While these findings echo existing studies demonstrating strong commitments to separation between religion and politics, the true influence of politics for organizational affiliation is likely understated by existing studies. My findings provide clear evidence that political and religious identities are intimately tied for many churchgoers, and while this perspective is more common among liberals, churchgoers across the ideological spectrum view political fit as a primary concern for congregational choice.

Perhaps more importantly, analysis of respondents' reasoning demonstrates that many view political identity as a barometer of one's commitment to core principles of faith. As the religiously attached population continues to sort along partisan lines, it is likely that macro-level associations between religious and political identity will increasingly affect local-level decisions about congregational affiliation, making sorted congregations more common and political echo chambers stronger.

### 3.1 What's the role for politics in congregational choice?

Religious and political identities are deeply intertwined in contemporary American politics. The “God Gap” is now a well-known feature of the political landscape; regular churchgoers are significantly more likely to identify as Republican, while infrequent churchgoers, or those who do not identify with any religion are overwhelmingly Democratic (Claassen 2015; D’Antonio, Tuch and Baker 2013; Green 2007). In the last half century, patterns in switching within and between denominations and faith traditions, and into or out of religion, have sharpened political differences between major Christian groups (Green and Guth 1993; Roof and McKinney 1987). Republicans are more likely to return to religion in young adulthood than Democrats (Margolis 2018). Among individuals who identify with a particular faith group, white evangelical Protestants are more likely to identify as Republican, while white mainline Protestants are more likely to identify as Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

The increasingly close relationship between religiosity and conservatism is driven in large part by asymmetric disaffiliation in the past half century; liberals have left religion at much higher rates than conservatives (Hadaway and Roof 1988; Nelson 1988). Many scholars have pointed to liberals’ discomfort with the rise of the Religious Right – and the association between religious identity and conservative politics more generally – as key drivers of apostasy (Campbell et al. 2018; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Patrikios 2008, 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2012).

While existing scholarship has examined the role of political views in driving religious deidentification, fewer studies have focused on the role of political views in shaping decisions about affiliation with religious organizations. We know that political iden-

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<sup>1</sup>Statistics come from Pew Research Center’s *Religious Landscape Study*. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/political-ideology/>

tivity structures who remains in religion, but our understanding of how political convictions shape who worships with who is more limited.

Existing work has reached mixed conclusions about the extent of partisan and political sorting into congregations. On the one hand, scholars, especially of deliberative democracy, have demonstrated or assumed congregations as homogenous political environments where political discussion happens between like-minded individuals and open disagreement on issues is rare. (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mutz 2006; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Scheufele, Nisbet and Brossard 2003). Putnam and Campbell (2012) describe religious congregations as “political echo chambers” where, even without explicitly prioritizing political factors, like-minded individuals select into the same congregations, and reinforce one another’s political views through organic social interactions.

On the other hand, several scholars have challenged the idea that congregations are homogenous environments devoid of meaningful political diversity or deliberation. These studies either demonstrate that political deliberation and disagreement happen often in congregations, or rely on observational measures of political heterogeneity to demonstrate that churchgoers are not selecting into congregations based on partisanship (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Neiheisel, Djupe and Sokhey 2009; Sokhey and Mockabee 2012; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018).

Most studies that argue against political sorting rely on observational data of congregational partisan composition or associations between political disagreement with a congregation and service attendance. One exception is Putnam and Campbell’s (2012) study of congregational choice; the authors ask respondents to rank the importance of various factors, including their own political views, for their decision to join their congregation. Theology and worship style are the factors most commonly ranked as respondents’ primary concern, while political and social views rank near the bottom of the list. Putnam and Campbell suggest political views are not driving selection into con-

gregations, but that correlated factors like theology and worship style bring like-minded people together regardless of the explicit salience of politics.

However, 25% of Putnam and Campbell's respondents ranked their own social and political views as the most important factor. While far from a majority, this generalizes to a sizeable number of churchgoers, and this number likely underestimates the true influence of politics, since a second-order concern may still influence respondents' behavior. Furthermore, while Putnam and Campbell do not find differences by religious tradition in who prioritizes political factors, we may expect differences along other dimensions.

While existing methods are valuable for demonstrating a component of the sorting question, they generally do not measure the demand for sorting – that is, how much churchgoers value or pay attention to political factors – and if they do, they cannot tell us why some churchgoers feel politics are an important consideration while others feel they are irrelevant.

In this paper, I advance our understanding of religious affiliation processes by studying respondents' perspectives on the relevance of politics for congregational affiliation, rather than relying on observable metrics, like the extent of partisan homophily in a congregation, to reveal the extent to which politics affects behavior. I theorize and test for variation in churchgoers' perspectives according to ideological orientation, which I suggest are driven by different expectations regarding political fit with potential congregations. Additionally, I analyse respondents' reasoning to better understand what motivates some people to focus on politics, but not others.

Understanding whether churchgoers believe politics is relevant for congregational choice, and why, is important for our broader understanding of the relationship between religious and political identities. Even if churchgoers are not consciously selecting congregations based on political factors, tendencies toward social homophily will serve to further constrict political worlds. If churchgoers' are motivated by political consider-

ations, then particular religious views and values become another marker of political identity, creating additional lines of polarization and animosity.

### **3.2 Do politics matter differently for liberals and conservatives?**

Differences between liberals and conservatives are likely to emerge when considering the role of politics for congregational choice. The white religious population in the United States skews heavily to the right; 77% of white Protestants and Catholics identify as conservative or moderate, while only 22% identify as liberal.<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-twentieth century, liberals have left religion due to political disagreements at disproportionately higher rates compared to conservatives and moderates, due primarily to the rise and visibility of the Religious Right (Campbell et al. 2018; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Patrikios 2008, 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2012). The exodus of liberals from organized religion has several potential implications for the role of politics in congregational choice. First, those liberals who have remained affiliated may be attending liberal churches where conflicts over the Religious Right – or associations between religious identity and conservative politics – are less common, or they may be attending congregations that take a more politically neutral stance. Alternatively, it may be that liberals who continue to attend church are simply not that concerned about politics; they do not worry about the associations between the Religious Right and organized religion, or are generally less bothered by political conflict and disagreement than those who have disaffiliated.

Several trends lend credence to the former hypothesis over the latter. First, it is un-

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<sup>2</sup>43% identify as conservative, 34% as moderates. Trends for party affiliation belie the conservative tilt – 46 % identify as Republican, 37% as Democrats, and 17% as Independents. Statistics come from Pew Research Center's *Religious Landscape Study*. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/political-ideology/>

likely that those who self-identify as liberal and attend church regularly would be unbothered by associations of religion with the Right. Considering self-described liberals are more politically active than self-described conservatives and moderates, a sizeable contingent of liberal churchgoers should care about consistency between their religious and political views. The decision to self-identify as liberal and as a religious person – to reconcile two identities that have been unreconcilable for many – is an explicit choice that does not signal an indifference to politics.

Further, evidence demonstrates that liberal congregations are more explicitly political than theologically conservative congregations; liberal white churchgoers, especially those that attend homogeneously liberal congregations, are more likely to report political activity at church, and liberal pastors are more likely to send explicit political cues, compared to conservative churchgoers and pastors (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Woofalk 2013).

These findings suggest that white liberal churchgoers are sensitive to political fit with a congregation, and many select into liberal-leaning congregations. Because the American religious landscape skews so heavily to the right, liberals should be more sensitive to political cues than conservatives and moderates; a liberal churchgoer will be much more likely to encounter obviously right-leaning congregations than a conservative or moderate would be to encounter a clearly left-leaning congregation. Different expectations of political fit should heighten the salience of cues about the political or ideological leanings of potential congregations.

Secondly, I expect differences between more and less religious individuals' in attention to political factors. I examine differences between those who report religion is highly important for their lives compared to those for whom it is less important. Existing evidence demonstrates that highly religious individuals rely on religion for non-political and political decision-making alike (Putnam and Campbell 2012). For these individu-

als, the link between partisanship and religious views is stronger than among those for whom religion is less salient in their day-to-day lives. I theorize that this integration of religious and political identities should motivate highly religious individuals to seek out a congregational climate that reinforces their theological and ideological views.

To test whether political concerns are activated differently for liberals compared to conservatives and more religious individuals compared to less religious, I rely on a close-ended survey question that asks respondents how much the political views of other members mattered for their decision to join their current congregation. I expect liberals will report that politics were more important for their decision compared to conservatives and moderates, and that highly religious individuals will report politics mattering more for their decision than the less religious.

### **3.3 What are existing methods missing?**

Norms of separation between church and state likely affect many churchgoers' perspectives regarding the relevance of politics for religious affiliation and identity more broadly. Americans express uneasiness about the entwinement of religion with politics; survey data demonstrate that a majority of Americans believe churches should refrain from expressing views on social and political questions and from more explicit electoral involvement, like endorsing candidates during elections (Gecewicz 2020). These commitments will undoubtedly affect churchgoers' attention to political factors and, very likely, their responses to survey questions about political influence. However, these norms are not universal, and our understanding of why some churchgoers prioritize political factors and others do not is limited. Though faith traditions have historically engaged in distinct modes of political activity, existing work has not uncovered clear patterns according to faith tradition or denominational differences.

To better understand how perspectives on political influence shape religious affiliation decisions, I probe respondents' reasoning for their answers to the close-ended question with an open-ended prompt asking respondents to explain why politics did or did not matter for their decision. I use respondents' elaborations to look for patterns in reasoning about political influence. Further, analyzing respondents' reasoning can illuminate what churchgoers mean when they report paying attention to politics; rather than assuming they are most sensitive to ideological or partisan orientations, qualitative analysis provides the opportunity to highlight recurring themes or emphases that refine our understanding of political influence.

More generally, I analyze open-ended responses to highlight the limits of observational data for uncovering the full, and nuanced, nature of political influence on churchgoers' affiliation decisions. Methods used in existing work rely on observable metrics, like partisan composition of a congregation or the correlation between reported political disagreement with a congregation and church attendance, to measure the prevalence of politically-motivated sorting (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988).

While these metrics are valuable, they implicitly assume observable patterns are indicative of actual demand for political congruence or the true extent of political influence on individuals' decisions. In reality, churchgoers may be more sensitive to political factors than what is revealed by patterns in political composition, or other associations between observable metrics. For example, we cannot know with certainty that the heterogeneously partisan congregations mean that congregants did not consider political factors, or prefer to worship in congregations with a diversity of views. It is just as plausible that congregants would have preferred a more homogeneously partisan congregation, but could not join one for various reasons. It is also possible that the observable partisan composition belies a particular ideological climate that congregants perceived and



selected into.

Putnam and Campbell (2012) ask respondents to rank the importance of political considerations, which measures preferences better than relying on objective measures of political composition. However, survey questions in general assume political influence runs in one direction; if respondents report caring about political views generally defined, the usual assumption is that they seek consistency between their views and those of a potential congregation. However, it may be the case that political considerations shape churchgoers decisions in that they specifically seek out a politically diverse congregation or an intentionally neutral congregation.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, I examine how norms of separation of church and state affect survey responses. Because these norms are widely held and deeply entrenched in our national conscience, survey respondents who are asked whether politics mattered for their decision to join a congregation may feel pressure to understate the importance of politics. Conversely, asking respondents about the importance of politics for their decision (i.e. presenting politics as a potential consideration) may cause a backlash, if most churchgoers feel strongly that politics and religion should remain separate. In this case, a backlash would signal that churchgoers do not like to think of themselves as relying on political considerations when making decisions about religious practice or affiliation. In either case, norms of separation between church and state (and religion and politics more broadly) likely condition the social acceptability of making religious affiliation decisions based on politics. This is a unique feature of religious choice compared to other domains of choice like neighborhoods or social networks, where decisions based on political considerations are more socially acceptable (Mummolo and Nall 2017; Huber and

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<sup>3</sup>Neiheisel, Djupe and Sokhey (2009) find that politically mixed churches host more discussion groups than politically homogenous congregations. If one values political diversity and deliberation, heterogeneous congregations may be significantly more appealing than homogenous environments.

Malhotra 2017).

In order to test how these norms shape opinion, I embed a simple experiment in the larger survey, in which I prime some respondents with a subtle cue that prompts them to reflect on how much they pay attention to politics for decisions about congregational affiliation. I then ask all respondents how important politics were for their decision to join their current congregation. In the case of social desirability bias, treated respondents will report that politics is more important for their decision compared to the control group. In the case of a backlash, prompted by cognitive dissonance between principles of church and state and potential political influence, treated respondents will report politics mattering less for their decisions than the control group (Festinger 1957). In the following sections, I describe the data and methodology for each component of the analysis in more detail.

### **3.4 Data & Methods**

I conduct three sets of analyses to better understand the influence of political considerations on congregational choice, each of which I will explain in turn below. All three analyses draw on original survey data I collected during the first two weeks of December 2019. I fielded my survey on Lucid Marketplace.<sup>4</sup>

To collect my sample, I screened respondents on religious affiliation and race, limiting my sample to white Protestants and Catholics. I capped the sample at 2,000 respon-

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<sup>4</sup>Lucid Marketplace, much like Amazon's mTurk, allows researchers to collect their own convenience samples, with the option of adding demographic quotas. One main advantage of Lucid over mTurk is the ability to screen respondents using Lucid's own prescreening surveys at no extra charge to the researcher, and without having to pay for a separate screening survey as required through mTurk. A recent study by Coppock and McClellan (2019) demonstrates that Lucid Marketplace is a suitable substitute for mTurk convenience samples; Lucid respondents are more similar to US demographic and political benchmarks, less professionalized, and results of experimental studies replicated on Lucid align with results produced from other platforms.

dents, and added quotas for gender after the first 1,000 respondents skewed heavily female. Table 4.1 provides the demographic breakdown of my final sample compared to the demographic breakdown of white Protestants and Catholics according to Pew Research Center’s 2014 *Religious Landscape Study*.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3.1:** Demographic Breakdown by Tradition

% Sample	<i>Lucid Sample</i>			<i>Pew Religious Landscape</i>		
	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline
Female	60	63	66	54	55	55
Male	40	37	34	46	45	45
18-29	17	10	7	17	17	16
30-49	32	31	21	33	33	29
50-64	24	26	26	29	29	29
65+	27	33	46	20	20	26
HS or less	19	17	14	46	43	37
Some college	24	28	18	27	35	30
College degree	40	44	49	16	14	19
Post-grad	16	10	19	10	7	14
Conservative	39	61	39	37	55	37
Moderate	36	26	37	34	27	38
Liberal	25	13	24	23	13	20
N	903	723	335	–	–	–

Note: column entries represent the demographic distribution within a given faith tradition.

The sample skews more Catholic, more female, older and more highly educated than the population of white Protestants and Catholics, while the ideological distribution of the sample mirrors the population distribution closely. Accordingly, I cannot make claims that the results from the following analyses generalize to the entire white Protestant and Catholic population in the US. The sample includes respondents from most major white Protestant denominations; Table C.1 in the Appendix displays the full breakdown by denomination.

The survey includes three blocks of questions, the last of which include variables rel-

<sup>5</sup>Pew provides demographic breakdown by tradition; I calculated percentages for white Protestant and Catholic population accordingly. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religions>

evant for the following analyses. The first block asks basic demographic questions, standard religiosity questions, and questions about respondents' ideological orientation and partisan identity. In the next block, respondents participate in a conjoint experiment, described and analyzed in Chapter 3, that tests the relative importance of ideological congruence for congregational choice. After completing the conjoint portion, respondents then answer two questions – one close-ended and one open-ended – about the importance of politics for their decision to join their current congregation; these two questions comprise the main outcome variables for the proceeding analyses.

I embed a simple priming experiment after the conjoint tasks. Respondents complete the conjoint tasks, then answer a question asking them to indicate how much the political views of other members affected their decision to join their own congregation.<sup>6</sup> This question serves as my primary dependent variable. Respondents are randomly presented with the treatment or the control version, which are identical except for the treatment language that precedes the question. Respondents in the treatment group read the question preceded by a short debrief that describes the intent of the conjoint experiment. Respondents in the control group do not receive a debrief statement before the multiple choice question. The short debrief is intended to bring political considerations to the front of respondents minds by reinforcing the focus on politics, and to signal that political factors are potentially important considerations. The question is listed below, with the treatment language bolded<sup>7</sup>.

**Treatment: *Thank you for your participation. The point of this study was to determine whether people prioritize the political views of potential congregations when deciding***

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<sup>6</sup> The conjoint does not explicitly prime political considerations; ideological congruence is embedded among other characteristics respondents are asked to consider.

<sup>7</sup> Respondents assigned to the control group are debriefed about the intent of the conjoint experiment at the end of the survey.

***where to attend church.*** Thinking about your decision to join your current congregation, how much did the political views of the other members of the congregation factor into your decision to join?

**Control:** Thinking about your decision to join your current congregation, how much did the political views of the other members of the congregation factor into your decision to join?

The question has four ordered response options, ranging from 1-4 on a Likert scale: "Not at all", "A moderate amount", "A little", "A lot". After answering the treatment or control version of the question, all respondents then answer an open-response question that probes why politics were or were not important for their decision to join their congregation, which includes a text box for respondents to briefly explain their rationale. The question is listed below.

**Open-response:** *In a few words, describe why the political views of other members did or did not affect your decision:*

The first section of the results presents findings from the experimental manipulation. The second tests for subgroup differences in the importance of political considerations for churchgoers' affiliation decisions using the close-ended survey question. The third section draws on respondents' answers to the open-response question to examine theoretical expectations about the implicit role of political considerations.

The distribution of responses to the close-ended survey question suggests a good deal of variation in respondents views towards the relevance of politics for congregational choice; the mean is 2.07 on a scale of 1-4, the median is "2", corresponding to "a

little bit”. Table 3.2 displays the percentage of responses in each category of the scale. A majority of respondents say that politics mattered at least a little bit for their decision to join their current congregation. Considered another way, a plurality of respondents say that politics did not matter at all. In the analyses below, I will examine both quantitative differences in who prioritizes politics, and qualitative differences in the meaning of respondents’ answers to this question.

**Table 3.2:** Distribution of Responses to Political Importance DV

Code	Not at all (1)	A little bit (2)	A moderate amount (3)	A lot (4)
Count	808	416	513	223
%	41	21	26	11

For all models that include covariates, I control for a standard set of demographic variables, religious affiliation, church attendance, born again identity, and length of time at respondents’ current congregation. For all models, age is a continuous variable measuring respondents’ age at the time of the survey; gender is a binary variable, taking a value of 1 for female and 0 for male; education is measured on a seven-point scale, ranging from "No HS degree" to "Post-graduate degree"; respondents’ ideology is collected on a five-point scale, ranging from "Very conservative" to "Very liberal", but is recoded to a three-point scale for the analysis (1= Conservative, 2 = Moderate, 3 = Liberal); respondents’ self-reported religious denomination is categorized into the three religious traditions applicable for the analysis (1 = Mainline Protestant, 2 = Evangelical Protestant, 3 = Catholic)<sup>8</sup>; church attendance is measured on a 1-7 scale from “Never” attend to attending “More than once a week”; religious importance is collected on a five-point scale ranging from religion is “Extremely important” in one’s life to “Not at all” important, but is collapsed to a binary measure for the analysis where “Extremely” and “very impor-

<sup>8</sup>To guide this categorization, I rely primarily on Putnam and Campbell (2012) categorization, and use Pew Research Center’s categorization scheme as a cross-reference. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religions>

tant” are coded as “high” religious importance and “Moderately,” “Slightly” and “Not at all important” are coded as “low” importance; born again identity is measured using a binary indicator<sup>9</sup>; tenure at current congregation (CongTenure) is a continuous variable measuring the number of years respondents’ have attended their current congregation.

## 3.5 Results

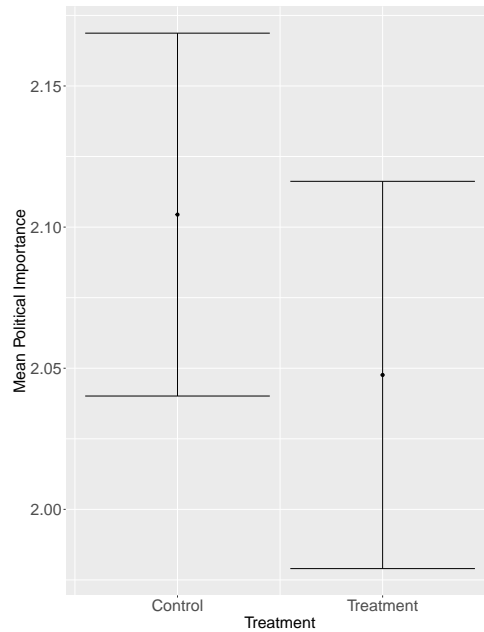
### 3.5.1 Priming politics

The first part of the analysis assesses the effect of priming experiment. Respondents in the treatment group were informed that the exercise they just completed (the conjoint) was designed to measure how much politics affects people’s decisions about which congregations to join. The intent of the prime is to increase the salience of political considerations in respondents’ minds. Figure 3.1 displays the simple difference in means between the treatment and control group, along with associated 95% confidence intervals.

