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Chapter 6

The Consequences of Denominational Typicality on Individual Political Attitudes

Michael W. Wagner and Amanda Friesen

In *Exploring the Public Effects of Religious Communication on Politics*. Brian Calfano, editor. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

This chapter focuses on a religious communication microfoundation—self-perceived typicality with one’s religious group. As discussed in regard to the “Santorum” experiment featured in chapter 3, identity group prototypicality may be critical for effectively communicating religious views and ideas among intended audiences. This is because religious communication is often a context-dependent phenomenon that requires a sense of identity for the religious that enables them to participate in their faith community. But when it comes to politics, do individual-level perceptions of group prototypicality and context impact the communication of attitudes? In a nation with constitutionally enshrined rights to the free exercise of religion and the prevention of a government-established religion, it is at least intellectually imaginable that Americans might separate their political preferences from their sacred ones. What is theoretically possible, though, is often quite different from what is empirically demonstrable. There is robust evidence that Americans’ political and religious views are interrelated (Smidt et al. 2010; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Friesen and Wagner 2012; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009; Layman 2001; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018; Campbell 2007; Kellstedt and Green 1993).

After the behavioral revolution in political science, a dominant explanation for how Americans approached faith and politics rested on denominational differences (Carmines and

Layman 1997; Sundquist 1983). For example, the New Deal coalition's strong Roman Catholic contingent did ecclesiastical and political battle with mainline Protestants for much of the twentieth century, thereby explaining both religious and political cleavages. However, more recent explanations about the comingling of faith and politics begin with exhortations about preferences on "culture war" issues (Hunter 1991) and generally end with the sorting of American Christians into categories like "religious traditionalist" and "religious modernist." These categories exist across denominational affiliation and account for the "great divide" between partisans in the contemporary era (Layman 2001). The traditionalist-modernist divide, while the dominant one in current politics and religion research, is not without its critics (Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Lege et al. 2002; Friesen and Wagner 2012). As McTague and Layman (2009, 356) note, some believe "our framework may be too narrow while another school of thought suggests that it may be too broad."

While simultaneous claims of broadness and narrowness may imply that the religious traditionalism/modernism perspective's porridge is, thus, "just right," we argue that one's perceived contextual place (i.e., social identity) in a religious denomination continues to play a crucial, independent role in the shaping of political attitudes. In this chapter, we show how one's self-reported sense of feeling like a prototypical member of a denomination is connected to political attitudes. While large-scale, replicated survey measures are crucial to contribute to this line of inquiry, we spent time listening and interacting with people of faith in their environments and local networks to shed light on what it means for individuals to "belong." Thus, we rely on a series of focus group conversations conducted in eight adult Sunday school classes (across seven Christian denominations) in three large American cities. Rather than relying on survey measures or personal interviews, we realized that facilitating focus groups allowed us to observe and record rich conversations between members of already intact small groups. This is important because network composition is critical to understanding political expression and participation (Van Duyn 2018). The conversations we facilitated revealed how parishioners in both homogeneous and heterogenous networks communicate with each other and view themselves within their religious communities.

While some important denominational differences emerged in our analysis, those calling themselves prototypical Christian congregants also generally expressed political views that align with conservative issue preferences that Republicans favor, especially on social issues. Even so,

our interviews also revealed that what it means to be a “typical” member of a faith community varies widely across the American theological spectrum. Our results suggest that to comprehensively understand the ways in which Americans view the relationship between religion and politics, it is necessary to understand who thinks of themselves as prototypical members of their faith, what they think a typical member of their church is in the first place, and how they talk about these positions with their peers. More generally, our results align with recent work suggesting that the context that exists within a relevant social network can affect the expression of political attitudes (Van Duyn 2018).

Measuring Faith and Politics: The State of the Art

Most analyses of political attitudes and associations that incorporate the role of religion examine some combination of the “Three Bs”: believing, behaving, and belonging. While religious belief and religious affiliation have much in common, religious affiliation, or belonging, is considered the most important component in the relationship between politics and religion (Kleppner 1970; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth’s (2009) thorough review of the “Three Bs” perspective concludes that belonging is often operationalized broadly, as group affiliation or religious tradition with its obligatory geographic, ethnic, denominational, or doctrinal ties. At the beginning of the twentieth century, religious affiliation was a strong correlate to partisanship. The New Deal coalition, which brought Catholics and religious minorities into the Democratic fold, competed for political power with non-Southern white Protestants aligned with the Republican Party (Carmines and Layman 1997). The civil rights movement brought Black Protestants to the Democratic Party just as Southern whites began identifying with the GOP (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