A pairwise test of significance confirms that the treatment had no statistically significant effect on respondents’ reported importance of politics ( $-0.05, z_{diff} = 1.19, p \leq 0.23$ ). Given that the prime was relatively weak, the null result is not surprising; however, the direction of the estimate suggests a potential backlash against the prime. It may be that revealing to respondents that the experiment manipulated political information or otherwise sought to uncover the influence of politics cut against respondents’ commitment to the separation of church and state and the more general intermingling of politics with religion. While I caution against reading too much into the null result, the fact

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<sup>9</sup>Born again identity is a common proxy for theological orthodoxy, either used alone or in combination with other questions tapping doctrinal orthodoxy. Theologically speaking, this tenet describes “the necessity of a ‘born again’ conversion experience for attaining salvation” (Layman and Carmines 1997)



**Figure 3.1:** Difference in Average Importance of Politics by Treatment Status

Note: Estimates represent average reported importance of politics for control and treatment groups. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

that the treatment group reacted by slightly reducing the stated importance lends weak support for the idea that priming the importance of politics may generate cognitive dissonance among churchgoers.

### 3.5.2 Who cares about politics?

While the results from the survey experiment suggest no overall effects from priming the importance of politics, I expect important subgroup differences in who prioritizes political considerations when considering congregational affiliation. First, I expect liberal churchgoers will be significantly more likely than moderates or conservatives to prioritize the political views of their current congregation. For liberals, the salience of political considerations should be heightened due to their relative extremity compared to the average conservative or moderate churchgoer.



To test my hypothesis of ideological differences, I collapse the four-point measure into a binary variable where respondents who report politics mattering “A lot” or “A moderate amount” are coded as 1 and respondents who answer that politics matter “A little bit” or “Not at all” are coded as 0, producing a binary outcome variable of high and low political importance. I use a linear probability model to predict respondents answers as a function of their ideology, religious tradition, born-again identity, and frequency of church attendance, controlling for age, gender, and tenure at their current congregation. To guard against any post-treatment bias, I present results from the OLS model for the control group, and include results for the treatment group in the Appendix.

Table 3.3 below displays results from the linear probability model, estimated for the control group only. Most notably, liberals are 19 percentage points more likely to say that politics matter “a moderate amount” or “a lot” compared to conservatives – the largest effect across all covariates; moderates are no more or less likely than conservatives to report politics mattering for their decision. Religious importance has the second largest effect on reported importance of politics. As expected, respondents who say the religion is “Extremely” or “Very” important for their lives are 12 percentage points more likely to say politics matters at least moderately compared to those for whom religion is less important in their lives. Age has a small negative effect on the likelihood of reporting that politics matters, while education has a small positive effect.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Table B.2 in the Appendix displays results for the treated group. The effect of liberal ideology is stronger among treated respondents compared to results for the control sample, while the effect of religious importance disappears. Born-again identity is positive and significant in the treated sample. These results suggest the treatment perhaps raised the salience of politics for liberals, while other respondents react against the suggestion that politics is relevant for choosing houses of worship. I caution against reading too much into these results, especially the effect of born-again identity. These effects appear to be driven by born-again Catholics who are much more likely than non-born-again Catholics to say that politics matter at least moderately. When running the OLS model on faith tradition subsamples in the treated group, born-again identity is only significant among the Catholic sample. However, this group is very small (only 113 respondents; 13% of Catholic sample) and the majority of their responses to the open-ended question (analyzed below) are difficult to interpret or nonsensical. Born-again identity is much rarer among Catholics than among Protestants, which makes this group worth studying further.

**Table 3.3:** Regression of Binary Political Importance – Control

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	congp2
Moderate	-0.042 (0.036)
Liberal	0.191*** (0.043)
Evangelical	-0.006 (0.047)
Catholic	0.016 (0.045)
Church Attendance	-0.012 (0.010)
Relig. Importance	0.121*** (0.038)
Born-Again	0.051 (0.042)
Age	-0.005*** (0.001)
Female	-0.024 (0.032)
Education	0.038** (0.017)
CongTenure	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	0.467*** (0.091)
Observations	952
R <sup>2</sup>	0.082
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.071

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

For a benchmark comparison, 25% of Putnam and Campbell's (2012) respondents ranked their social and political views as the most important factor for choosing their congregation, while I find that 38% of respondents said the political views of other members mattered a moderate amount or a lot. Putnam and Campbell do not examine differences by ideology; in my study, 31% of moderates, 35% of conservatives and 56% of liberals, report politics mattering at least moderately for their decision, while 41% of those for whom religion is very important report politics mattering at least moderately, compared to 32% of those for whom religion is less important.

These results suggest, firstly, that quantifying the role of politics depends on how the influence of politics is framed in survey questions. Differences between my study and Putnam and Campbell's undoubtedly turn on whether politics are presented as the most important factor. While useful, ranking factors obscures a larger role for political considerations. When asked in a close-ended context, politics matter significantly more for liberals compared to conservatives.

It is important to emphasize that concern about politics cuts across ideological and religious groups, but at the same time, to not overstate the influence of politics according to this measure. Liberals are the only subgroup for whom a majority report politics mattering significantly. Among the full sample, a majority of churchgoers' report that politics did not matter at all or mattered only a little bit for their decision.

In the next section, I explore the reasoning behind respondents' answers and to better understand why politics matter for some respondents and not others, and to better understand respondents' stances on the relevance of politics for congregational choice and religious identity more broadly. Additionally, I use respondents' open-ended answers to explore whether the influence of politics is understated by the close-ended

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However, because their responses indicate less attention to the survey, I hesitate to draw any conclusions about this finding.

measure. Specifically, I examine whether political considerations surface implicitly among those who report politics not mattering for their decisions.

### **3.5.3 The how and why of political influence**

In the previous section, I demonstrate that political factors matter for churchgoers' decisions to join their congregations, and significantly more for liberals than for conservatives and moderates. While these trends align with theoretical predictions based on the political composition of white Christianity, relying on close-ended survey questions alone may obscure important nuance around the influence of politics and respondents' understanding of salient political considerations. Open-ended questions allow respondents to explain their reasoning, which provides important context for interpreting results from close-ended questions; without such analysis, our understanding of the role of politics for congregational choice is incomplete.

In this section, I will first describe the open-ended coding process and final scheme; secondly, I will provide a few basic descriptive statistics on the distribution of codes and categories; lastly, I will analyze important patterns in respondents' understanding of political influence.

Immediately following the close-ended survey question analyzed in the previous section, I asked respondents to explain the reason(s) that politics did or did not matter for their decision to join their current congregation (see exact question wording in section 3.4). This yielded 1,891 interpretable responses for analysis. To create a coding scheme, I first read through all responses to determine the broad "buckets" of responses; this yielded four broad categories, which I further divided into nine exhaustive categories. I then created a test sample of 250 responses that two undergraduates who

were unaware of the project’s purposes coded into one or two of the nine categories.<sup>11</sup> After the calibration round, we met and refined the meaning of the categories according to gaps or instances of ambiguity. The same undergraduates then coded the full sample using the revised nine-category scheme. I then reconciled discrepancies between their codes for the final sample.<sup>12</sup> Table 3.4 outlines the nine categories and examples of each.

**Table 3.4: Open-Response Coding Categories**

Code	Description	Example
1	Separation of church and state/religion and politics	“Politics and religion don’t mix” “Church and government separate”
2	Individualism/freedom of choice	“Everyone is entitled to their opinion” “I don’t care what anyone else thinks”
3	Religious/theological	“I go to serve only God” “Our shared belief in the saving grace of Jesus Christ”
4	Political/partisan	“I don’t want to go to a church that is ultra liberal” “Can’t be in the same church as someone who likes Trump”
5	Morals/personal values	“I prefer a congregation focused on helping others” “It helped me see their morals aligned with mine”
6	Like-minded people	“I want to attend church with people who share my views” “A common cause is important to me”
7	Practical/logistical	“My husband is the pastor” “I was just looking for the denomination”
8	Simple negation/affirmation	“Not a strong factor” “They don’t” “Makes a difference”
9	Unclear/not sure	“Too much drama” “Not sure” “No opinion”

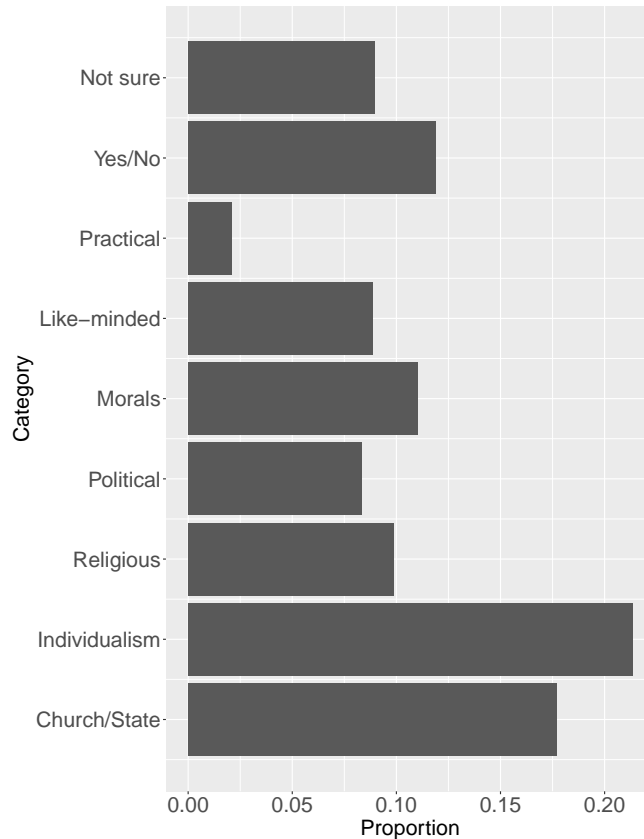
Figure 3.2 displays the distribution of responses across the nine categories for the control sample, with categories along the x-axis and the proportion of each response coded into each category along the y-axis.<sup>13</sup> A plurality (39%) of responses fall into cate-

<sup>11</sup>While the nine categories are intended to be exhaustive, I allowed for a single response to fall into two categories; the second code indicates the second-most applicable category (rather than an equally applicable category). Only 12% of responses received a second code, and the distribution of responses does not change when using the second code for those responses that received one.

<sup>12</sup>The intercoder reliability for the full sample was .68. There were consistent trends in mismatches, especially for categories that overlapped theoretically with others. Category 1 (separation of church and state) and category 3 (religious/theological responses) contain some overlap; many responses indicating that the respondent only attends church “to worship God” could fall in either category, and the general rule of thumb was to categorize the response as a “3” if the respondent explicitly invokes God, the Bible, or other clearly religious subjects. However, some ambiguity remained. Similarly, political or moral reasons (categories 4 and 5) often overlapped with one another, and coders’ judgment about what constituted explicit political reasons versus general moral reasoning was not perfectly symmetric. Similarly, many responses in categories 4 and 5 invoked a desire to worship only among liberals and conservatives, or those who share respondents’ values, which is similar to category 6. Responses were generally coded as a “6” when the respondent said, simply, that they prefer to be around/worship with like-minded people, without invoking a political party or viewpoint.

<sup>13</sup>Figure B.1 in the Appendix displays the distribution for treatment and control groups, as a check for post-treatment bias. A few differences emerge; treated respondents give fewer answers coded as political (4) than the control group. Differences also emerge in frequency of answers in categories 7 (practical) and 8 (simple negation/affirmation). Substantively, the differences in proportion of political answers provide another suggestive indicator that the priming experiment made treated respondents less likely to consider political factors important. Because there are clear differences between the control and treatment

gories 1 or 2, corresponding to separation of church and state/religion and politics, and individualism/freedom of choice. This is not surprising given that a majority of respondents reported politics mattered “a little” or “not at all”.



**Figure 3.2:** Distribution of Response Categories – Control Group

Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.

Another 38% of responses fall into the four other substantive categories – religious, political, moral, and explicit preferences for being around like-minded people. Within each category, there are clear themes that emerge.

18% of the control responses fall into category 1. Responses in this category indicate

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distribution, I analyze patterns solely among the control group. However, I will use the full sample to provide illustrative examples and to analyze responses when I do not intend to generalize trends. Figure B.2 displays the distribution of responses for the full sample.

discomfort with politics in church, and that many respondents simply do not discuss politics in church because they do not feel others' views are relevant for worship.

- "I don't think politics and religion belong together."
- "I feel that I am not looking for politics in a church. Politics do not belong in church."
- "We aren't there to talk about political views, we are there to talk about religion."
- "Faith and state are separate and should remain that way. If it is wrong, I will let God judge that."

21% of control responses fall into category 2. Responses in this category invoke several themes related to individualism and freedom of choice. Many responses invoke individuals' right to believe whatever they want, and that their views are not anyone else's business. Another common theme is that respondents view themselves as possessing strong convictions and are not easily swayed by others' views. Some simply say that they don't pay attention to politics.

- "We can belong to the same congregation and not support the same candidate."
- "Because I don't care about other people's political views, just mine."
- "I believe everyone has a right to their own political opinions ."
- "I always think for myself and form my own opinions."

10% of responses fall into category 3, which encompasses religious and theological reasoning. Many of these responses indicate prioritizing congregations' and other congregants' views about God, the Bible, and/or general theological commitments over political views. A majority of the responses use religious reasons to argue that political

views do not matter. However, some indicated that the political views of other congregants would affect the messages and activities offered by a congregation, or that a church should follow political views that uphold Biblical or other religious principles.

- “What they believe about God and the Bible is more important than a political label.”
- “The most important aspect of choosing a church hinges on the spiritual/Biblical beliefs of the church.”
- “It affected my decision a moderate amount because it would impact what types of services they are involved in and it might be brought up in sermons.”
- “Any church should follow the political views that represent what the Bible discusses and tells us.”
- “Political views sometimes effect Christian beliefs and I believe the Bible is the word of God and to be followed and if church doesnt believe that, I don’t want to go there.”

8% of responses fall into category 4, which draw on explicitly political reasons. Many of these respondents express discomfort with the idea of worshipping among those with out-party or counter-ideological views. Some point to views on particular issues that they do not agree with; abortion, gay marriage, immigration, and racism are the issues that surfaced most frequently. Among Democrats a few suggested they could not worship among those who support Trump, or in a church that supports his values. However, answers explicitly mentioning Trump are the exception rather than the rule.

- “I do not want to go to a church that is ultra liberal.”
- “I do not want to be surrounded by conservatives.”
- “I have no interest in being around people who don’t support reproductive rights.”
- “Liberal and God don’t mix. You can’t be a Christian and believe in abortion.”



- “Because I’m not going to deal with bigotry and racism which is how most Republicans are known to be.”
- “Political views held by other members , such as those who support Trump, could have a definite effect on me if they were held by the congregation as a whole.”

11% of responses fall into category 5, which draw on morals and personal values. This category is particularly interesting and also contains a good deal of overlap in sentiment with category 4. Generally speaking, reasons coded as a 5 were those that drew on general moral principles without linking them explicitly to a political party or ideology. These responses came from both sides of the aisle, and while most came from respondents who believed politics were important, some expressed a commitment to tolerance of political differences. One particularly interesting difference arises when comparing responses indicating that political beliefs speak to core values in this category with responses from categories 1 and 2, which often implied that political views were irrelevant to whether someone was a decent person.

- “I want to be around Christians that are loving and accepting of everyone.”
- “I want to be associated with people who believe in individual responsibility and accountability.”
- “Because I wouldn’t feel comfortable contributing to a cause that I did not believe in.”
- “Our congregation focuses on diversity therefore I expect a diversity of political views.”
- “Because values and political views go hand in hand, in my opinion.”
- “Political views actually DO tell us a lot about how, if, and how much someone loves others.”

9% of responses fall into category 6, which is relatively straightforward. These respondents indicate simply that they would prefer to worship or associate with like-minded

people. This category, in theory, contains a good deal of overlap with categories 4 and 5. The main difference is that responses in this category are shorter and do not indicate an ideological or moral direction. Some suggest that politically mixed congregations would be more prone to tension and strife, or that it's easier to get along with those who share your views.

- “I wanted to be around like minded people.”
- “I like attending services with people who share similar views as me.”
- “I think having political views in common is necessary to a congregation to be effective.”
- “It is important to share viewpoints with other members to feel more attached to the group and have a sense of belonging.”
- “Like minded people are easier to get along with.”

Only 2% of responses fall into category 7, which generally indicated that practical concerns were a higher priority than politics or the worldview of a congregation. The main priorities that surfaced here were denominational affiliation (especially among Catholics), family ties/needs, and location.

- “I am Catholic and assigned a parish based on where I live.”
- “I grew up in this church as my dad was the pastor there. The members became family and that's why I joined.”
- “We were there for the Christian Ed program and could ignore any political issues if necessary.”
- “We choose the congregation because of it being close to our home.”

Category 8 encompasses answers that simply affirm or negate the importance of politics. The vast majority of responses in this category negate the importance. Category

9 encompasses answers that are unclear or the respondent is unsure. 12% of responses fell into category 8 and 9% in category 9.<sup>14</sup>

While a few of these categories could in theory apply to reasoning for and against political importance, a general pattern emerges when comparing response categories to respondents' answers to the close-ended question. Figure 3.3 displays the distribution of responses between those who report politics mattering "a moderate amount" or "a lot" (coded as "high" political importance) and those who for whom politics matters "a little bit" or "not at all" (coded as "low" political importance)<sup>15</sup>. Those who believe politics are at least moderately important for their decision are more likely to give answers drawing on political and moral reasons, and to prefer worshipping with like-minded people. Those who report that politics do not matter or matter only "a little" are more likely to give answers invoking separation between religion and politics (church/state) and individualism/freedom of choice. Of the remaining substantive categories, religious and practical concerns surface at relatively equal rates regardless of political importance.

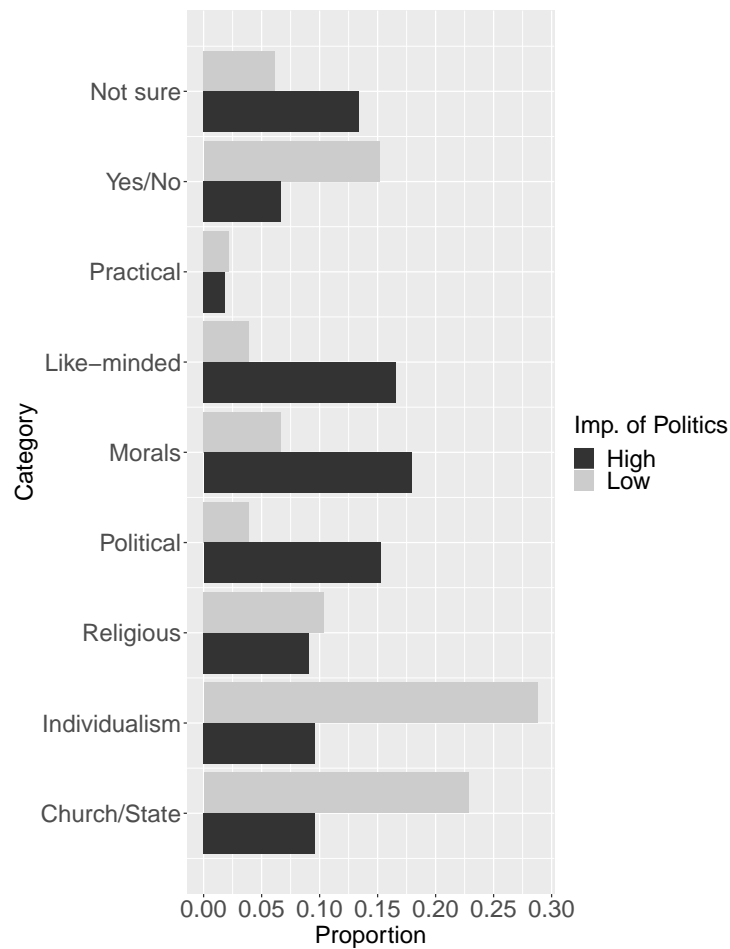
While there are obviously exceptions to this pattern, the differences demonstrate that those who believe politics are important for congregational choice consider political views indicative of personal values, and do not want to attend a church that promotes values at odds with their own. The issues that motivate this stance are the classic wedge issues that divide progressive and traditional Christians.