And, while “belonging” matters, its importance overlaps with religious differences within specific denominations (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009). This segues into “believing,” which also is a central feature of the contemporary relationship between religion and politics (Stark and Glock 1968; Hunter 1991; Jelen 1991). Sociologists of religion have spent the last several decades presenting evidence consistent with the “restructuring hypothesis”: differences in belief among members of the *same denomination* have more important political consequences than differences *between denominations* (Hunter 1991; Wuthnow 1988; Layman 2001). This perspective posits that modern politics crosses denominational lines and is better explained by

beliefs that religious traditionalists across denominations hold dear as compared to beliefs that religious modernists—across those same denominations—believe themselves. Doctrinal orthodoxy is the most often used measure to conceptualize believing. It typically combines different measures of beliefs about the veracity of the Bible and the nature of the afterlife into an index (Layman 2001; Jelen 1989; Wilcox 1990; Kellstedt and Green 1993). Despite their virtues, measures of believing rarely tap into particular beliefs held by specific denominations (but see Mockabee, Monson, and Grant 2001). For example, evangelical Christians believe in a traditional definition of marriage, but evangelical Baptists and Evangelical Free Christians have divergent doctrinal perspectives on whether people should try to turn their religious beliefs into official public policy (Friesen and Wagner 2012).

The third major measure examining how religion and politics mix is “behaving.” Two discrete kinds of behavior have earned scholarly attention: private devotionism (i.e., praying at home) and ritual activity (i.e., taking communion) (Leege, Wald, and Kellstedt 1993). Some scholars also include one’s self-reported importance of religion in one’s everyday life to measure behaving. Some evidence indicates that belief is not as important as behaving and, especially, belonging (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Merging American National Election Studies measures of believing, behaving, and belonging, Layman’s (2001) measure of religious traditionalism shows with impressive precision how systematic differences in religious traditionalism across denominations account for change in the American party system. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, religious traditionalists became more likely to identify as Republicans while religious modernists moved toward identification as Democrats (Carmines and Wagner 2006).

The emphasis on this “great divide” generally measured these concepts from the point of view of a religious traditionalist, that is, with questions about being born-again or literal translations of the Bible. In 2008, the American National Election Studies added questions as to whether one has tried to be a good Christian and, when trying to be one, whether it is more important to avoid sin or to help others. Mockabee, Wald, and Leege (2012) show marked differences between evangelical Protestants (56 percent avoiding sin) and mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics (43 percent and 36 percent avoiding sin, respectively). The authors’ measures of “communitarian” and “individual piety” predict party identification and attitudes about moral issues, while the communitarian measure also is negatively correlated with conservative positions on economic issues.

Some critics of the “Three Bs” approach contend that the measures are tarnished with conceptual and measurement errors that hide relevant variation within and across individuals, congregations, and religious communities (Djupe and Gilbert 2006, 2009; Jelen 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Guth et al. 1997). Perhaps in response, Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth (2009) suggest that scholars should examine each “B” independently from each other. We suggest this is especially important when thinking about the expression of issue preferences when religious networks intersect with the opportunity for political discussion.

We believe that the cases where individuals express a preference about religion’s role in society that is “against type” (from a religious traditionalist/modernism perspective) may be explained by something outside religiosity/religious traditionalism scales: how typical one considers oneself within her or his denominational context. Denominational faith statements vary widely with respect to how, and indeed whether, the ideas and beliefs encountered in church should manifest in government (Friesen and Wagner 2012). When individuals express views demonstrating a lack of ideological constraint on a religious traditionalism scale, their particular denomination’s view on religion’s role in society should help explain the disconnect. This is because typical classifications of religious affiliation by denomination pertain to differences in religious beliefs (e.g., the literal truth of the Bible, perspectives on the end of days, etc.) rather than the role that religious beliefs should play in a democratic society with the constitutional separation between church and state. This disconnect can have enormous consequences for how individuals choose to engage in democratic deliberation, or even simple political discussion, with those around them. Van Duyn’s (2018) pathbreaking exploration of a group of rural Texas liberal women revealed that those who live in rural areas, and do not fit in politically with their neighbors, can go as far as to form secret societies to find a safe harbor where they can talk politics without fear of social repercussions. While homogeneous networked enclaves encourage participation and facilitate the development of more confident and extreme attitudes, the networked silence Van Duyn describes is one in which individuals who disagree with the dominant voices in a network can form alternative networks to express themselves.