Importantly, while all ideological viewpoints are represented in each category, there are clear differences in the distribution according to respondents' ideological orienta-

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<sup>14</sup>This relatively high rate of simple yes/no responses (category 8) is likely a reflection of the question wording. Asking respondents to explain their reasoning "in a few words" does not encourage lengthy responses. This is a methodological shortcoming of the design, and likely means I am underestimating the prevalence of most substantive categories/themes.

<sup>15</sup>This plot displays only responses from the control group, but the pattern is identical among the treatment group

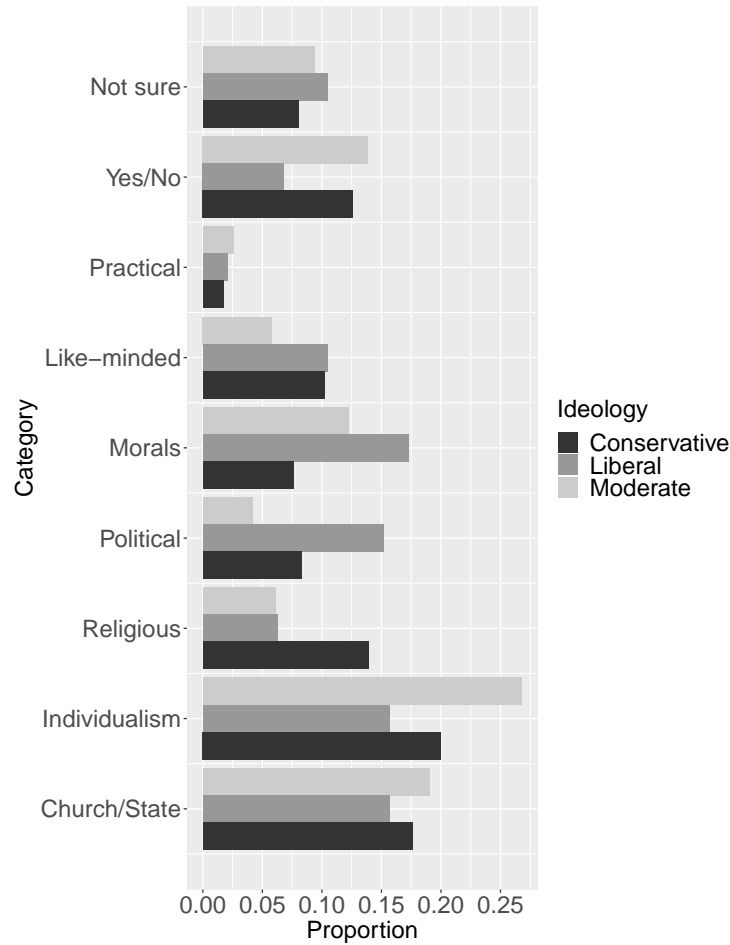


**Figure 3.3:** Distribution of Response Categories by Reported Political Importance – Control

Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.

tion. Figure 3.4 displays the distribution of response categories for liberals, conservatives, and moderates (once again, only among the control group). Most notably, liberals are significantly more likely to give responses drawing on political and moral reasons than both conservatives and moderates. This finding clearly aligns with the results from the close-ended question, demonstrating that liberals are more likely to report politics mattering at least moderately. Conservatives are more likely to give answers drawing on religious/theological reasoning, while moderates are more likely to invoke individu-

alism and freedom of choice. Liberals and conservatives are equally likely to express a desire to worship among like-minded people.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 3.4:** Distribution of Response Categories by Ideology – Control

Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.

Figure B.4 in the Appendix demonstrates the distribution among respondents who report “high” and “low” religious importance. The most notable difference emerges in responses drawing on religious reasoning; respondents for whom religion is highly im-

<sup>16</sup>At first glance, this finding appears to cut against the idea that liberals care more about the political views of potential congregations. However, given that the vast majority of explicitly political responses (category 4) come from respondents who care about politics, these findings support the idea that liberals report caring more about politics. It also suggests, however, that conservatives who care about the political views of congregations are less likely to express that concern in explicitly political terms.

portant are much more likely to give answers falling in this category than those for whom religion matters less, which is not surprising. There are not major differences in how often the two groups invoke explicitly political reasons. However, when reading the answers for qualitative substance, it is clear that many of the religious reasons given by “high” importance respondents imply that being a faithful Christian requires adhering to certain political beliefs that are guided by Biblical teachings. The responses below highlight this reasoning.

- “Generally we all believe what we believe politically because of our views on the Bible.”
- “Political opinions can show if people are open to what God actually says on those subjects.”
- “Because politics makes a big difference in obeying or disobeying God.”
- “It matters what the Bible says and to keep thing in context and not creating things to fit your own political views.”
- “If the views are contrary to the Word of God I would not want to attend.”

This analysis suggests that the religious reasons given by many highly religious respondents include implicit political considerations. This is one way in which close-ended questions obscure important nuance. The analysis also highlights a philosophical perspective on the relevance of politics for religious identity and beliefs, in which doctrinal commitments – namely to biblical authority – require particular political commitments. This is a specific example of a broader difference regarding respondents’ perspectives on the relevance of politics for religious identity broadly, and stands in stark contrast with another perspective offered by those who draw on the norm of separation of church and state and religion and politics generally. Many of these respondents either state or imply that political views generally, and other congregants’ views specifically, are irrelevant to worship or not appropriate to discuss in church. Among those

who believe politics are relevant, some are very clear that they cannot focus on worship in a congregation that does not share their political views. Similarly, some describe that membership in a congregation requires financial contributions, and they are not comfortable supporting causes antithetical to their values.

- “I am there to honor God and follow the Bible’s teachings. I don’t care about other people’s political leanings.”
- “How I worship, and what I need from a service isn’t dictated by political views of other members.”
- “For me, there is a separation of church and state. My political beliefs sometimes do not align with what the church often promotes.”
- “A lot. I want to worship with like minded people so my focus can be on God when I’m at church.”
- “A church is a charity unto itself – I cannot give money to those advocating what I believe is wrong.”
- “Because I wouldn’t want to support causes that I don’t believe in or are antithetical to my own beliefs.”

Contrasting these sentiments illuminates how differently some churchgoers perceive the relationship between politics and religion. For some, a congregation’s political orientation is fundamental to its functioning; politics shape congregational outreach and advocacy, and membership in a congregation implies support – financial or otherwise – for the causes with which it engages. Similarly, some consider the political views of other members central to their ability to worship freely and fully, while others view politics as a distraction from worship.

The implicit influence of politics surfaces again when analyzing responses from who report politics mattering “ a little” or “not at all”. Many respondents give answers that suggest politics mattered implicitly for their decision or equate certain politics views with a proper understanding of Christianity. The responses below illustrate this pattern.

- “We were looking for a Bible-based congregation to join. Since the LCMS tends to be pretty conservative, we didn’t feel as if we had to worry about the political views of other members.” (“Not at all”)
- “Because if one’s Biblical worldview is Scriptural, then their political views generally are conservative as mine are.” (“Not at all”)
- “They do not bring their politics into the congregation. My Baptists are politically conservative, i.e., Christian values are Conservative values.” (“Not at all”)
- “Because being a fundamental, Bible believing church I knew other members political views would be the same as mine.” (“Not at all”)
- “I find that extremely liberal people/congregations stray from God’s word.” (“A little”)
- “Some are not pro life and I don’t know how you can be a christian and not be pro life.” (“A little”)
- “I like a church fully devoted to the teaching of the Bible and those who have certain political views are not following God’s Word.” (“A little”)

This pattern demonstrates that even asking people directly whether politics matters for their decisions will underestimate the true effect; some churchgoers’ do not report politics mattering explicitly, yet politics are deeply intertwined with their understanding of Christianity. Though responses like these are a small portion of the total responses, they come almost exclusively from conservatives and moderates. This suggests that political concerns may register differently depending on one’s social location among the religious population. For conservatives and moderates, the political views of other members may be important for their decision, but do not register as a concern because they can assume other congregants will share their beliefs. On the other hand, liberals are a minority among churchgoers; if they wish to join a congregation that shares their views, they must explicitly determine and evaluate the views of other members.

On the other hand, some respondents for whom politics mattered at least moderately gave reasons that indicated they specifically sought political neutrality rather than



a homogenously partisan or ideological climate, implying a very different perspective on relationship between politics and religion, particularly within congregations. The responses below illustrate this orientation.

- “I don’t want my church tied to a political agenda.” (“A moderate amount”)
- “Politics have no business in a worship service.” (“A lot”)
- “I believe in the separation of church and state. I want my church to help people but not be involved in government.” (“A lot”)
- “My church is relatively non-political, which I strongly prefer. They focus on helping people but do not judge others’ ways of helping.” (“A moderate amount”)
- “I try to make sure that I go to a church that keeps politics out of church as much as possible unless it’s important to our belief system.” (“A lot”)

What emerges clearly from the preceding analysis are significant and fundamental differences among churchgoers regarding the relevance of politics for religious identity, practice, and beliefs. For some respondents, honest faith and worship transcend political divides, and accepting differences in opinion is an important element of Christian identity. On the other hand, many respondents articulated a belief that political views are central to their understanding and practice of faith, and that certain views are incompatible with core tenets of Christianity. This is especially common among those for whom religion is highly important in their day-to-day lives.

While the ideological differences in how frequently respondents articulate explicit political or moral reasons for considering politics indicate that liberals are probably more likely to seek out politically similar churches, the fundamental philosophical differences across ideology indicate that one’s perspective on the proper relationship between religion and politics likely motivates a substantial amount of the ideological sorting into congregations. That is, those who believe political views are central to their un-

derstanding of what it means to be a true Christian are more motivated to seek out “political” churches that align with their views compared to those who believe politics has no bearing on religious faith and practice, regardless of ideological orientation. While there is clearly some overlap between the importance of politics for churchgoers’ decisions and the importance of religion for their daily lives, concern for political factors exists regardless of religiosity.

The open-ended analysis suggests individuals who prefer “political” churches are in the minority, which aligns with existing data demonstrating that the majority of Americans are uncomfortable with churches and congregations taking stances on political and social issues, and with overt politicking, like endorsing candidates from the pulpit.<sup>17</sup> However, 38% of respondents reported politics mattering at least moderately, and these quantitative findings likely underestimate the true extent of politics’ role for shaping preferences for congregational choice, considering that the open-ended analysis demonstrated the implicit influence of politics among those who reported politics mattering little or not at all.

While these selected responses are a small subset of the total sample, they point to the limits of close-ended questions for capturing the nuanced influence of politics for congregational choice. Standard Likert-scales or ranking questions alone cannot shed light on the conditional nature of political influence, in some cases, nor the implicit influence in others. The mismatches between responses to the close-ended questions and respondents’ elaborated reasoning demonstrates that political influence is not uniform across churchgoers and contexts. Conservatives and moderates may be less likely to indicate that politics matters significantly in a close-ended format, but without providing

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<sup>17</sup>“Americans Have Positive Views About Religion’s Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics,” Pew Research Center (2019). <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>

a space for respondents to elaborate on their reasoning, we would miss the role that assumptions about political contexts play in shaping churchgoers' decisions. Similarly, simply asking whether political considerations matter may conflate positive and negative roles of political factors.

While many methodological and theoretical lessons can be learned from comparing close-ended responses to open-ended elaborations, there are also several drawbacks to this approach. Firstly, the Likert scale of political importance I used for the close-ended question introduces a good deal of subjectivity into the analysis. Despite the clear ordering of response options, the qualitative difference between politics mattering "a little" and "a moderate amount" is likely a matter of personal interpretation. This introduces some measurement error into the regression analyses and the comparison between close-ended and open-ended responses. Relatedly, there is always some slippage when collapsing a Likert scale into a binary measure, particularly so in cases where the qualitative magnitude of answer options are subjective.

### **3.6 Discussion & Conclusion**

Scholars of religion and politics have long debated the influence of political considerations on churchgoers' decisions to affiliate with congregations. Evidence exists for and against political influence, highlighting the need to fine tune our understanding of the conditions and contexts that affect the salience of political factors. This paper makes both theoretical and methodological contributions to this understanding.

First, though the results from the priming experiment were null, the direction of the effect suggests a potential backlash against the notion that political considerations affect decisions about congregational affiliation. This dynamic is likely driven by strongly held norms of separation between religion and politics among the churchgoing popu-

lation and larger population as a whole. The strength of these norms is echoed by the rate at which themes of separation of church and state (and religion and politics more generally) surfaced in the open-response analysis.

Secondly, my analysis of responses to the close-ended survey question demonstrates that liberals report politics mattering more for their decisions about congregational affiliation than moderates or conservatives. I suggest these differences arise due to different assumptions liberals and conservatives and moderates may make about the political composition of potential congregations. As political minorities among the white Christian churchgoing population, liberals are more likely to encounter congregations that hold different political views from their own. This may raise the salience of political information for liberals as they search for a congregation, while moderates and conservatives can more easily assume congregations will lean their direction politically.

Additionally, I find that respondents for whom religion is very important in their day-to-day lives are more likely to report politics mattering for their decisions compared to those for whom religion is less important. I suggest these differences arise due to the extent to which religious and political identities are integrated for these two groups. Those who rely on religion to guide decision-making in non-religious spheres will align their political views with their religious identity and seek out congregational environments that reinforce their understanding of the proper connection between theology and ideological outlook.

My analysis of open-ended responses corroborates the quantitative findings, while also advancing our understanding of the nature of political influence for congregational choice, specifically, and religious identity more broadly. Firstly, the open-ended data supports the hypothesis that liberals seek more explicitly political congregations. Liberals invoke political and moral reasons when explaining their reasoning at higher rates than moderates and conservatives. Secondly, respondents' reported attention to politics

from the close-ended question is associated with their reasoning in their open-ended responses; those who report politics mattering little or not at all for their decisions are more likely to give answers drawing on the norm of separation between religion and politics and individuals' right to hold political beliefs without judgement from others. Those who report politics mattering at least moderately are much more likely to invoke political and moral reasons, and a preference for worshipping and associating with like-minded people.

More generally, my findings demonstrate that the proper relationship between politics and religious practice and identity more broadly is contested. I find that at least 38% of respondents reported that politics matter at least moderately for their decision to join congregations, and a significant portion of these respondents believe others' political views are indicative of their moral and religious convictions. On the other hand, a majority report that politics matter only a little bit or not at all for their decision to join congregations, and many of these respondents believe politics have no place in church, and that others' political views are personal – not relevant to fellowship or worship, and immaterial to a congregation's efficacy and cohesion. Liberals are more likely than conservatives and moderates to say that politics matter and to give political and moral reasons for this opinion, but the belief that politics is integral to religious faith and practice exists across the ideological and theological spectrum.

The reasoning for these positions are varied and illuminating. Some respondents are explicit in their belief that politics are irrelevant to religion, and many indicate that they will not discuss politics in church. Some are explicit about avoiding out-partisans, while some simply want to avoid extreme views. Some seek congregations focused on social justice, some seek an environment in which pro-life teachings are front and center. Some indicate very clearly that one's political views tell you a great deal about their personal values or commitment to their faith. Relying on observational data alone obscures

the range and textures of political influence, and any black and white claims about the existence or absence of political sorting into congregations miss the nuance and conditionality of these dynamics.

Additionally, this analysis highlights the methodological challenges involved in conceptualizing and measuring the influence of political factors for congregational choice. Close-ended survey questions provide important quantitative measures of churchgoers' self-reported attention to politics, but are not without limitations. Asking respondents to rank the importance of politics, as in Putnam and Campbell (2012) helps to capture tradeoffs involved in congregational choice, but obscures the influence of political factors even as second-order concerns. Likert scales provide more fine-grained measures of political influence or importance, but introduce a good deal of subjectivity.

Including open-ended prompts can provide important theoretical nuance to quantitative trends. In this case, providing respondents the opportunity to elaborate their reasoning highlighted how the explicitness of political considerations differs for some liberals and conservatives, and that political influence is not always unidirectional. Theory building informed by careful qualitative analysis is especially essential for a subject like political sorting into congregations, and religious organizational choice more broadly, where existing studies reach mixed conclusions about the role of political factors, and where effects are likely to be heterogeneous based on different organizational structures, rules, and cultures across denominations and local communities.

These findings cannot provide any quantitative measure of how these preferences affect behavior, if at all. The reality of congregational choice makes rampant partisan sorting unlikely – people have other priorities and constraints that make selecting a church based purely on their political views impracticable. Rather than speaking to the extent of sorting, these results speak to the range of norms regarding religious and political entwinement, which will ultimately guide churchgoers' individual decisions about con-

gregational affiliation. Respondents who feel politics is central to religious identity and practice will likely seek congregations that reinforce their views and emphasize connections between religious teachings and political views and causes, while those who believe politics are irrelevant will likely avoid congregations that clearly connect politics to faith and worship. While political considerations are more important to liberals than conservatives, the differences in orientation towards the relevance of politics means a subset of liberals and conservatives seek politically compatible congregations.

Finally, as for concerns about entrenched partisan and religious identities go, these findings confirm that for many churchgoers these identities are intimately tied. They illuminate a previously underappreciated divide between those who believe politics are irrelevant to faith, and those who believe them to be integral. The latter group should be significantly more likely to seek out congregations that affirm their views. Yet, even for those who do not report paying attention to politics, preferences for social homophily and avoiding out-partisan congregations, as demonstrated in the next chapter of this dissertation, will naturally produce sorted congregational environments. These findings are fairly consistent with the idea that people seek congregational environments that do not challenge their views, and many prefer congregations that keep explicit politicking to a minimum. As Putnam and Campbell (2012) suggest, churchgoers likely select into environments broadly consistent with their ideological worldview, whether or not politics register as a central factor in their decisions. This will, inevitably, lead to stronger associations between political and religious identities.

## 4 | **Sorting on Sundays? Understanding the Role of Politics for Congregational Choice**

A defining feature of the contemporary American religious marketplace is the freedom and prevalence of choice. Americans increasingly choose, rather than inherit their religious affiliations. Over the past four decades, Americans have sorted themselves into religious traditions, or out of religion altogether, along political lines (Hout and Fischer 2002; Margolis 2018; Patrikios 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2012). While midcentury political cleavages largely fell along denominational lines, contemporary political fault lines separate the religious from the “nones”, and conservative Christians from progressive Christians, regardless of denomination.

These trends raise interesting questions about the causal role of political convictions and affiliations in shaping American’s religious behavior and belonging. While existing work speaks to the role of politics in driving “macro” trends in religious identification and deidentification, the role of politics in driving more local decisions about religious affiliation is less clear. Specifically, scholars debate the importance of politics for individuals’ decisions about which congregations to join or attend.

Some scholars rely on the partisan composition of congregations to argue against political sorting, while others assume or demonstrate through correlates of political ideology that congregations resemble political “echo chambers” (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Putnam and Campbell 2012). To date, no consensus exists as to



what constitutes political influence, how to measure it, and whether political influence necessarily leads to political sorting. Additionally, existing work has not explicitly tested the causal effect of political considerations for congregational choice.

In this paper, I advance our understanding of congregational choice and religious affiliation processes in several ways. First, I define political influence as churchgoers' responsiveness and sensitivity to the fit between their political views and the political climate of potential congregations. I operationalize political fit as congruence or incongruence between churchgoers' political views and those of potential congregations, and compare preferences for fit to respondents' preferences for "non-political" or politically neutral congregations. I generate several possible hypotheses regarding the ordering and structure of churchgoers' preferences for political fit, and use a conjoint experiment to adjudicate between theories.

Secondly, I use the structural features of the American religious landscape to generate predictions of subgroup differences in sensitivity to political fit. I hypothesize that mainline and evangelical Protestants will be more sensitive to political fit with a congregation than Catholics, owing to institutional differences between traditions that shape churchgoers' expectations regarding political fit. Secondly, I expect that sensitivity to fit will vary between more and less religious individuals – I hypothesize that regular churchgoers and those who attach high importance to religion in their daily lives will prioritize political fit *more* than the marginally attached. Finally, I hypothesize that liberals will prioritize political fit with a congregation more than conservatives, owing to liberals' statistical minority status among the churchgoing population.

The conjoint experiment allows me to measure the relative causal impact of political fit on churchgoers' preferences for hypothetical congregations, compared to other important factors churchgoers are likely to consider. This method provides a more realistic test of the impact of political factors because it incorporates many of the meaningful

tradeoffs churchgoers face when considering potential congregations, better reflecting the true decision task compared to a single or double-factorial survey experiment.