Behaviors such as those exhibited by these Texans may be found more among those who do not consider themselves to be typical members of their faith. van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) argue that prototypical group members are stronger group identifiers and behave in ways that are more group oriented. Hogg and Reid (2006, 11) explain, “Self-categorization causes our

thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behavior to conform to our prototype of the in-group.” Extrapolating these ideas to one’s denominational affiliation, we argue that those who consider themselves prototypical denomination members are more likely to adopt and express public policy preferences consistent with their idea of what the typical member of their church believes (compared to other denomination members who consider themselves less prototypical). As a point of comparison outside religion, this is a dynamic similar to non-Christian Americans who desire to be considered prototypical Americans showing more patriotism than non-Christians less interested in prototypicality (Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013).

If we think of a church’s official position on an issue as a norm to inculcate to parishioners, prototypical congregants should be more likely to express preference for said position. But here is where differences in religious motivation manifest. For example, those who view religion as what it can do for them are extrinsically motivated and answer affirmatively to statements like “What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow,” while intrinsically motivated individuals are more likely to say, “My whole approach to life is based upon my religion” (Gorsuch and McPherson 1989, 352). People even join churches for explicitly political reasons. When people do switch faiths, it is usually to bring one’s religious affiliation in line with one’s political views (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Patrikios 2008).

Our goal in this analysis is to understand whether people’s self-reported sense of typicality in their denomination predicts their issue preferences, how people talked about their preferences, and their location on a contemporary scale measuring religious traditionalism. For most Christian denominations, we expect that increased self-perceived typicality increases the probability of holding political views consistent with the church’s teachings. Using current measures, this means an individual alignment with positions that are more religiously traditionalist in nature. That said, the denomination in question matters. For a denomination like the United Church of Christ, which has less of an official doctrine, we do not expect a positive link between self-perceived typicality and issue positions. We provide evidence for these claims below and suggest scholars should not be too quick to abandon notions of belonging and its importance in shaping the attitudes of the faithful.

Methods

When exploring a new concept or seeking to understand established large-scale survey findings,

qualitative data collection can provide detailed explanations and valuable insight beyond a closed-ended survey response (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009; Brady, Collier, and Seawright 2004; Creswell 2003, 2008; Saint-Germain, Bassford, and Montano 1993; Walsh 2012). To this end, we conducted a series of focus groups in 2011 and 2012 in three large cities in different regions of the US. Using the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.arda.com), we selected the top two or three most populous denominations for each city and then randomly selected congregations from a denominational website (e.g., the United Methodist Church at www.umc.org). We sent an email invitation explaining the project to the lead pastor or a pastor in charge of small groups, Sunday school classes, or other church life categories. If there was no response within a week, we made a follow-up telephone call to inquire about participation before moving on to the next randomly selected church. In the South, we wished to contact an evangelical nondenominational church and used the Yellow Pages to find one. After numerous nonresponses and declinations of participation from churches selected in this manner, we drew upon local informants—with whom we had contact for the larger project—to find a church willing to participate. In total, we spoke to four groups in the Northwest (Catholic, Presbyterian USA, and two Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] groups), two groups in the South (evangelical nondenominational and United Methodist), and two groups in the Northeast (Episcopalian and United Church of Christ).

Within already formed adult small groups or Sunday school classes, participants met either during their regularly scheduled time (during a weekly Bible study or Sunday school) or at a prearranged time convenient for the authors and group members. All groups met at their place of worship. Before the focus group discussion began, participants completed a questionnaire involving demographic, religious, and political questions. Facilitated by one of the authors using a semi-structured protocol of open-ended questions, each group met for about an hour, and the discussion was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

{~?~IM: insert Table 6.1 here.}

Table 6.1 displays the descriptive statistics of the religiosity variables included on the focus group questionnaire, such as whether one was born-again, how important one views religion in everyday decision-making, biblical views, and our newly developed typicality inquiry:

On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you place yourself in regard to how “typical” you are of a

member of your religious affiliation? (e.g., If you are Catholic, a rating of 10 would indicate you believe and act like most Catholics. A score of 1 would indicate that you consider yourself very different from other Catholics.)