My findings suggest that churchgoers – regardless of ideological or partisan views, religious affiliation, or frequency of church attendance – pay attention to political and ideological cues when offered them. Churchgoers’ sensitivity, however, is asymmetric; across all subgroups, respondents are much more sensitive to political incongruence than congruence. Respondents are significantly less likely to choose a congregation that signals political leanings contrary to their own, yet they do not demonstrate clear preferences for congregations that clearly signal congruence with their views, relative to more politically-neutral congregations. The causal effects of political fit with a congregation are larger than other important factors, like the size of a congregation, the average age of members, and distance from home. Furthermore, churchgoers’ ordering of preferences is remarkably consistent across subgroups; while a few differences in intensity of preferences emerge, all respondents prefer neutral or congruent congregations significantly more than incongruent congregations, but are no more favorable toward congruent congregations compared to neutral congregations, regardless of faith tradition, ideology, or levels of religiosity.

These results provide the first causal measure of the relative importance of political considerations for congregational choice compared to other, often highly correlated factors. The causal impact of political incongruence with a potential congregation is one of the largest effects across all congregational characteristics included in the study. Secondly, and importantly, this study reveals the extent of churchgoers’ demand for political fit with a potential congregation; while existing studies demonstrate that churchgoers do not generally prioritize their own political views when looking for a congregation, my results suggest that churchgoers are highly sensitive to incongruence with a congregation when cues about political fit are available. Thirdly, these findings illuminate the

importance of considering churchgoers' preferences for political neutrality rather than strictly political congruence or homogeneity.

More broadly, these results speak to a number of outstanding questions regarding the impact of politics on religious affiliation. Firstly, churchgoers' sensitivity to incongruence but relative indifference to congruence helps to explain why many religious individuals who leave congregations due to political disagreements leave religion altogether, rather than looking for a more compatible congregation. Secondly, because respondents do not demonstrate significantly higher demand for explicit political congruence compared to politically moderate or neutral congregational environments, these results assuage concerns about rampant partisan sorting into congregations.

In many ways, congregational choice resembles other domains, like residential choice, where people prefer homophily over difference, but preferences for homophily are bound by other considerations (Mummolo and Nall 2017). Strong adherence to norms of separation of church and state and general disapproval of entangling politics with religion should further constrain churchgoers' propensity to select into perfectly compatible congregational environments, above and beyond constraints posed by more practical concerns like denomination and distance from home, for example.

However, avoiding environments that run counter to one's views will naturally produce some political sorting, at least in the sense that many churchgoers are unlikely to attend congregations where the majority hold views contrary to their own. These findings fit with existing work suggesting that congregations resemble political "echo chambers" where like-minded individuals exchange political information and reinforce political beliefs through worship and socialization. While previous work was relatively agnostic as to the selection mechanism at work, this study demonstrates for the first time churchgoers' tendency to seek out environments that reinforce their views or, at the very least, environments that do not clearly run counter to their views.

## 4.1 Understanding congregational choice

Contemporary American religion is particularly fluid; religious joining, switching, and leaving are common. Importantly, choices about religious identification and affiliation are increasingly shaped by political convictions. Scholars have demonstrated how political identity shapes who returns to religion after a lapse in adolescence, who leaves religion, and who switches religions (Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018; Hadaway and Roof 1988; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Margolis 2018; Nelson 1988; Patrikios 2008, 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2012). The sum of these changes is a restructuring of American religion along political lines, and especially within the white Christian population; white religious individuals are becoming more Republican, while those leaving religion and claiming no religious affiliation are becoming more Democratic (Green 2007; Layman 2001). Importantly, this literature has not only identified descriptive trends in political and religious identity, but has also identified political convictions as key causal movers of religious attachments, behavior, identity, and affiliation (Campbell et al. 2018; Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018; Margolis 2016, 2018).

While these macro trends in religious identification and affiliation are well-documented, we know significantly less about how political considerations affect more local affiliation decisions, like which congregations to attend. Scholars have pointed to congregational choice as a potential avenue for further partisan sorting and polarization if churchgoers are choosing to affiliate with particular congregations based on their political views (Campbell et al. 2018; Margolis 2018).

Existing evidence regarding the influence of politics on congregational affiliation is mixed, and extant studies rely on a wide variety of methods and metrics for assessing the extent of political sorting into congregations. Most recently Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey (2018) focus on disaffiliation from congregations, showing that political disagreement

with a congregation predicts disaffiliation over time, especially among marginally attached congregants. Importantly, political disagreement with a congregation is uncorrelated with worship attendance initially, which the authors cite as evidence that political congruence with a congregation does not motivate initial affiliation decisions. Other studies rely on the observed partisan or theological composition of congregations to suggest that politics is not a central motivation for joining a house of worship (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988).

On the other hand, Putnam and Campbell (2012) describe congregations as “political echo chambers” where like-minded congregants reinforce one another’s political beliefs through organic social interaction. Importantly, Putnam and Campbell’s analysis of survey data demonstrates that churchgoers’ own political views are not primary drivers of affiliation decisions; instead, the authors suggest like-minded individuals select into congregations based on factors like theology and worship style that are highly correlated with political identity.

#### **4.1.1 What is “political” in a congregation setting?**

While valuable, the varied methods and conflicting conclusions of existing work speak to the need to define what we mean when we talk about political influence and political sorting. What are the political factors churchgoers might care about, and how do we measure their influence? What are the appropriate metrics for capturing political sorting? In this paper, I focus on churchgoers’ preferences for political similarity with congregations, rather than focusing on outcomes of political sorting (i.e. partisan composition of congregations). The relevant political factor for my analysis is the fit between congregants’ political views and the political climate of potential congregations. This approach allows me to measure churchgoers’ demand for politically congruent congre-

gations, which is essential for our understanding of the processes that produce observable patterns of political sorting into congregations. Additionally, measuring demand is important in its own right; understanding how much churchgoers' value political congruence reveals another facet of the interaction between politics and religion.

Isolating the impact of political fit requires a clear definition of “political” in a congregational setting. Existing work makes clear that churchgoers generally disapprove of overt politicking from the pulpit, and believe churches should refrain from political involvement (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Gecewicz 2020; Putnam and Campbell 2012). Because the primary function of religious congregations is not political, we would not expect churchgoers to necessarily look for or care about overtly partisan factors, like the percentage of Democrats or Republicans, or the party affiliation of the pastor, for example. Instead, churchgoers likely pay more attention to the ideological climate of a congregation, evaluating the fit between the congregation's views on theologically-relevant political issues and their own.

Useful political cues, then, are those that signal the prevailing ideological climate of a congregation, allowing potential new members to assess congruence between the congregation's outlook and their own views. These cues may be obvious from a congregation's website, perhaps signaled through the mission or belief statements, bulletin, or other circulated materials, or through interactions with current members and congregation leadership. Importantly, because the political orientation of a congregation will be tied to its theological orientation (Guth 1997), political cues may be embedded in theological cues, or theological cues may signal the ideological philosophy of a congregation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The correlation between the ideological and theological climate of a congregation makes adjudicating between different selection mechanisms difficult. Existing work on sorting in other domains identifies two possible selection mechanisms that drive preferences for politically-similar environments – partisan homophily and partisan discrimination (Mummolo and Nall 2017). Partisan homophily suggests peo-

## 4.2 What is unique about congregational choice?

To date, no study has explicitly tested the causal role of political fit for congregational choice. I operationalize political fit as congruence (or incongruence) between churchgoers' ideological views and the ideological climate of potential congregations. In this paper, I also introduce political neutrality as a potential climate, to provide a "non-political" baseline against which to measure the effects of congruence or incongruence. Existing work on sorting in other domains provides a useful starting point for hypothesizing about the importance of political fit for congregational choice, but it is worth considering the ways choosing a house of worship differs from other forms of choice.

Mummolo and Nall (2017) use a conjoint design to measure the causal impact of partisan composition for residential choice, finding that respondents demonstrate a clear preference for politically-similar neighborhoods, but preferences for partisan homogeneity are not as strong as preferences for other attributes, like commuting time, crime rate, and housing costs. Congregational choice, like neighborhood selection, is a choice that involves a great deal of investment and, as a result, significant tradeoffs that may outweigh political fit. Results from Putnam and Campbell (2012) demonstrate that factors like worship style, theological beliefs, location, and social connections are more important to churchgoers than political views. Given our established tendencies towards social homophily in other domains, it is likely that churchgoers will respond to ideological cues, but practical concerns like distance from home may weigh more heav-

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ple select into politically homogenous networks and environments based on non-political preferences or factors (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). Partisan discrimination, on the other hand, suggests partisans use political information to avoid or discriminate against members of the other party. In the context of gathering information about potential congregations, or assessing the ideological climate, it is unlikely that churchgoers would have access to clearly partisan or explicitly political cues. For this reason, I embed ideological cues into theological cues to preserve the construct validity of the conjoint tasks. This means I cannot clearly distinguish between partisan homophily and discrimination. I will describe the construction of ideological cues in more detail in the next section.

ily in their decision.

At the same time, churches are different in important ways from other domains of choice. Americans largely disapprove of churches getting involved in politics, and overt political activity is rare in American congregations (Chaves 1999; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Gecewicz 2020).<sup>2</sup> While partisan acrimony has been well-documented in non-political domains like online dating, religious congregations are often considered one of the few remaining environments of partisan diversity, where fellow congregants can put differences aside to come together for worship<sup>3</sup> (Huber and Malhotra 2017). Given deeply held norms of separation between church and state (religion and politics), I expect churchgoers will be especially sensitive to any overt political impingement of congregations, whether congruent or not with their own views. Because religious congregations are considered or presumed to be politically neutral by many, it is important to consider preferences for non-political or politically-neutral climates, rather than simply comparing preferences for congruence versus incongruence.

The preceding discussion yields several predictions regarding preferences for political fit. First, given tendencies toward social homophily and well-established findings that political disagreement within congregations often drives religious disaffiliation, I predict that churchgoers will prefer political incongruence the least, relative to congruence and neutrality. Secondly, I predict that norms of separation between religion and politics make congregations that clearly advertise ideological stances unappealing, relative to congregations that do not clearly signal a particular political or ideological worldview. Thus, I predict that respondents will prefer politically neutral congregations

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<sup>2</sup>See also “Americans Have Positive View About Religion’s Role in Society, But Want It Out of Politics”, Pew Research Center, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>

<sup>3</sup>Results from the second chapter of this thesis demonstrate this point clearly; many respondents believe politics has no place in church and do not pay attention to the political views of other congregants.



to politically congruent climates. In sum, I theorize that churchgoers will be repelled by the possibility of being in the political minority, but will prefer a congregation that simply avoids politics altogether over a congregation that takes clearly congruent political stances.

### **4.3 Who cares about politics?**

Previous work suggests a minority of churchgoers prioritize their own political and social views when searching for a congregation, but limitations of existing studies preclude evaluation of the relative causal impact of political factors on choice. Additionally, previous studies have employed various definitions of political factors. These limitations may mean that the importance of political fit, in particular, is understated across the board and for particular subgroups. Putnam and Campbell (2012) find no differences among religious traditions in who prioritizes their own political views when looking for a new congregation; however, we may expect to find differences between groups on other dimensions, or that introducing more meaningful tradeoffs illuminates previously obscured differences.

I use the structural features of American denominations and the political composition of the religious population to generate predictions about subgroup differences in who prioritizes political fit when looking for a new congregation. First, I expect the importance of political fit to vary among religious traditions due to institutional differences that may affect the salience of political considerations.

The Catholic tradition of territorial parishes may make Catholic churchgoers less sensitive to the political climate of potential congregations. Because, historically, Catholic parishes drew congregants within fixed geographic boundaries, Catholics, over time, have not enjoyed the freedom to choose between competing congregations. Addition-

ally, Catholic parishes supported schools and other social activities that rooted the parish firmly in the neighborhood and lives of parishioners. As such, Catholic parishes fostered a strong sense of loyalty among parishioners and those seeking to leave the neighborhood or parish faced high “barriers to exit” (Djupe 2000; Gamm 2001). Mainline and evangelical Protestant denominations, on the other hand, were never bound by geographic constraints; congregations in both traditions have always competed for members, and doctrinal similarities among denominations make it easier for churchgoers to move between congregations (Finke and Stark 2005). While the rigidity of territorial assignment has loosened in the past few decades, this institutional legacy may shape contemporary Catholics’ views and expectations of political fit. Catholic parishioners may be socialized to value institutional loyalty and stability more than other factors, including political climate.

Additionally, existing scholarship demonstrates important differences across faith traditions in churchgoers’ approval of churches involving themselves in politics. According to a recent study by Pew Research Center, white evangelical Protestants approve of churches expressing views on social and political issues at much higher rates than mainline Protestants and Catholics. While classic research from the 1960s and 70s suggested differences in political involvement among religious traditions according to theological orientations, scholars since the 1990s have found that any theological gap in political activity has virtually disappeared (Guth 1997; Hadden 1969; Stark 1971). If anything, the most prominent gap between religious traditions in political involvement arises between mainline Protestants on the one hand, and evangelicals and Catholics on the other. Mainline Protestant congregations are much more likely to participate in civic activity than evangelical and Catholic congregations, but less likely to engage in more explicit political activity, like lobbying or distributing voter guides (Chaves 1999). Aggregate differences between traditions in norms around congregational political in-

volvement may translate into differences in individual churchgoers' sensitivity to political cues and preferences for political congruence.

Secondly, I expect the importance of political similarity to vary by religious attachment. Those marginally attached to religion are less socially embedded in their congregations, and as a result may be less attentive and committed to shared norms and values that inform the political climate (Djupe 2000; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; Jelen 1992; Gilbert 1993). This may decrease the salience of finding a politically similar congregation if these churchgoers do not expect to attend regularly or to involve themselves with the congregation outside of occasional worship. More religiously attached churchgoers, on the other hand, should prioritize congruence with the political climate of a potential congregation.

The strongest evidence to support this prediction is from Putnam and Campbell (2012), who demonstrate that among those who have a strong social ties at church, partisanship and religiosity are highly correlated. On the other hand, religiosity and partisanship are uncorrelated among those with few social ties to their congregation. These results suggest that social connections at church are one way that individuals link their political and religious views together. It is hard to imagine how this relationship could exist if frequent attenders did not prioritize some baseline level of political congruence with their chosen congregation.

Finally, I expect differences in the importance of political similarity between liberals and conservatives. Conservatives make up a majority of regular churchgoers in the United States, and given the increasingly strong relationship between political affiliation and religiosity, they may expect that the average congregation leans conservative and in general will align with their views. Liberals, on the other hand, are a statistical minority among churchgoers, and cannot assume as easily as conservatives that their views will mesh with the orientation of any given congregation. These differing expectations may

make liberals more attentive to cues about the political climate and more motivated to seek congruence than conservatives.

On the other hand, we may expect that because the relationship between political views and religiosity is stronger among conservatives that they would be more attentive to political congruence than liberals, and perhaps prefer more political congregations. However, evidence suggests liberals are more likely than conservatives to report hearing political messages at church, and those who report more political activity are those who attend liberal congregations (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Thus, liberals may prefer explicitly political congregations more than conservatives, in which case they should seek out clear signals about a congregation's ideological orientation.

## 4.4 Data & Hypotheses

I use a conjoint design to overcome several limitations of existing studies. The conjoint design allows me to test the causal impact of several factors, including political factors on individuals' preferences for congregations. Conjoint designs are well-suited for studying decision-making contexts in which individuals face tradeoffs between several factors. This method asks respondents to rate pairs of hypothetical profiles in which a set of attributes is randomly varied, allowing researchers to estimate the causal effect of several treatments on the same outcome (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014*a*).

The conjoint experiment is embedded in an online survey experiment fielded on Lucid Marketplace. Much like Amazon's mTurk, Lucid Marketplace allows researchers to collect their own convenience samples, with the option of adding demographic quotas.<sup>4</sup> To build my sample, I screened respondents on religious affiliation and race, limit-

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<sup>4</sup>One important advantage of Lucid over mTurk is the ability to screen respondents using Lucid's own prescreening surveys at no extra charge to the researcher, and without having to pay for a separate screening survey as required through mTurk.

ing eligibility to white Protestants and Catholics.<sup>5</sup> I then capped my sample to 2,000 respondents, and added quotas for gender after the first 1,000 respondents skewed heavily female. After collecting the data, I dropped respondents who did not identify with a specific denomination, leaving me with a total of 1,964 respondents.

I use Pew’s Religious Landscape study to compare the distribution by religious tradition. My sample is 46% Catholic, 37% evangelical Protestant, and 17% mainline Protestant, compared to 34% Catholic, 42% evangelical Protestant, and 24% mainline Protestant among white Christians, according to Pew. Table 4.1 provides the demographic by religious tradition my final sample compared to the demographic breakdown of white Protestants and Catholics according to Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 4.1:** Demographic Breakdown by Tradition

% Sample	<i>Lucid Sample</i>			<i>Pew Religious Landscape</i>		
	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline	Catholic	Mainline	Evangelical
Female	59	62	66	54	55	55
Male	41	38	34	46	45	45
18-29	16	10	7	17	17	16
30-49	33	31	21	33	33	29
50-64	24	26	27	29	29	29
65+	27	33	45	20	20	26
N	855	711	372	-	-	-

Note: column entries represent the demographic distribution within a given faith tradition.

As Table 4.1 demonstrates, my sample skews more Catholic, more female, and older. I created weights to correct for gender and tradition imbalance, drawing population distributions from the Pew data; however, results for all models described below are sub-

<sup>5</sup>Please note as I make claims based on the data in the proceeding sections that I am referring only to white Catholics and Protestants. I make a note to refer consistently, but not every time, to the race of respondents. I am cognizant of the fact that any trends I find among this population may not generalize to non-white Christians within the same traditions.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. See *Complete Report* for detailed demographic breakdown.

stantively identical without weights. I chose to present unweighted results for all models.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4.4.1 Survey Flow & Experimental Design**

Respondents enter the survey and answer a block of demographic questions, followed by a standard battery of religiosity questions, including their current religious affiliation. Respondents are informed that the next section of the survey is designed to understand how individuals make decisions about which congregations to attend. They are asked to imagine that they are looking for a new congregation and to read the proceeding congregational profiles closely before indicating which congregation they would prefer to attend. After completing the conjoint task, they are asked to indicate how useful the information was and to briefly explain why they found the information useful or not.

Each respondent views three pairs of hypothetical congregation profiles that vary across seven attributes, two of which are designed to signal the political climate of the congregation. Each attribute can take on one of two or more values, referred to as the “levels” from here onward. The seven attributes I vary are: denomination, worship style, distance from home, size, average age of members, congregational mission statement, and ministries offered. I used Putnam and Campbell (2012) Faith Matters survey (FMS) and external validity considerations (Chaves 1999; Djupe and Gilbert 2003) as a guide for selecting attributes. Two attributes – worship style and distance – come directly from the list that FMS respondents cite as important factors for their decision to join their current congregation.

Denomination can take on one of nine possible levels – respondent’s own denom-

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<sup>7</sup>For the sake of space, weighted results are not included in the appendix, but are available upon request.

ination or one of eight pre-defined denominations, which represent the largest white Christian denominations.<sup>8</sup> Respondent's own denomination is included as a level in order to ensure statistical power to estimate how much respondents prefer to remain in their home denomination. Theoretically, denomination is one proxy for the theological beliefs of a congregation, which a majority of FMS respondents ranked as the most important factor for their decision.

Worship style takes on one of two levels – contemporary or traditional. Distance from home is straightforward and takes on one of four values – walking distance, 15 minute drive, 30 minute drive, 45 minute drive. I include average age as a possible proxy for the social context of a congregation; for a younger respondent with a family, a younger congregation probably indicates more opportunities for friendships. Average age takes on one of three values – 30 years old, 45 years old, and 65 years old. Size can take on one of four levels – 50, 100, 250, or 1,000 members. The size of a congregation should also indicate the extent of a congregation's small-group and social offerings.

Mission statement and ministries offered are designed to signal the political climate of the congregation. Overtly partisan cues, like the ideological or partisan composition of the congregation would be unrealistic, as churchgoers would have no way to ascertain this before joining a congregation, nor would a congregation advertise anything like it. In order to preserve external validity, the attributes cue political climate subtly. The mission statements incorporate both ideological and theological elements, and draw language from real mission statements found on congregation websites. I constructed two liberal-inflected, two conservative-inflected, and two neutral statements. Each mission statement is paired with a set of ministries that reinforce the ideological cue.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup>Table C.1 in the Appendix lists the distribution of respondents' self-reported denominational affiliations.

<sup>9</sup>The ministries are more clearly politically-charged than typical ministry offerings. While the explicitness may detract somewhat from the construct validity of the profiles, it would be difficult to isolate the

mission statements and their associated ministries are listed below.

**Neutral V1:** *“An active and energetic church serving Christ and our local community.”*

**Paired ministries:** Habitat for Humanity, youth ministry

**Neutral V2:** *“Our purpose is to love God, care for our neighbors, and be Christ’s witness to the world.”*

**Paired ministries:** weekly soup kitchen, Sunday School

**Liberal V1:** *“A progressive and inclusive church focused on building community and passionate social justice.”*

**Paired ministries:** immigration support, environmental protection council

**Liberal V2:** *“We affirm the sanctity, dignity, and equality of all human beings, and stand for individuals’ right to respond to God’s call in their own understanding of God’s love.”*

**Paired ministries:** social justice task force, interfaith speaker series

**Conservative V1:** *“A Gospel-centered church committed to following the teachings of Jesus Christ, glorifying God by making disciples, and leading those outside the faith towards his Word.”*

**Paired ministries:** pro-life outreach, seminar on the traditional family

**Conservative V2:** *“We believe in the authority of the Bible, submitting to God’s Word, and the power of God’s grace to heal a lost and broken world.”*

**Paired ministries:** religious freedom council, traditional Christian Bible study

Three attributes – size, average age, distance – are fully randomized across all profiles and tasks. As mentioned above, denomination is conditionally randomized to display respondents’ self-reported denominational affiliation for the first profile of Task 1. For the remaining five profiles, denomination is fully randomized across eight denominations. Similarly, mission statement is constrained to match respondents’ self-reported

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effects of political cues without a stronger political cue than the mission statement alone.



ideology for the first profile of Task 1. For the remaining five profiles, mission statement is fully randomized without replacement.<sup>10</sup> Ministries follow the randomization scheme of the mission statements. The logic behind these randomization schemes is to ensure sufficient statistical power to estimate respondents' preferences for in-denomination and ideologically congruent congregations. Finally, worship style is constrained to "traditional" for all Catholic profiles, and fully randomized for the remaining denominations.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Hypotheses

Drawing on FMS data (Putnam and Campbell 2012) and structural features of the American religious landscape, I propose the following hypotheses:

*H*<sub>1</sub>: The causal effects of political fit will be stronger than the effects of worship style, size, and average age of congregation, but weaker than the effects of denomination and distance.

*H*<sub>2</sub>: The causal effect of political incongruence will be larger than the causal effect of congruence.

*H*<sub>3</sub>: Respondents will prefer political neutrality over congruence, and congruence over incongruence.

*H*<sub>4</sub>: Catholic respondents will prioritize political congruence less than evangelical and mainline Protestant respondents.

*H*<sub>5</sub>: Highly religious respondents will prioritize political congruence more than less religious respondents.

*H*<sub>6</sub>: Liberals will prioritize political congruence more than conservatives.

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<sup>10</sup>This is important to preserve the validity of the experiment. It is unlikely that two randomly chosen congregations would share the same mission statement; for this reason, each respondent saw each possible mission statement only once.

<sup>11</sup>Catholic worship is traditionally ceremonial and does not include many elements of more contemporary worship. According to Chaves (1999) Roman Catholic worship style shows a great deal of historical continuity; while important changes, namely Vatican II, have occurred, most congregations still follow traditional liturgical and worship practices.

## 4.5 Empirical Analysis

As discussed above, 2016 respondents rated three pairs of profiles, yielding 12,096 rated profiles. For the sample used in the proceeding analysis, I drop respondents who do not identify with an established denomination (non-denominational respondents are classified as such and included),<sup>12</sup> and those respondents who answered “not sure” to a standard ideological orientation question. Thus, my final sample includes 1,961 respondents, yielding 11,385 rated profiles; the sample includes white Protestants and Catholics who identify with established denominations, including affiliation with a non-denominational congregation, and as liberal, conservative, or moderate.

Respondents viewed three pairs of congregational profiles sequentially, with the two profiles displayed side-by-side on the same screen.<sup>13</sup> After viewing each pair of profiles, they were asked to indicate which congregation of the two they would prefer to attend. The primary outcome is a binary variable indicating whether or not respondents chose a particular profile. Unless otherwise noted, the proceeding models are unweighted and do not include respondent covariates.<sup>14</sup>

### 4.5.1 Baseline models

To begin, I estimate the the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for all attributes included in the design. The AMCE represents the causal effect of a particular attribute level averaged across the distribution of all other attributes (Hainmueller, Hop-

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<sup>12</sup>I define established as those denominations that are included in Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study <https://www.pewforum.org/dataset/pew-research-center-2014-u-s-religious-landscape-study/> and/or in Putnam and Campbell’s (2012) Faith Matters Survey.

<sup>13</sup>Figure C.1 in the appendix illustrates one set of profiles presented to a respondent.

<sup>14</sup>For all proceeding models, weighted results produced substantively identical results. Results for the full model can be found in the appendix; results for additional models provided upon request.

kins and Yamamoto 2014*b*). Crucially, the AMCEs capture the causal effect of each level on the same outcome variable, allowing me to assess the relative influence of a particular attribute level relative to other important factors that churchgoers have been shown to consider. Practically, estimating the AMCEs involves regressing the outcome variable on indicator variables for all attribute levels, where for each attribute one level is excluded to serve as the reference category. Thus, the causal effect of a particular level is a *relative* one; the point estimate of an AMCE represents the expected change in probability of choosing a particular congregation when the effect of a given attribute level is compared to the baseline level.

Importantly, AMCEs cannot provide information on the descriptive ordering of preferences across attributes, or on descriptive differences in preferences between subgroups. AMCEs provide measures of causal effects of attribute levels relative to the researcher-chosen baseline, but are ill-suited to describe preference ordering or patterns between groups because they do not take into account absolute levels of favorability toward profile attributes (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2018). Because many of my central hypotheses involve comparing the ordering of subgroup preferences, I also estimate marginal means and differences in marginal means for all models. Marginal means are simply the average probability of choosing a profile with a particular attribute level (again, averaged over the distribution of all other attributes). This quantity represents respondents' average favorability towards profile characteristics (I will often refer to the means as "average favorability" throughout the discussion). Differences in marginal means are simply the difference in favorability between two comparison groups (e.g. Democrats vs. Republicans).

I use the *cjoint* package (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014*b*) and the *cregg* package in R to estimate all models. All AMCE models use clustered standard errors at the respondent level to account for dependencies in ratings from the same respondent.

Figure 4.1 displays the baseline AMCEs for all attributes included in the design<sup>15</sup>, with the associated 95% confidence intervals. The AMCEs can be interpreted as the expected change in probability of selecting a congregation with a given attribute level compared to the baseline level. For example, congregations that are 45 minutes away are 10 percentage points less likely to be selected compared to those that are within walking distance, a statistically significant difference. Respondents similarly prefer walking distance to a 30-minute drive, but do not demonstrate a strong preference for walking over a 15-minute drive.

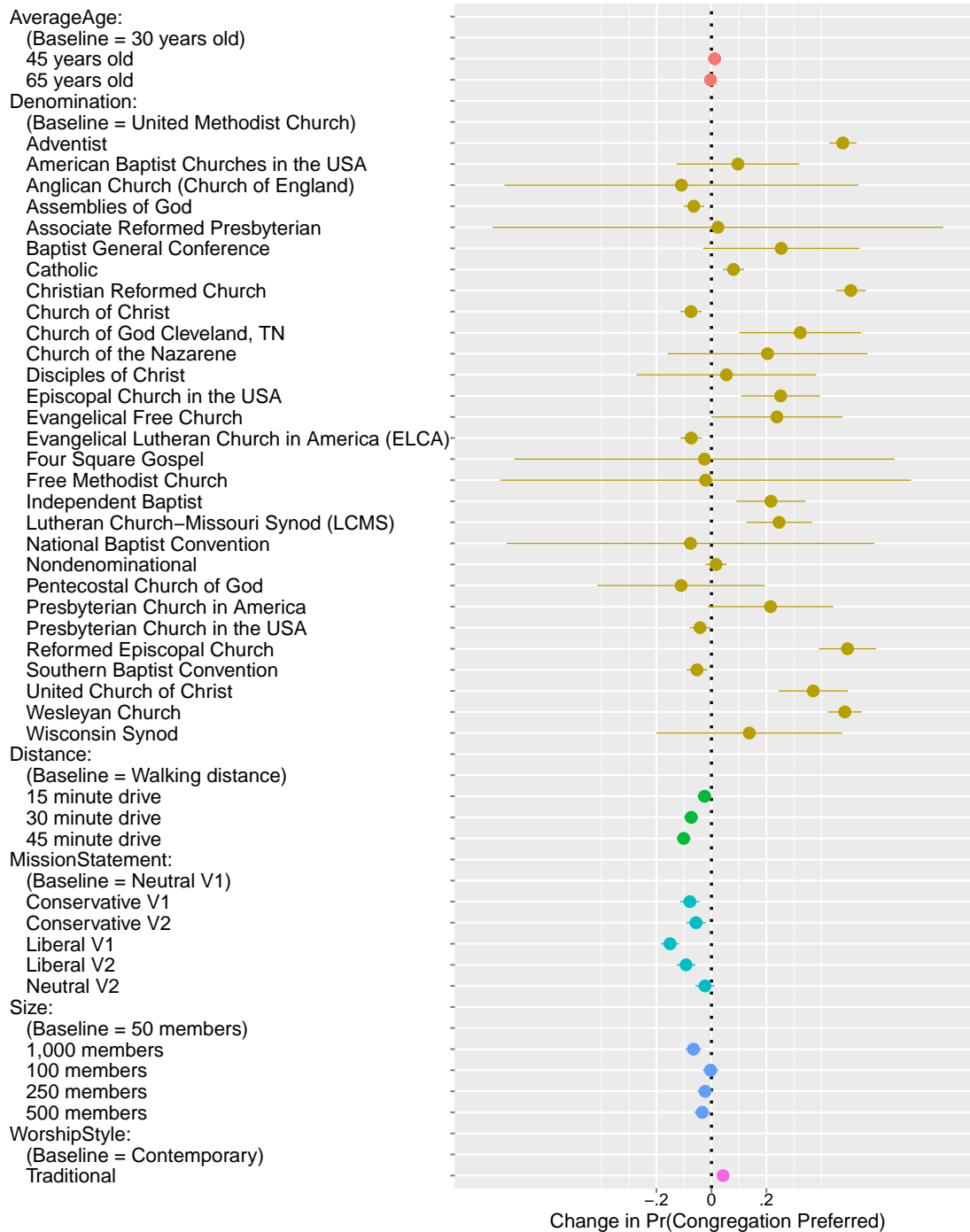
Respondents display strong preferences for neutral mission statements compared to any of the four ideologically-inflected statements. The negative effect of the first liberal mission statement is the single largest effect across all attributes. The negative effect of the second liberal mission statement is only slightly weaker than the negative effect of a 45-minute drive compared to walking distance. It is important to remember that the effects for mission statements capture the joint effect of the statement and associated ministries. The first liberal statement is paired with the most obviously political ministries – immigration support and environmental protection council. This may be one explanation for the particularly strong effect of this mission statement. Clearly, respondents are sensitive to the political climate of congregations.

#### **4.5.2 Denominational and Ideological Congruence**

Next, I probe the effects of ideological and denominational congruence. Instead of displaying the effect of each mission statement, I create a new attribute called *Match* which takes on four values: “Neither Match”, “Denomination match”, “Ideology match”,

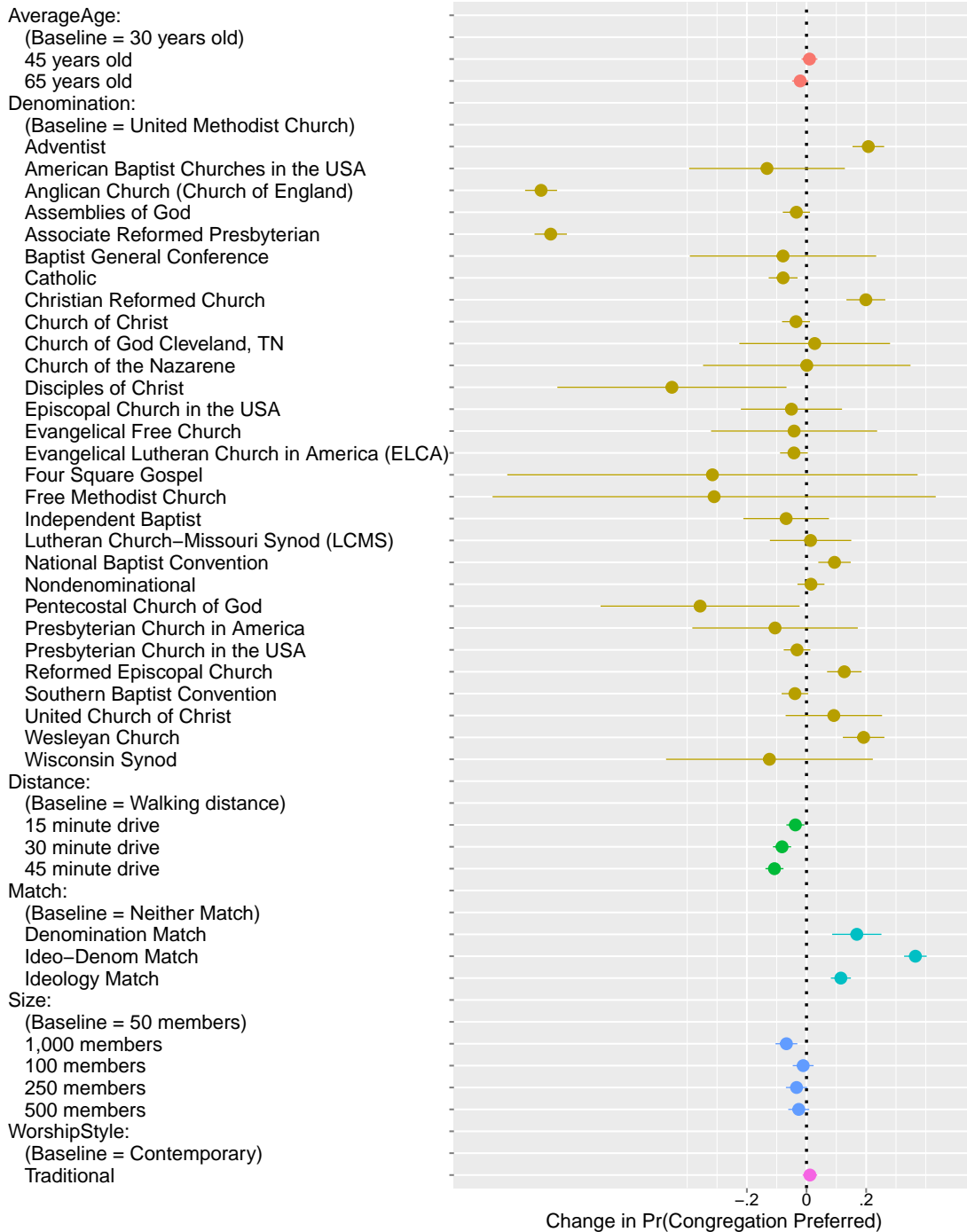
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<sup>15</sup> *Ministries* are not included as an attribute in the models at all, since they are perfectly collinear with the *Mission Statements*. Thus, the causal effect for each mission statement represents a joint effect of the embedded ideological cues in the mission statements and associated ministries.



**Figure 4.1:** Baseline AMCEs for Congregation Choice

Note: Estimated effects of the randomly assigned congregation attributes on probability of selecting congregation. Point estimates are linear regression estimators with clustered standard errors. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Baseline estimates are represented by solid dots arrayed along the dotted line at 0.



**Figure 4.2: AMCEs Plus Ideological and Denomination Match for Congregation Choice**

Note: Estimated effects of the randomly assigned congregation attributes on probability of selecting congregation. Point estimates are linear regression estimators with clustered standard errors. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Baseline estimates are represented by solid dots arrayed along the dotted line at 0.

and “Ideo-Denom match”. Profiles were coded as a “Denomination match” if the *Denomination* attribute matches respondents’ self-reported denomination. Profiles were coded as an ideological match if the ideological valence of the mission statement matches respondents’ self-reported ideological orientation.<sup>16</sup> Profiles were coded as “Ideo-Denom match” if both the denomination and mission statement matched respondents’ self-reported denomination and ideological orientation. This attribute allows me to assess the relative influence of denomination and ideology. Because the first profile was coded to match respondents’ denomination and ideology, I am able estimate the effect of joint effects of denomination and ideology compared to the marginal effects of each attribute alone.

Figure 4.2 displays AMCES for all attributes plus the new *Match* variable. Focusing on the three estimates for *Match*, a clear pattern of influence emerges. Respondents prefer congregations within their own denomination that are ideologically congruent more than a match on only one or neither dimension. Respondents appear to prefer denominational congruence slightly more than ideological congruence, relative to no congruence. However, this is a tenuous conclusion because of the imprecision around the *Denom Match* estimates.<sup>17</sup> Respondents’ preferences for ideological and denominational matches are stronger than the effects of all other attributes except their distaste

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<sup>16</sup>Moderates are dropped from this analysis; it seems a stretch to assume as neat a mapping between neutral mission statements and moderate ideology as between explicitly conservative and liberal mission statements and their respective ideological orientations. Moderates’ average preferences for each mission statement (not shown) demonstrate no clear pattern in preferences for ideological statements versus neutral statements.

<sup>17</sup>The effect of *Denomination Match* is significantly more imprecise than the effects of *Ideo-Denom Match* and *Ideo Match*; this is due to the fact that the first profile in the first task is coded to match respondents’ denomination *and* ideological views. Consequently, the 20% of the sample who do not identify with one of the eight major denominations cannot receive another in-denomination profile after the first profile (because the denomination attribute only includes the eight major denominations after the first profile of Task 1). Because denominational and ideological match are perfectly correlated for the first profile, the in-denomination attribute is functionally estimated with the remaining 80% of the sample for all but the first profile of Task 1. This is unfortunate for the sake of precision, but necessary to ensure enough statistical power to estimate the joint effect of a denomination and ideology match.

for traveling long distances.

These results support my first hypothesis – respondents strongly prefer ideological and denominational congruence over all other attributes, but the positive effect of ideological congruence alone is slightly smaller than the effect of denominational congruence alone, and smaller than the negative effects of long distances from home.

### 4.5.3 Probing ideological congruence further

In the next set of analyses, I will examine preferences for ideological congruence more closely. The *Match* variable from the last analysis measures ideological congruence by distinguishing respondents' preferences for ideologically-aligned mission statements from their preferences for neutral and incongruent statements, with the latter two combined into the “incongruent” category. However, I expect that respondents' preferences are more nuanced than this; I hypothesized that respondents will prefer neutral or non-political climates over congruent, both of which they will prefer over incongruent climates. To test this hypothesis, I create a new attribute called *IdeoMatch* that codes mission statements as “congruent”, “neutral”, and “incongruent”.

Importantly, in order to accurately estimate the effect of ideological congruence alone, I restrict the *IdeoMatch* analyses to only Tasks 2 and 3 of the conjoint experiment (the second and third pairs of profiles respondents rate); this is because ideology and denomination are perfectly correlated in Task 1, which means any effect of ideological congruence is confounded by denominational congruence. This obviously reduces the sample size significantly, and therefore the precision of the proceeding estimates. Nonetheless, the sample is large enough to examine subgroup differences and illuminate important trends.

Figure 4.3 displays AMCEs for the baseline attributes plus the new *IdeoMatch* at-



tribute. Focusing on the two coefficients for *IdeoMatch*, the large and negative effect of incongruent congregations stands out. Respondents are 23 percentage points less likely to choose a profile with an incongruent ideological cues compared to neutral cues. The negative effect of incongruence is the largest effect across all attributes by a significant margin. However, respondents are no more likely to choose a profile with congruent ideological cues compared to neutral profiles. This supports my hypothesis that respondents are more sensitive to incongruence than congruence ( $H_2$ ).