Because of the small sample sizes, meaningful conclusions cannot be drawn from correlations. However, the descriptive statistics demonstrate that our groups are fairly representative of how these denominational groups are theologically defined (e.g., nearly all of the evangelicals considered themselves born-again). More useful than analysis of statistics on these small samples is an examination of how individuals categorize themselves and how this corresponds to their discussion content.

Our opening prompt was “Tell us about your church,” followed by “What does your church believe?” and “What is the role of religion in society?” Answers to these questions provide insight on typicality because they enable the examination of individual perceptions of their church (denomination) and its central beliefs. We classified our participants as prototypical if they scored 7 or above on the scale. With the exception of the Catholic focus group, there was a great deal of variance in how prototypical each of our focus group participants considered themselves to be in their church. Below, we discuss how self-professed prototypical and atypical members of each denomination describe their church and the role they prefer religion to play in society. We have created pseudonyms for the participants, which are indicated below with some of their direct quotes.

Congregationalists

While all of our Congregationalist participants identified as Democrats, the prototypical members of the northeastern United Church of Christ focus group independently mentioned how they came to the church after a long process of searching out faith communities that would fit their preexisting political and social beliefs. One participant said her reason for membership was “definitely the progressive aspect of (name of) Church.” Another participant mentioned that her search process involved trying to discern various churches’ politics virtually.

I looked on a few different websites in order to look for a church, and how things are presented on the website was a key factor for me in coming here. Really I decided I would become a member here before I actually showed up.

A participant who considered himself to be an atypical member of the same church explained

that his life in the church was not due to a long search but because of a strong rejection of his former faith and a member of his social network attended the Congregational church. Still, when it comes to politics, his views were very typical of the other Congregationalists, helping to explain his comfort in expressing his political views.

I'm a friend of (another participant), I started coming when she started working here. I was raised Catholic, and I have a very negative view of the Catholic Church. What keeps me coming here is what I consider to be the sincerity. I mean, religion is supposed to be about openness, about acceptance, about kindness, about tolerance, about helping one another, and the people here are not hypocrites. They live the Christian message in my view. . . . But also I mean yes, specific issues like marriage equality. I mean I happen to come from a family, we've always had gay friends in my family. And to think that people who call themselves Christians condemn gay people to me is madness. What this congregation would be without some of its gay members, I mean we would be so impoverished.

Putnam and Campbell (2010) show that those who switch faiths systematically pick a new faith that fits their political views. In our sample, the intentional search for a church home that shared their political views was also a hallmark of feeling like a typical Congregationalist; and though the atypical member agreed with the church's political leanings, his negative past church experiences may have made him reluctant to feel as though he was a typical part of any Christian group. Further, the less intentional, more relational way in which he came to attend the Congregationalist church also may help to account for his perceptions of atypicality. Even so, perhaps because his political views were typical of his fellow parishioners, he appeared comfortable talking politics in a group where he otherwise did not feel like a typical member.

Episcopalians

The Episcopalian participants who expressed feelings of typicality were those who saw a connection between the religious traditions associated with the church and the traditions of social activism within the particular parish. One woman, before describing how she appreciated the connection between her church's progressive role in her city's piece of the Occupy Wall Street movement, discussed how she appreciates the nature of liturgy and worship in her church.

There's a reason for everything, I mean, some people might think it's fussy, but I like that everything is thought through and grounded in some kind of uh, theological or historical you know, reason. So it's more, for me it's more than just the aesthetics. I mean, yes it's wonderful that it's pretty and well done, and there's a reason why each piece is where it is.

While most self-professed typical Episcopalians in the group agreed, another participant who reported feeling atypical only stressed the religious tradition of the church, while longing for less socially liberal politics of what she described as the past.

Tradition means a lot, it means a lot to me. I think that's what church is about. That is what church is about. It is about tradition. Religion in general, I mean, if you're Hindu, if you're Buddhist, it's about the tradition. It's about keeping it going. I like being part of the apostolic tradition. I don't do revision history. But now, it has become so Laura Ingraham nasty ugly attacking. I guess I'm just more comfortable with the country club Republican(s). And they were just run out of office.

The atypical Episcopalian also identified as politically independent (compared to the other participants, who identified as Democrats). Perhaps for this atypical individual, when thinking of denominational typicality, political leanings and social activism were her point of reference for “belonging.”

Methodists

As was the case with Episcopalians, typical Methodists highlighted the traditions of their church (denomination), tying the beliefs of their particular faith to the work of improving life in their own community. One Methodist who considered herself to be typical said,

Our church's beliefs are pretty traditional for the United Methodist Church uh, individual members have a variety of beliefs but as the church itself goes, I think the church believes that we followed the ministry and the leadership of Jesus as the son of God, that the Bible is the revealed book of God as a guide to how we should live our lives and interact in community with others, when I say community I mean not just local community but the world community as well, that we have a responsibility to give from our many blessings uh, to others in our community and to help them find their own way and stand on their own two feet.

The Methodists who felt atypical were far more likely to embrace the “messiness” of faith, praising the church's diversity of viewpoints. One woman said,

There are (adult Sunday school) classes that are different and you can kind of choose like, I feel like our side of the class is pretty liberal and I like that, I like to be able to—we can think out loud, say whatever we want to say or need to say and uh, it's acceptable and not only that but encouraged, so we really like that. The middle is messier.

Another self-professed atypical member of the Methodist focus group said,

I think the reason we stay here (in the United Methodist Church) is because it draws people from all over the county and all over the community rather than being just in one, our neighborhood, where it's pretty single-minded.

Unlike the atypical Episcopalians, the atypical Methodists were more likely to express comfort in ambiguity and note that they were less concerned with doctrine. And unlike the social network Van Duyn (2018) chronicled in Texas, the Methodist social network embraced ambiguity and difference, leaving people more comfortable to publicly disagree in their political expressions. The typical members of our Methodist focus group were more likely to highlight specific doctrinal elements of their faith and connect them to promoting social good. However, another way in which the Methodists were different from other politically relevant social networks was that they were both more ideologically moderate and more religiously traditionalist than their atypical counterparts.

ELCA Lutherans

While typical ELCA Lutherans we spoke with exhibited high degrees of religious traditionalism versus those who identified as atypical Lutherans, there was considerable diversity with respect to ideology and partisanship among the typical identifiers. Some religiously traditional typical identifiers were strong conservatives and Republicans, while others were strong liberals and members of the Democratic Party. For a typical Lutheran Republican, religion's role in society is about "respect" and "connecting" faith to life while being "open-minded," as "(name redacted) and I are on different ends of the political spectrum, but we respect each other here." A typical Lutheran Democrat made a similar point, noting that there are a variety of ways to "follow the example [of Jesus]. And following the example is the part that drew me to the whole thing."

A self-described atypical Lutheran preferred to keep connections between faith and politics separate, noting that he liked the church because "the Christ that we raise up and gather around is the Christ that was forever pushing the boundaries and you know, reaching out to walk with you know, all kinds of citizens and folk, acceptable and unacceptable," but that he talks politics "at work." Though on opposite sides of the partisan spectrum, typical Lutherans saw clear connections between their political views and their understanding of the purpose of the church, while atypical Lutherans saw politics and religion as separate realms (see also Van Duyn 2018).

Presbyterians

In general, the Presbyterians we met with who identified as typical Presbyterian were more conservative ideologically and exhibited higher levels of measures associated with religious traditionalism. For example, typical Presbyterians were more likely to identify as being “born-again” than atypical congregants. An atypical Presbyterian did not think religion was as important to his daily decision-making as the typical Presbyterians, nor were his views about the Bible as traditional as typical Presbyterians. However, there was considerable diversity in the economic views and the religious views of typical Presbyterians in our focus group sample. The exchange below between three men who all rated themselves as an 8 or above on the typicality measure highlights how typicality becomes murky when thinking about politics in a mainline church.

Jake: Interesting question. Um, my take is that the Democrats tend to take care of people more than Republicans do. And can say you know, they’re more in favor of social programs, so you can say from a church perspective or from a faith perspective, it’s taking care of the people who can’t take care of themselves, so I would make that connection with the Democrat side.

Ryan: Yeah, I would tend to agree with that. But this, very generally speaking, is how those things go. It’s sort of in my observation, too.

Lee: Yeah, sometimes in taking care of, I think that the government has gradually served the, uh, role of the church and some of the social organizations, so when they come in and you know, we’ll take care of the single parents, and so there are all these programs without expectations, without values. But whereas before you have, well let’s go back to the 1900s, you have thriving social groups, and I’ve said this to this group before, [inaudible] all these social welfare groups have protective orders and now the government, social security and other things have come in to take that.