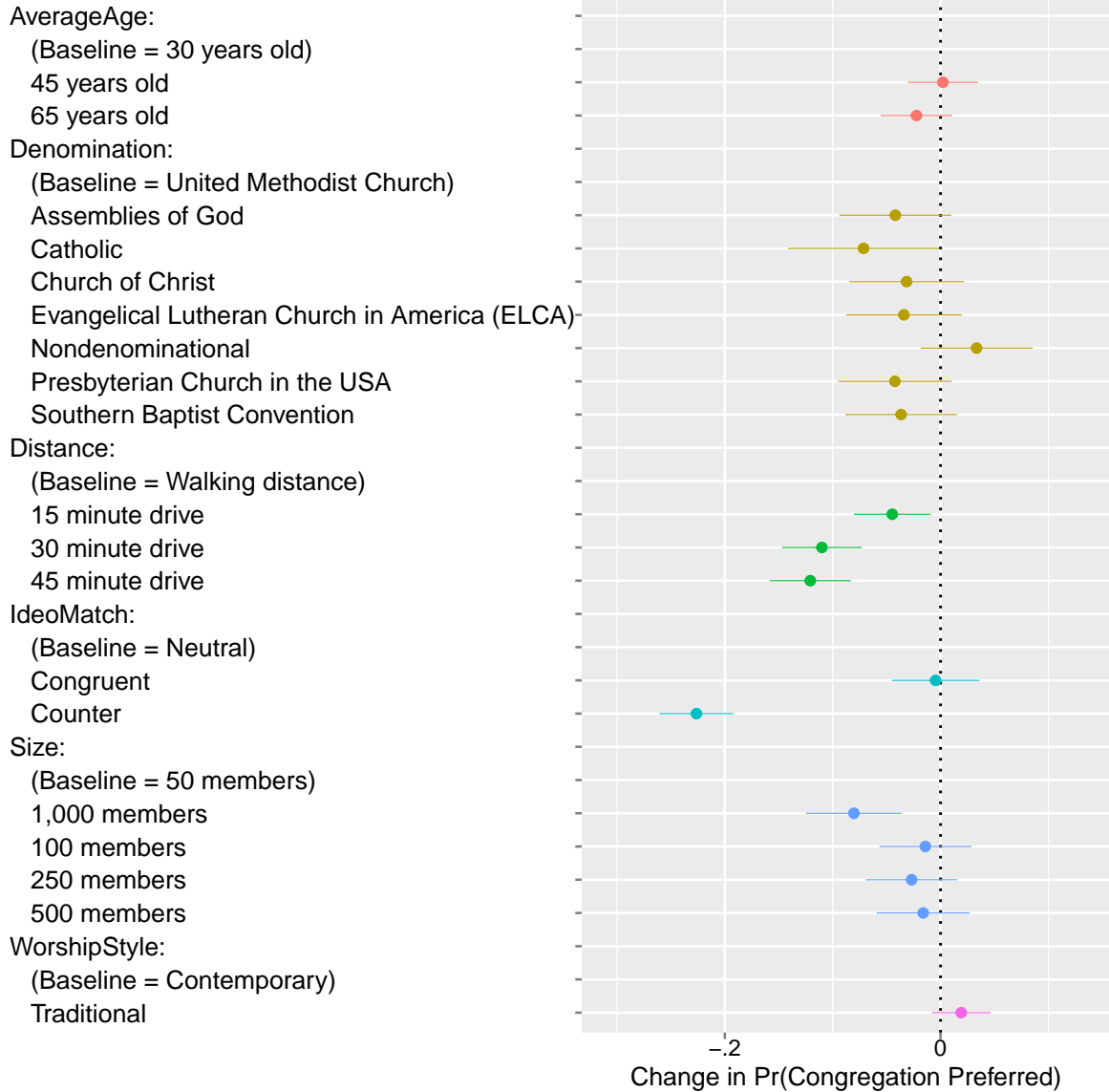
Figure 4.4 displays marginal means for the *IdeoMatch* attribute plus associated 95% confidence intervals, providing a measure of relative preferences rather than causal effects.<sup>18</sup> The marginal mean for a given attribute level is simply the average favorability (probability of being selected) of profiles with the given characteristic, averaged across the distribution of all other levels. For example, looking at 4.4, the average probability of selecting a congruent profile is .59 (again, looking at Tasks 2 and 3 only), while the probability of selecting an incongruent profile is .37. This is a different quantity of interest compared to the AMCE, which measures the causal effect of an attribute on preferences, or respondents' sensitivity to particular attributes.

The marginal mean results echo the patterns in causal effects; respondents display a clear preference for neutral and congruent profiles over incongruent, but no strong preference for ideologically congruent profiles relative to neutral. These findings lend some support my third hypothesis; respondents prefer congruence and neutrality over incongruence, but they do not prefer neutrality over congruence. Instead, respondents' preferences towards congruent and neutral profiles are substantively identical.

This is an important finding for understanding churchgoers' priorities; the mission

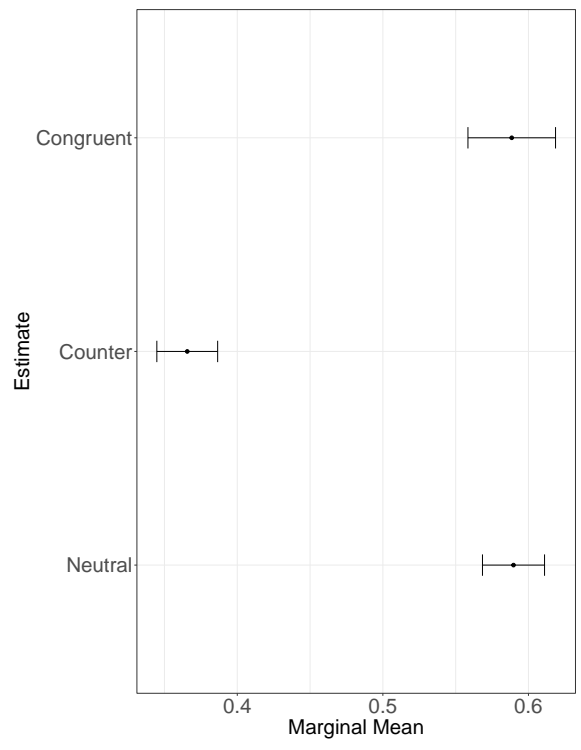
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<sup>18</sup>For the sake of space and parsimony, I display only the marginal means for the *IdeoMatch* attribute for rest of the analysis. The following analyses focus only on comparisons between the *IdeoMatch* levels, rather than comparisons across all attributes.



**Figure 4.3:** AMCEs Plus IdeoMatch for Congregation Choice – Tasks 2 and 3

Note: Estimated effects of the randomly assigned congregation attributes on probability of selecting congregation. Point estimates are linear regression estimators with clustered standard errors. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Baseline estimates are represented by solid dots arrayed along the dotted line at 0.



**Figure 4.4:** Marginal Means for Ideological Match (Tasks 2 & 3)

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.

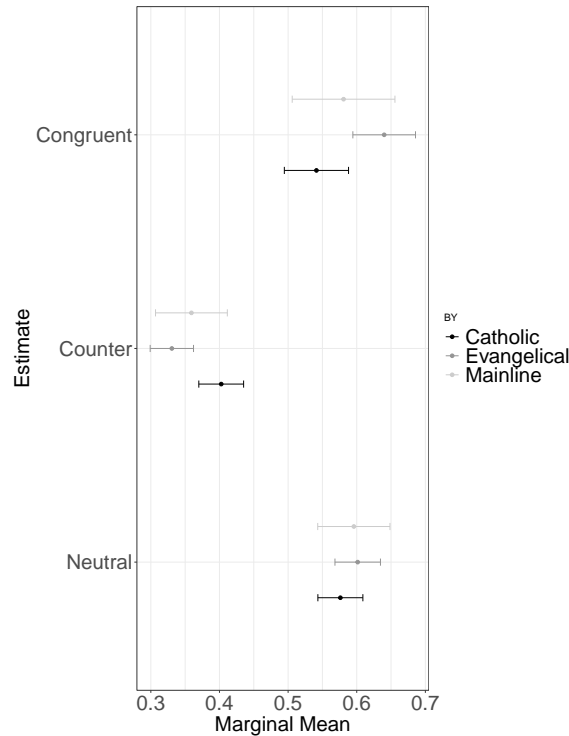
statements were written to clearly convey an ideological bent, and were reinforced by their associated ministries. Thus, it is unlikely that respondents had trouble discerning which profiles fit their views, but could clearly identify incongruence; instead, respondents seem to be reacting more strongly against incongruence than favoring congruence.

#### **4.5.4 Testing for subgroup effects**

While results for the full sample are instructive, there are numerous theoretical reasons to expect that preferences for political congruence might vary between subgroups. My fourth hypothesis predicts preferences for political congruence will vary depending on respondents' religious tradition. Specifically, I hypothesize that Catholic respondents will prioritize political congruence less than evangelical or mainline Protestants. Figure 4.5 displays the marginal mean estimates for the *IdeoMatch* attribute, by faith tradition, looking only at Tasks 2 and 3. Comparing the estimates for each level of *IdeoMatch*, we see significant differences by tradition, driven by differences between evangelical Protestants and Catholics. Respondents' ordering of preferences are similar across traditions – congruent and neutral congregations are rated similarly, while respondents in all traditions are generally less favorable towards incongruent congregations – but the strength of preferences varies between evangelicals and Catholics. Evangelicals' favorability toward congruent profiles is 10 pp greater than Catholics', while Catholics are 7 pp more favorable toward incongruent profiles than evangelicals.

These results suggest that white evangelical Protestants prefer congruent congregations more, and incongruent congregations less, than Catholics; Catholics' preferences are less polarized compared to evangelicals and mainline Protestants. These results lend support to my fourth hypothesis; Catholics prioritize political congruence significantly

less and are more favorable towards incongruence than evangelicals and perhaps mainline Protestants, though the mainline estimates are limited by smaller sample sizes.



**Figure 4.5:** Marginal Means for Ideological Match, by Faith Tradition (Tasks 2 & 3)

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.

Next, I test for subgroup differences according to respondents’ religiosity. Specifically, I hypothesized that more religious individuals will prioritize political congruence more than less religious respondents. My survey included two questions that are often included in measures of religiosity – frequency of church attendance and importance of religion in one’s life. Because the results for these two variables are substantively identical, I present results broken out by church attendance below and include results broken down by importance of religion in the Appendix.

I collapsed respondents’ reported church attendance into a binary variable, coded

as 1 for those respondents who report attending church more than weekly, weekly, or a few times a month, and coded 0 for those who attend monthly or less frequently.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 4.6 displays the marginal means for the three levels of *IdeoMatch* separately for frequent and infrequent church attenders, estimated only for Tasks 2 and 3. Frequent and infrequent attenders display similar preferences for neutral and incongruent profiles, but a suggestive difference is evidence for congruent profiles. The loss of statistical power from subsetting to Tasks 2 and 3 increases the uncertainty around these estimates. Similar to the overall pattern demonstrated thus far, frequent and infrequent church attenders do not strongly favor congruent over neutral profiles, but are significantly less favorable towards incongruent profiles.

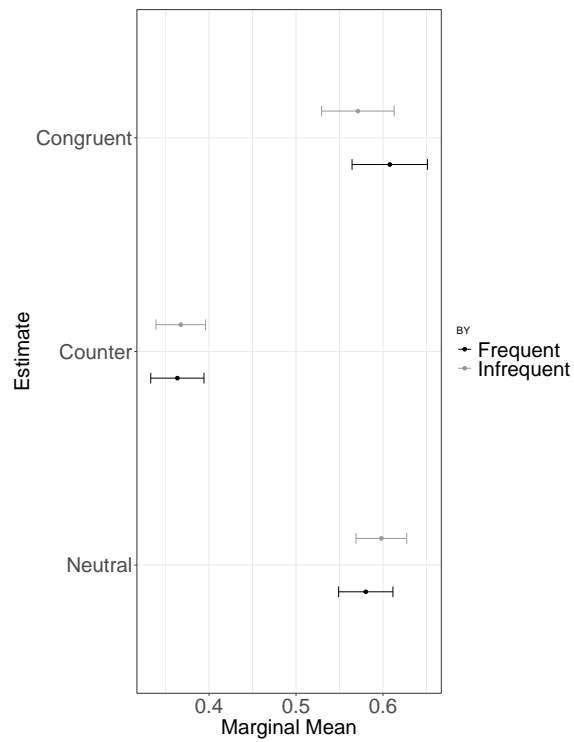
Figure C.2 in the Appendix displays results for the same model estimated for all 3 tasks; point estimates for frequent and infrequent attenders are substantively identical to the results from the model subset to Tasks 2 and 3, but the addition of data from Task 1 reduces the uncertainty around estimates. The resulting difference in favorability towards congruent profiles between frequent and infrequent attenders is statistically significant ( $-0.04, z_{diff} = 2.17, p \leq 0.03$ ). The results for importance of religion are substantively identical to church attendance, suggesting those for whom religion is very important are slightly more favorable of congruent profiles than those for whom religion is less important.<sup>20</sup> Taken together, these results provide suggestive evidence that more religiously engaged individuals prioritize political congruence with a congregation more than the less engaged.

Finally, I examine subgroup differences in preferences for political congruence be-

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<sup>19</sup>Importance of religion is coded similarly; respondents who report religion is “Extremely important” or “Very important” are coded as 1, and all others coded as 0 (“Moderately important”, “Slightly important” and “Not at all important”).

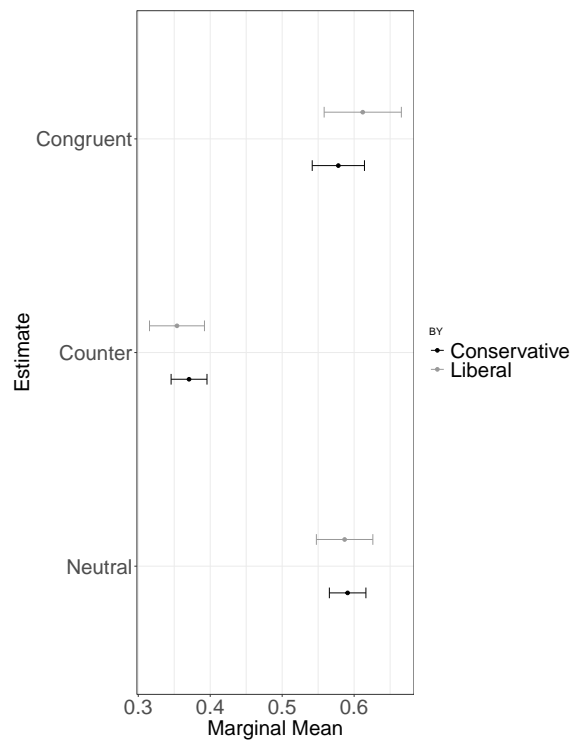
<sup>20</sup>See Figure C.3 for results from Tasks 2 and 3, and Figure C.4 for all three tasks. A pairwise test of differences between high and low importance groups confirms a significant difference in favorability towards politically congruent profiles ( $-0.05, z_{diff} = 2.44, p \leq 0.01$ ).



**Figure 4.6:** Marginal Means for Ideological Match, by Church Attendance (Tasks 2 & 3)

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.

tween liberals and conservatives. Figure 4.7 displays the marginal means for *IdeoMatch* for liberals and conservatives, estimated using only tasks 2 and 3. No significant differences between liberals and conservatives are apparent in favorability for congruent, neutral, and incongruent profiles. Neither liberals nor conservatives demonstrate a strong preference for congruent profiles compared to neutral profiles, but strongly prefer both to incongruent profiles. These patterns hold when the same model is estimated using data from all three tasks (see Figure C.5 in the Appendix), and estimated by partisanship instead of ideology.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 4.7:** Marginal Means for Ideological Match, by Ideology (Tasks 2 & 3)

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.

<sup>21</sup>Figure C.6 in the Appendix displays results for Republicans and Democrats.



These results suggest that, contrary to my sixth hypothesis, liberals and conservatives prioritize political congruence at similar rates, and these rates do not differ from their preferences for neutral profiles. In keeping with the overall pattern in respondents' ordering of preferences, liberal and conservative churchgoers hold unfavorable views towards incongruent congregations, but do not demonstrate strong preferences for congregations that advertise ideological views in line with their own, relative to more neutral congregations.

## **4.6 Discussion & Conclusion**

The preceding findings further our understanding of how political considerations factor into religious decision-making, broadly, and how political fit impacts individuals' evaluations of potential congregations, specifically. First and foremost, and in line with existing work, churchgoers do not demonstrate strong demand for overtly political congregations, but they are sensitive to political cues when made available. The four ideologically-charged mission statements had uniformly negative effects on respondents' favorability of profiles. However, respondents' favorability towards particular mission statements mirror their ideological views – liberals prefer profiles with liberal mission statements more than conservatives, and vice-a-versa.

Importantly, despite liberals' and conservatives' baseline differences in preferences towards liberal and conservative profiles, respondents on the whole do not demonstrate significantly stronger preferences for ideologically-congruent profiles compared to neutral profiles. Instead, respondents are most sensitive to ideologically-incongruent profiles. Across faith traditions, levels of religiosity, and ideology, respondents are significantly less likely to select ideologically-incongruent profiles compared to neutral profiles, and are significantly less favorable towards incongruent profiles compared to

neutral and congruent. While the size of the penalty varies somewhat between groups – Catholics are more favorable towards incongruent profiles compared to evangelical Protestants, for example – respondents' ordering of preferences are uniform and consistent.

Subgroup differences illuminate potential patterns in preferences for political congruence, but sample size limitations temper these inferences. As mentioned above, Catholics demonstrate less polarized preferences for political congruence and incongruence compared to evangelical Protestants. These differences may be driven by differing expectations regarding political congruence between Catholics and evangelicals; the different institutional legacies of these two traditions may affect how important churchgoers perceive political fit to be, and how much they prioritize finding politically-similar congregations.

I find suggestive, but inconclusive, evidence of differences in priorities between more and less religious individuals, measured by frequency of church attendance and importance of religion in one's life. More religious individuals prioritize political congruence slightly more than less religious individuals; while caution is warranted in extrapolating from these results, they speak to potential differences in the value placed political congruence depending on the degree of social-embeddedness in a congregation.

Finally, I find no differences according to ideological orientation, contrary to my expectations that liberals would prioritize political congruence more than conservatives. While some existing work suggests liberals are more likely than conservatives to hear political messages at church, my results indicate that neither liberals nor conservatives seek out explicitly political congregations that fit their views. These findings suggest that liberals are not differentially motivated by minority status or more appetite for politics at church. However, ideologues from both sides prefer congregations that are not dia-

metrically opposed to their views.<sup>22</sup>

These results further our understanding of how politics affects religious decision-making among white Christians. This is the first study to quantify the causal impact of political considerations on congregational choice, in an experimental setting that approximates real-world decision-making. Additionally, this is the first study to measure and test the effect of political fit, and to incorporate and test preferences for political neutrality. These are important methodological advances, but conjoint designs present a unique set of methodological limitations.

Any survey experiment must balance external and internal validity. Conjoint designs overcome one important challenge to external validity by allowing researchers to manipulate several treatments at once. However, it is still not realistic to test every possible causal factor, and some simply do not make sense to include in a hypothetical setting. In the case of congregational choice, I did not include important factors like existing social ties to a congregation (Putnam and Campbell 2012); it was not realistic to include an attribute indicating that respondents' spouses or friends attend a congregation that is not within their home denomination or is 45 minutes away, for example.

Similarly, conjoint designs necessarily incorporate some unrealistic combinations of attributes. For example, some denominations may be more likely to advertise their ideological views through a mission statement on a website or bulletin than others. It is probably more realistic for smaller, less centralized denominations to do so compared to a large, centralized denomination like the Catholic Church to advertise particular ideological viewpoints. Omitting important factors and incorporating some unrealistic combina-

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<sup>22</sup>Of course, studying liberal churchgoers is difficult because they make up such a small share of churchgoers; this is reflected in the large standard errors for liberal estimates. Additionally, rather than motivating them to seek out a similar church, their minority status may temper their expectations for political fit, especially if they do not live in overwhelmingly liberal places where progressive churches are easier to find. Their indifference towards congruent churches relative to neutral churches may simply reflect rational expectations about finding a church that fits their views.

tions of attributes obviously decreases the external validity of the experiment, and limits the extent to which the conjoint reflects the real tradeoffs facing churchgoers.

Relatedly, all conjoint tradeoffs are hypothetical. Results gathered from conjoint surveys do not necessarily correlate with real-world behavior, and even if the conjoint does capture sincere preferences, it is not obvious that respondents could act on them. In this case, respondents demonstrate a clear ordering of preferences for the political character of congregations, but we do not know whether most respondents could glean this information when looking for new congregations. Certain congregations may not advertise their views through a mission statement, or some respondents' may live in a community that only supports one church within their denomination, for example.

Similarly, churchgoers may prefer particular political climates, but prioritize other factors in their real-world decision that functionally limits the possibility of finding a congregation that fits their political preferences. Future work should employ a design similar to Mummolo and Nall (2017) that allows researchers to link respondents' real world congregational choices to their stated preferences from a conjoint experiment.

Additionally, there are several important limitations to my particular design. My power to detect subgroup effects was limited by the decision to fix the first profile to match respondents' denomination and ideology. Because these attributes were perfectly correlated in Task 1, the analysis of ideological congruence was only valid using Tasks 2 and 3. This significantly shrunk my sample size; thus, it is possible that certain subgroup effects, especially those between frequent/infrequent church attenders and more/less religious individuals, are underestimated.

Finally, while this design was carefully constructed to attempt to separate political effects from theological effects, the political cues were imperfect and necessarily included theological elements. Church mission statements are a clear indication of congregation's values and beliefs, and often include theological and ideological elements. I

mimicked this design to maximize external validity, though this obviously weakened my ability to point to ideological cues as the sole causal factors.

The ministries were included to bolster political signals; I chose politically-charged ministries to maximize the chances of finding an effect. However, the ministries still needed to be realistic, even if more overtly political than a typical congregation's offerings. This meant that for conservative congregations, for example, the most politically-salient ministries are probably those dealing with traditional moral concerns, like abortion and gender roles. While these issues are political lightning rods at the national level, they touch on fundamental theological debates, which ultimately means it may not be possible to separate theological and political elements in respondents' minds. However, the fact that respondents gleaned a great deal of useful political information from *relatively* subtle cues demonstrates the extent to which theological views and political identities are intertwined for many white Christians.

Regardless of the specific causal levers at play, these findings demonstrate, at the very least, that churchgoers are sensitive to ideological cues embedded in a congregation's description. Respondents are sensitive in ways that align with their self-reported ideological convictions, but only by avoiding congregations that clearly signaled views contrary to their own. The asymmetry between respondents' strong aversion to incongruence and indifference towards congruence relative to neutrality raises important questions about causal mechanisms.

One explanation for this result is that norms dictating a clear separation of politics from religion drive respondents' preferences for political neutrality, or non-political congregations. In the context of congregational choice, individuals may be attracted to neutral congregations over environments that emphasize political views congruent with their own because they do not consider politics an important or appropriate element of worship. The flip side of that logic is that a congregation which emphasizes politics

different from their own beliefs and priorities will feel particularly jarring and unappealing. Especially considering congregational membership often entails financial contributions, individuals may feel that attending a church that promotes views different from their own would require implicitly supporting causes and stances antithetical to their values. In a sense, then, avoiding clearly incongruent congregations allows churchgoers to focus on worship and fellowship without worrying about cognitive dissonance.

Another, and perhaps not fully contradictory, explanation is that politically neutral cues do not necessarily signal neutral congregational environments in respondents' minds. Instead, if congregations are largely ideologically sorted already, respondents may project political congruence onto neutral cues, drawing on their personal experience to inform their expectations of hypothetical congregations. In this case, congruent cues signal more "political" congregations, while neutral cues signal congregations where many people share the respondent's worldview, but politics may not feature as prominently. Neutrality, then, is not completely free of political considerations.

My design does not allow me to adjudicate between these theories. Without a better understanding of the true rate of ideological sorting into congregations, it is difficult to know whether truly neutral or "non-political" congregations are common or realistic. Researchers should think creatively about how to better measure ideological sorting across denominations and traditions. Relatedly, and more specifically for conjoint and experimental designs, future work should test potential primes to understand how respondents' perceive ostensibly neutral and political cues, whether in the form of a congregational mission statement, sermon, church bulletin, or other forms of implicit political speech or messaging that churchgoers are likely to encounter.

These results assuage concerns about rampant partisan sorting into congregations, but that is not to say that the political issues and signals included in the experiment are too extreme to tell us anything useful. On the contrary, several of these issues are central

theological issues that divide even churchgoers of the same denomination. Abortion, for example, remains a polarizing issue within many Christian denominations. My results suggest that liberal and conservative Catholics, for example, would react differently to a congregation featuring pro-life ministries on their website or newsletter, for example. Similarly, a Methodist church that displays a “Black Lives Matter” banner or sign in their congregation’s lawn will trigger different reactions among liberal and conservative Methodists.

Relatedly, respondents’ universal preference for attending “non-political” congregations has implications for congregational dynamics and clergy leadership. While overt politicking is relatively rare, recent survey data suggest that churchgoers across faith traditions report hearing political issues discussed regularly.<sup>23</sup> While processing political cues in a hypothetical decision about joining a congregation is different from hearing similar cues in a sermon or discussion with other congregants, respondents reacted predictably and strongly against counter-ideological cues, both for the full sample and across all subgroups. This suggests that even in a middle-of-the-road congregation political cues could be divisive; clergy who desire to take political stands on issues, or to even discuss theological points related to politically-impinged issues, or offer ministries related to political issues, may feel constrained by the possibility of a backlash from some segment of the congregation at all times. Similarly, political discussion or activity among congregants may risk engendering conflict.

Finally, the asymmetric response to incongruent and congruent political climates speaks to disaffiliation dynamics driving the rise of religious “nones.” In the past few decades, liberals have left religion at much higher rates than conservatives, and studies have demonstrated that disaffiliation from congregations and religion affiliation

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<sup>23</sup> “Many Americans Hear Politics from the Pulpit”, Pew Research Center <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/08/many-americans-hear-politics-from-the-pulpit/>

more broadly is often driven by political disagreement within congregations (Campbell et al. 2018; Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018). The implication of these trends is that individuals who leave congregations are choosing to leave religion altogether, rather than search for a new congregation that better fits their views. My findings suggest that churchgoers are much more repelled by disagreement than attracted to agreement with a congregation; it may be that individuals are simply not motivated enough to seek out a more politically compatible congregation after experiencing disagreement with a congregation. The fact that these results hold for both liberals and conservatives align with existing work demonstrating that political disagreement drives disaffiliation on both sides of the political spectrum (Campbell et al. 2018; Djupe, Neiheisel and Sokhey 2018; Hadden 1969; Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2012).

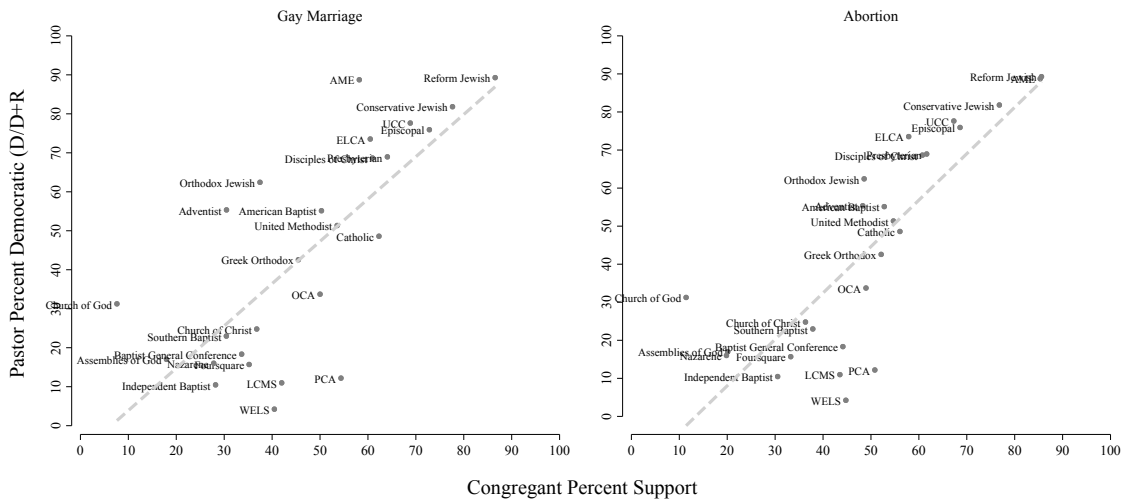
The findings from this study are another example of the myriad ways that politics shape religious behavior and identity. The clear and widespread preference to avoid ideologically incongruent congregations is a stark indicator of the extent to which associations between religious and political identities have hardened in past decades; such a tendency among churchgoers fifty years ago would have been almost unthinkable (Herberg 1983; Wuthnow 1988). Today, however, what is religious is political, and while truly neutral congregations may provide some bulwark against further polarization, aggregate trends point to politically polarized religion among white Christians for the foreseeable future.



# A | Appendix to Chapter 1

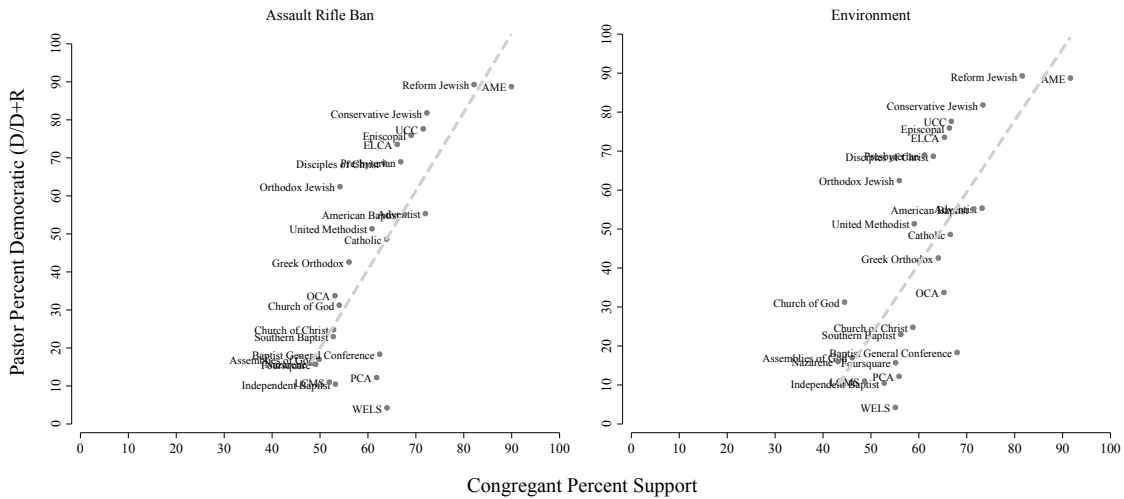
**Table A.1: Denominations Names and Directory URLs**

Denomination	Full Name	URL
AME	African Methodist Episcopal Church	<a href="https://www.ame-church.com/directory/find-a-church/">https://www.ame-church.com/directory/find-a-church/</a>
Adventist	Seventh-Day Adventist Church	<a href="http://eadventist.net">http://eadventist.net</a>
American Baptist	American Baptist Churches USA	<a href="http://www.abcis.org/public/ChurchSearch.asp">http://www.abcis.org/public/ChurchSearch.asp</a>
Assemblies of God	-	<a href="http://www.ag.org/top/church-directory/">www.ag.org/top/church-directory/</a>
Baptist General	Baptist General Conference	<a href="https://converge.org/locate-converge">https://converge.org/locate-converge</a>
Black Churches	-	<a href="http://theblackchurches.org/churches/">http://theblackchurches.org/churches/</a>
Brethren	The Brethren Church	<a href="http://www.brethrenchurch.org/upload/documents/CHURCH_LISTS/2016_May_Churches.pdf">http://www.brethrenchurch.org/upload/documents/CHURCH_LISTS/2016_May_Churches.pdf</a>
Catholic	The Catholic Church	<a href="http://www.thecatholicdirectory.com">http://www.thecatholicdirectory.com</a>
COG General Conf	Church of God General Conference	<a href="http://www.cggc.org/connect/directory/pastor-search/">http://www.cggc.org/connect/directory/pastor-search/</a>
COG Anderson	Church of God (Anderson, IN)	<a href="http://www.jesusisthesubject.org/church-finder/">http://www.jesusisthesubject.org/church-finder/</a>
Christian Reformed	Christian Reformed Church in North America	<a href="https://www.crcna.org/church-finder">https://www.crcna.org/church-finder</a>
Churches of Christ	-	<a href="http://www.churches-of-christ.net/usa/index.html">http://www.churches-of-christ.net/usa/index.html</a>
Church of God	-	<a href="http://www.churchofgod.org/index.php/church-locator">http://www.churchofgod.org/index.php/church-locator</a>
Disciples of Christ	-	<a href="http://disciples.org/find-congregation/">http://disciples.org/find-congregation/</a>
EFCA	Evangelical Free Church of America	<a href="https://churches.efca.org">https://churches.efca.org</a>
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	<a href="http://www.elca.org/tools/findacongregation">http://www.elca.org/tools/findacongregation</a>
Episcopal	The Episcopal Church	<a href="http://www.episcopalchurch.org/browse/parish">http://www.episcopalchurch.org/browse/parish</a>
The Evang. Church	The Evangelical Church of North America	<a href="https://www.theevangelicalchurch.org/churches">https://www.theevangelicalchurch.org/churches</a>
Foursquare	The Foursquare Church	<a href="http://www.foursquare.org/locator">http://www.foursquare.org/locator</a>
Fundamentalist Baptist	-	<a href="http://fundamental.org/fundamental/churches">http://fundamental.org/fundamental/churches</a>
Greek Orthodox	Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America	<a href="http://www.goarch.org/parishes/">http://www.goarch.org/parishes/</a>
Independent Baptist	-	<a href="http://baptistinfo.org/directory/index.shtml">http://baptistinfo.org/directory/index.shtml</a>
Jewish, Conservative	United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism	<a href="https://uscj.org/network">https://uscj.org/network</a>
Jewish, Orthodox	Orthodox Union	<a href="https://www.ou.org/synagogue-finder/">https://www.ou.org/synagogue-finder/</a>
Jewish, Reform	Union for Reform Judaism	<a href="https://www.urj.org/congregations">https://www.urj.org/congregations</a>
Missouri Synod	The Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod	<a href="http://locator.lcms.org/nchurches_fm/church.asp">http://locator.lcms.org/nchurches_fm/church.asp</a>
WELS	Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	<a href="https://yearbook.wels.net/unitsearch">https://yearbook.wels.net/unitsearch</a>
Methodist	The United Methodist Church	<a href="http://www.umc.org/find-a-church/search">http://www.umc.org/find-a-church/search</a>
Nazarene	Church of the Nazarene	<a href="http://nazarene.org/find-a-church">http://nazarene.org/find-a-church</a>
OCA	Orthodox Church in America	<a href="https://oca.org/parishes">https://oca.org/parishes</a>
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America	<a href="http://www.pcaac.org/church-search/">http://www.pcaac.org/church-search/</a>
Pentecostal (PCG)	Pentecostal Church of God	<a href="http://www.pcg.org/findchurch">http://www.pcg.org/findchurch</a>
Pentecostal (UPCI)	United Pentecostal Church International	<a href="https://www.upci.org/home">https://www.upci.org/home</a>
Presbyterian	Presbyterian Church (USA)	<a href="https://www.pcusa.org/search/congregations/">https://www.pcusa.org/search/congregations/</a>
Reformed Presbyterian	The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church	<a href="http://arpchurch.org/arp-church-directory/">http://arpchurch.org/arp-church-directory/</a>
Southern Baptist	Southern Baptist Convention	<a href="http://www.sbc.net/churchsearch/">http://www.sbc.net/churchsearch/</a>
UCC	United Church of Christ	<a href="http://www.ucc.org/find">http://www.ucc.org/find</a>
Unitarian	Unitarian Universalist Association	<a href="https://my.uua.org/directory/congregations/">https://my.uua.org/directory/congregations/</a>



**Figure A.1: Party Affiliation of Pastors vs. Adherents in the Mass Public**

Note: Forty-five degree line indicates equal share of pastor partisanship and congregant policy support.



**Figure A.2: Party Affiliation of Pastors vs. Adherents in the Mass Public**

Note: Forty-five degree line indicates equal share of pastor partisanship and congregant policy support.

**Table A.2: Summary Statistics of Merged and Full NCS Sample**

	Matched	Non-Matched	Full NCS
% Catholic	9	3	5
% Evangelical	43	49	48
% Mainline	38	14	20
% Black Prot.	8	25	20
% Non-Christian	2	9	7
Total %	100	100	100

Note: column entries represent the distribution of major faith traditions within NCS samples.

**Table A.3: Theological and Ideological Representativeness**

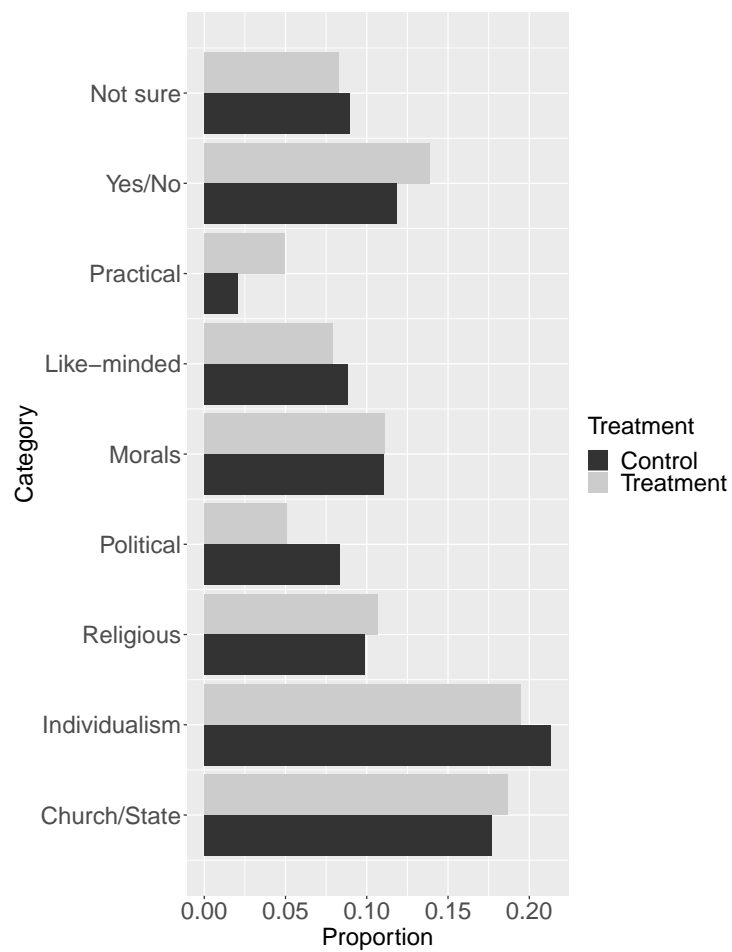
	<i>Theology</i>			<i>Ideology</i>		
	Matched	Non-matched	Full NCS	Matched	Non-Matched	Full NCS
% Conservative	62	64	64	58	55	56
% Moderate	23	24	24	29	35	34
% Liberal	15	12	12	13	10	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: column entries represent theological and ideological distribution of respective NCS sample.

**Table A.4: Partisan Diversity Across Faith Tradition**

	Catholic	White Evangelical	Black Protestant	White Mainline	Non-Christian
% Democrat	14	9	67	57	87
% Republican	24	69	5	30	13
% Other	62	22	28	13	0
Total N	25	134	29	97	4

## B | Appendix to Chapter 2



**Figure B.1:** Distribution of Response Categories by Treatment Status

Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.

**Table B.1:** Denomination Breakdown of Lucid Sample

Denomination	Count
African Methodist Episcopal Church	1
Adventist	5
Anglican Church	2
Assemblies of God	19
American Baptist Churches USA	18
Baptist General Conference	9
Independent Baptist	48 (2%)
National Baptist Convention	2
Progressive Baptist Convention	1
Southern Baptist Convention	181 (9%)
Baptist (Other)	35 (2%)
Catholic	913 (45%)
Christian Reformed Church	6
Churches of Christ	32 (2%)
Church of God	8
Church of the Nazarene	7
Disciples of Christ	9
Evangelical Free Church of America	13
The Episcopal Church	36 (2%)
Reformed Episcopal Church	3
Episcopal (Other)	6
The Foursquare Gospel Church	2
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	42 (2%)
The Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod	57 (3%)
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	9
Lutheran (Other)	23
Free Methodist Church	2
The United Methodist Church	139 (7%)
Nondenominational	202 (10%)
Pentecostal Church of God	11
Pentecostal (Other)	21
Presbyterian Church (USA)	38 (2%)
Presbyterian Church in America	15
Presbyterian (Other)	29
Reformed (Other)	1
United Church of Christ	22
Wesleyan Church	4

Note: Percentages shown for denominations comprising at least 2% of the sample.

**Table B.2:** Regression of Binary Political Importance – Treatment

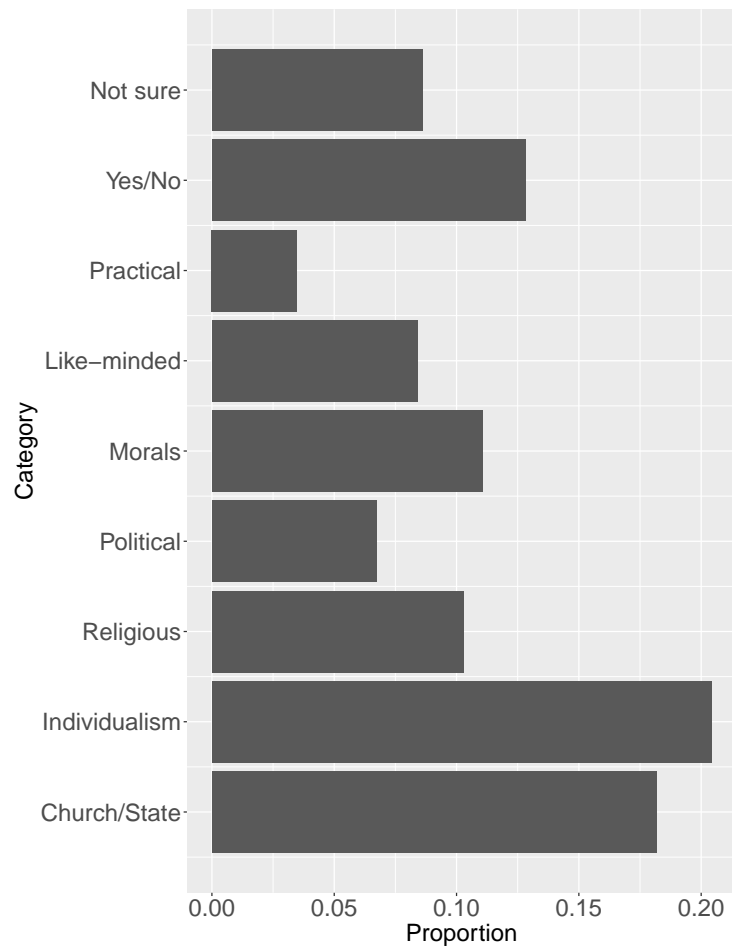
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	congp2
Moderate	0.013 (0.036)
Liberal	0.249*** (0.042)
Evangelical	-0.103** (0.048)
Catholic	-0.091** (0.045)
Church Attendance	0.014 (0.010)
Relig.Importance	-0.018 (0.039)
Born-Again	0.132*** (0.040)
Age	-0.005*** (0.001)
Female	-0.052 (0.033)
Education	0.002 (0.017)
CongTenure	-0.001 (0.001)
Constant	0.621*** (0.094)
Observations	901
R <sup>2</sup>	0.105
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.094

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

**Table B.3:** Proportional Odds of Political Importance

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	pol_imp
Moderate	−0.329** (0.158)
Liberal	0.185 (0.143)
Evangelical	0.303* (0.183)
Catholic	0.221 (0.172)
Church Attendance	−0.002 (0.033)
Born-Again	−0.154 (0.153)
Age	0.014*** (0.004)
Female	0.186 (0.122)
Education	−0.073 (0.065)
CongTenure	0.004 (0.004)
Observations	964

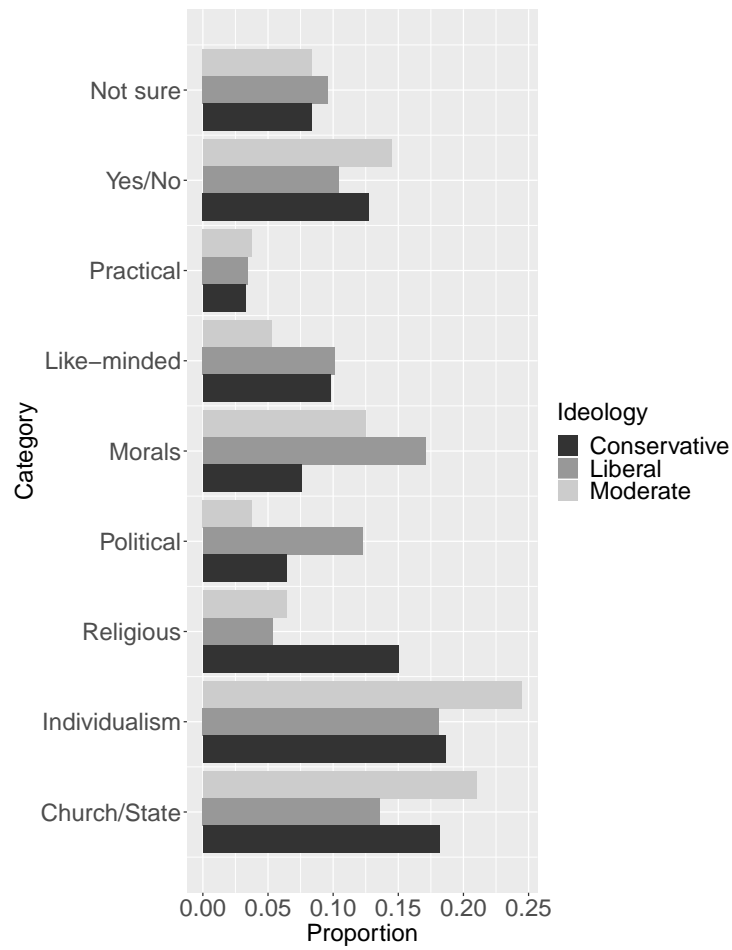
*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01



**Figure B.2:** Distribution of Response Categories – Full Sample

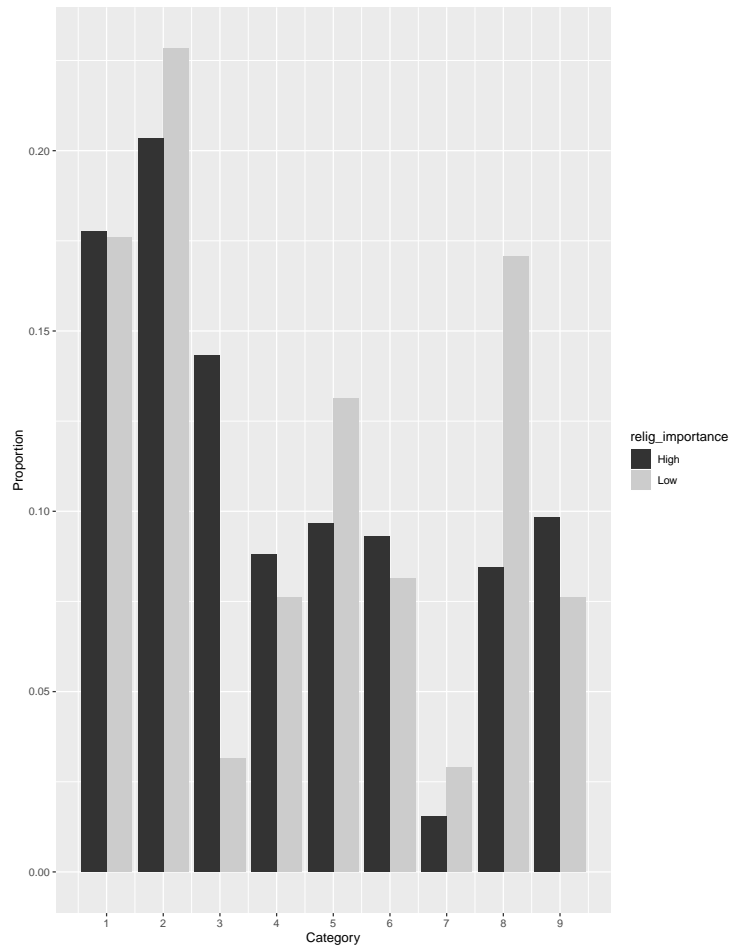
Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.





**Figure B.3:** Distribution of Response Categories by Ideology – Full Sample

Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.



**Figure B.4:** Distribution of Response Categories by Religious Importance – Control

Note: Bars represent proportion of responses drawing on each category of reasoning.

## **C | Appendix to Chapter 4**

**Table C.1:** Denomination Breakdown of Lucid Sample

Denomination	Count
African Methodist Episcopal Church	1
Adventist	5
Anglican Church	2
Assemblies of God	19
American Baptist Churches USA	18
Baptist General Conference	9
Independent Baptist	48 (2%)
National Baptist Convention	2
Progressive Baptist Convention	1
Southern Baptist Convention	181 (9%)
Baptist (Other)	35 (2%)
Catholic	913 (45%)
Christian Reformed Church	6
Churches of Christ	32 (2%)
Church of God	8
Church of the Nazarene	7
Disciples of Christ	9
Evangelical Free Church of America	13
The Episcopal Church	36 (2%)
Reformed Episcopal Church	3
Episcopal (Other)	6
The Foursquare Gospel Church	2
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	42 (2%)
The Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod	57 (3%)
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	9
Lutheran (Other)	23
Free Methodist Church	2
The United Methodist Church	139 (7%)
Nondenominational	202 (10%)
Pentecostal Church of God	11
Pentecostal (Other)	21
Presbyterian Church (USA)	38 (2%)
Presbyterian Church in America	15
Presbyterian (Other)	29
Reformed (Other)	1
United Church of Christ	22
Wesleyan Church	4

Note: Percentages shown for denominations comprising at least 2% of the sample.

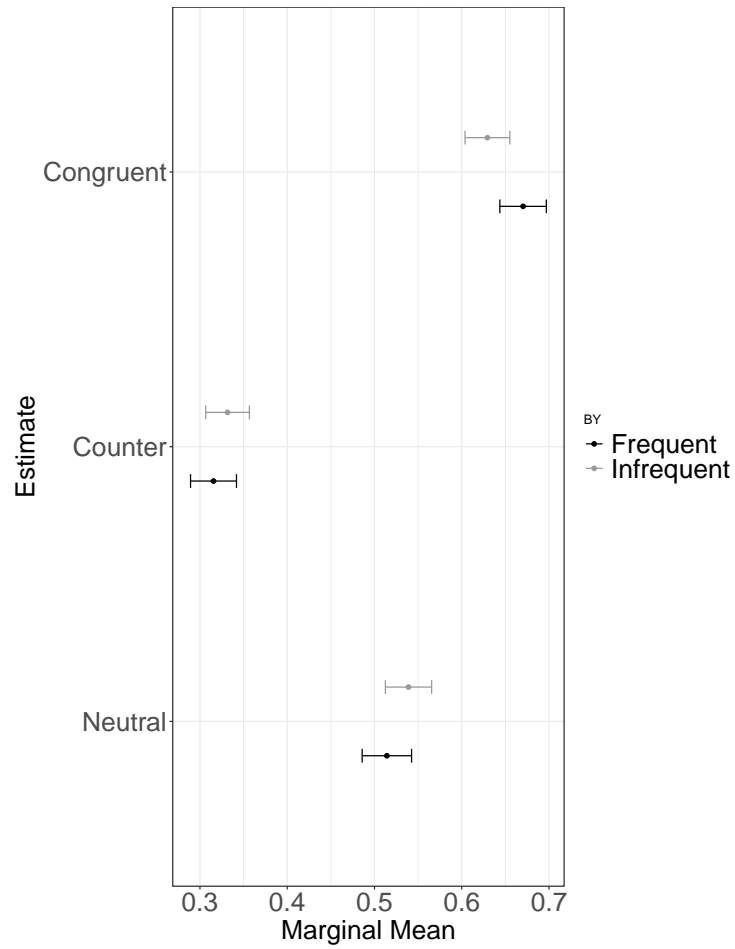
Please carefully review the options below, then indicate which congregation you would prefer to attend.

	<b>Congregation 1</b>	<b>Congregation 2</b>
Size	100 members	500 members
Distance	15 minute drive	Walking distance
Denomination	Catholic	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)
Average age of members	30 years old	45 years old
Worship style	Traditional	Contemporary
Mission statement	"A Gospel-centered church committed to following the teachings of Jesus Christ, glorifying God by making disciples, and leading those outside the faith towards his Word."	"We affirm the sanctity, dignity, and equality of all human beings, and stand for individuals' right to respond to God's call in their own understanding of God's love."
Ministries offered	Religious freedom council, Pro-life outreach	Social justice task-force, Interfaith speaker series

Congregation 1

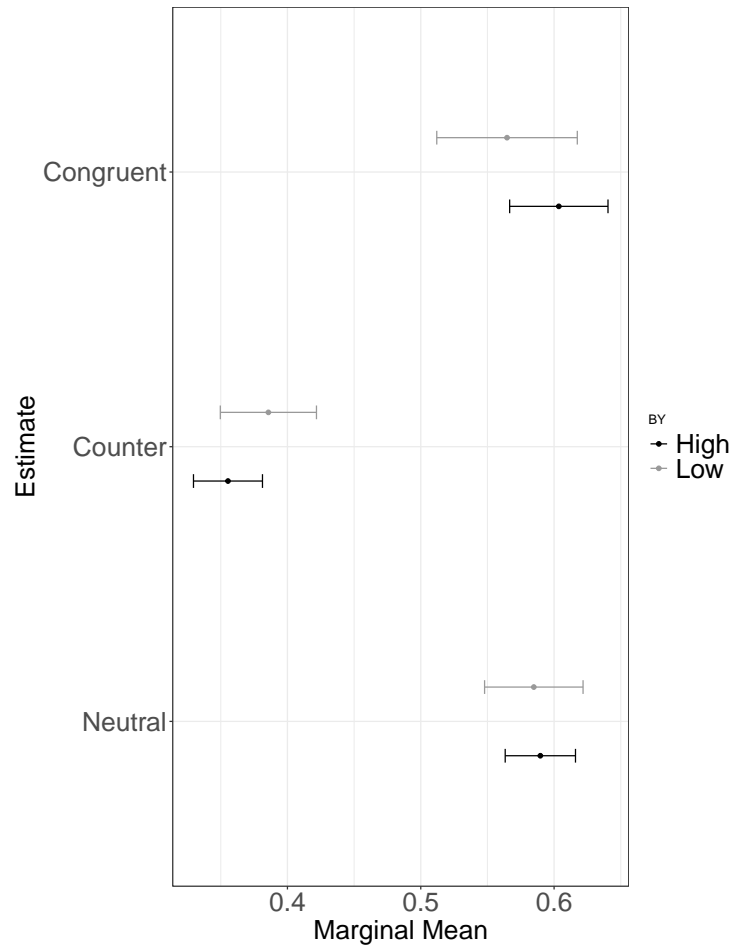
Congregation 2

**Figure C.1:** Example of Conjoint Task



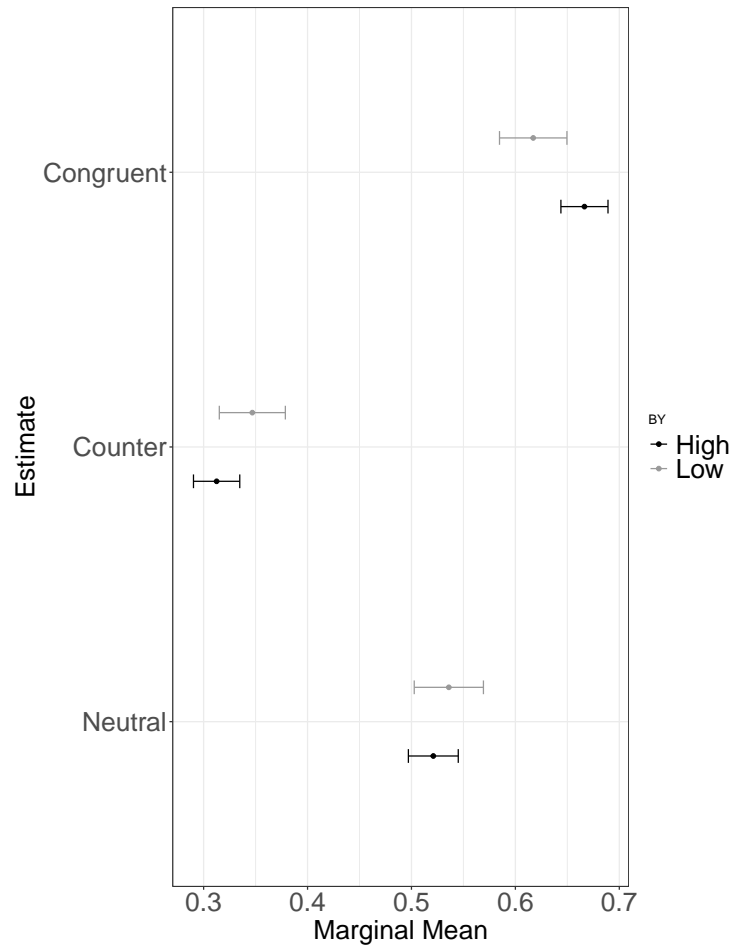
**Figure C.2:** Marginal Means Plus Ideological Match, by Church Attendance (Full Sample)

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.



**Figure C.3:** Marginal Means + Ideological Match, by Religious Importance (Tasks 2 and 3)

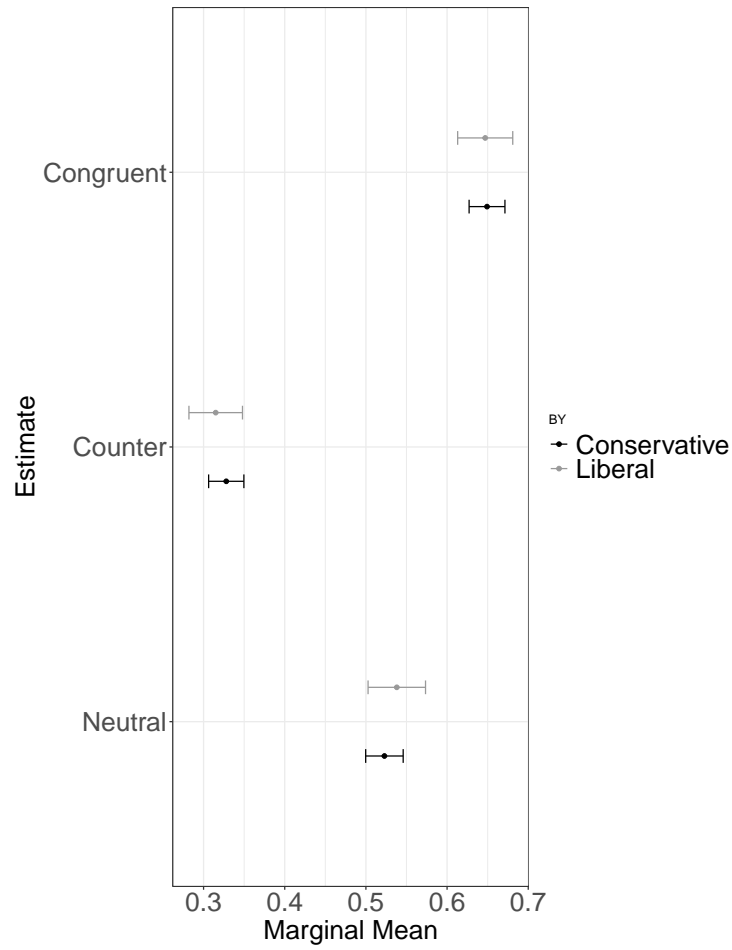
Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.



**Figure C.4:** Marginal Means + Ideological Match, by Religious Importance (Full Sample)

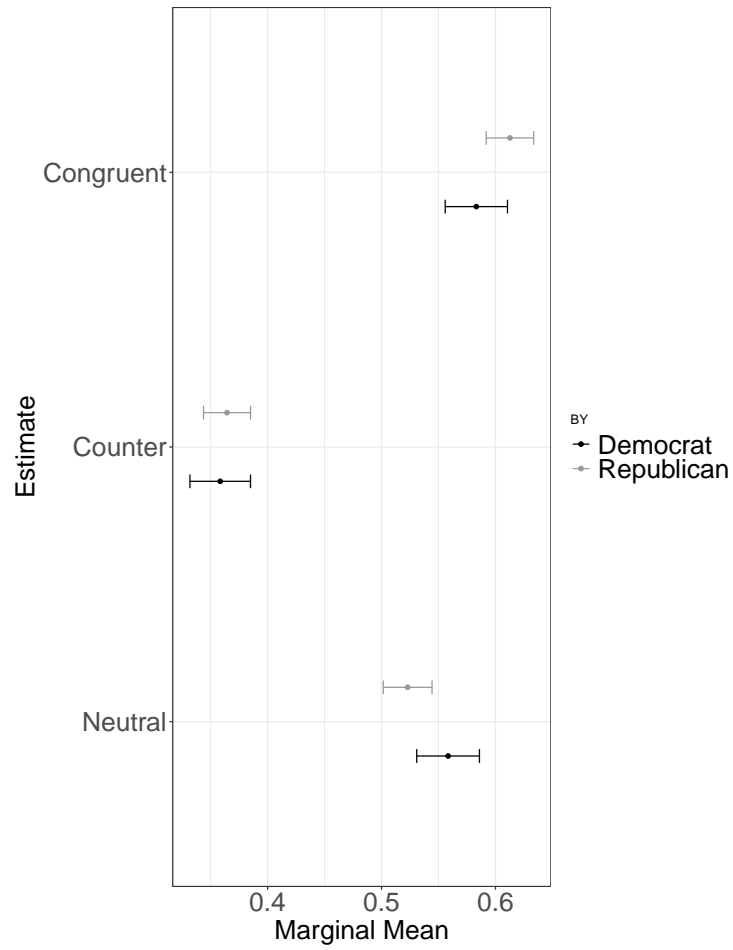
Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.





**Figure C.5: Marginal Means + Ideological Match, by Ideology (Full Sample)**

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.



**Figure C.6:** Marginal Means + Partisan Match, by Partisanship (Tasks 2 and 3)

Note: Point estimates represent the mean favorability for each attribute level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are centered around .5 to indicate trends significantly different from random chance.

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