Lee identified as an independent on our survey and considers himself socially liberal and economically conservative, whereas the other two, who identify as Democrats, both rank their social and economic ideologies as “liberal.” Elsewhere in the conversation, the group members discussed how the tension of trying to talk about political differences leads them to circle back to bedrock theological beliefs they know will be shared. This suggests that the presence of a bedrock belief system that applied to all—in this case, the theological beliefs of the group—can be enough to foster cohesion in networks even when other belief systems—such as political ideology—are the subject of disagreement.

Evangelicals

In the American South, the evangelical focus group we met with generally identified themselves

as conservative, Republican, and born-again. However, there was considerable diversity with respect to how typical a member of the evangelical community each participant claimed to be. One typical evangelical explained what he believed the church was about: “The gift that Christ gave us that died on the cross is a free gift, no works can take you into the presence of God or out of the presence of God, it’s all by the gift of Christ himself.” Another said that “you can’t separate” God from anything in day-to-day life and that one major purpose of the church was to foster individuals’ relationship with God. The only evangelical who identified himself as atypical was much more comfortable with ambiguity in the teachings of the church.

When our church says we believe the Bible word for word, what we mean within the context of what the literary style is. So you know, there’s a sophistication there that says, hey if it’s poetry, I’m gonna interpret it literally as poetry. If it’s history, I’m gonna interpret it literally as history, and it looked like within politics and within the media, you get portrayed as when you say you believe if word for word, well you’re either anti-intellectual, you’re anti-science or you’re against these, which shows a very, very naive understanding of interpretation. . . . And so we could have a debate within our own church about well, okay creation, is it twenty-four hours as is it now, is it a literary device, is it ages in a period, is it theistic evolution? And then have a debate, well what should be taught in school.

Prototypical evangelicals expressed a desire to seek and share the “truth” but were less comfortable with a deliberative process to find it. Indeed, the feelings of typicality in the evangelical church we visited lined up with Republican Party identification, while the atypical participant was a Democrat.

Roman Catholics

We met with the Roman Catholic focus group in the Northwest. All but one participant in the conversation felt as though she or he was a typical Catholic, which they tended to indicate was built around the social justice mission of the Catholic faith. One “typical” man said, “I like it because [the church] seems like it’s where the rubber meets the road.” When one of the authors said, “What do you mean?” another man answered,

This is it. This is, if you were in church this morning you would’ve seen there are people who don’t even have houses who come here. You know, people who don’t have a place to rest at night, come here. I think that one of the reasons why I started going here is I was, I just thought you know as I get better and better at helping people, this is the place to be. This is where I’ll learn it.

The Catholic participant who identified as atypical also believed in the central importance of the

church's social justice mission but made a direct connection between it and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ: "The response to the crucifixion is to do it more, and to find ways to relieve the suffering of those who are still being treated, are not given opportunities that they deserve as human beings." Interestingly, the atypical Catholic scored higher on measures of religious traditionalism than most of the typical Catholics in this group and was more conservative on economic political issues and with respect to his general ideology than his fellow parishioners.

Discussion and Conclusion

Religious context clearly matters for individual-level communication: people who felt comfortable expressing their political views tended to be surrounded by people with whom they had something in common: a bedrock set of principles. This suggests that the notion of religious belonging may pack more punch than some scholars have assumed. Social scientists of religion have been debating the issues of how and why people of faith connect politics and religion for decades, with many settling along the lines that orthodoxy and commitment (believing and behaving) matter more than the old standard of affiliation (belonging). Our study suggests we ought not abandon denomination but should think more deeply about variance in "belonging."

Thoughtful engagement with belonging might shed light upon the mixed results found in research exploring the effects of heterogeneous and homogeneous communication networks on political participation. For example, understanding how belonging can vary as a social identity might help explain why cross-cutting discussion in heterogeneous discussion networks can both mobilize and demobilize political participation (Mutz 2002; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). A focus on belonging can also help scholars unpack why homogeneous discussion networks can produce greater attitude extremity (Sunstein 2001) in some cases while mobilizing discussion in others (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014).

Joining scholars who emphasize the institutional influence of clergy and social networks (Djupe and Gilbert 2009), we suggest that individual orientations toward the institution and others in one's faith community also may be at play. From our focus group members, we learn that typical members of liberal mainline Protestant congregations (i.e., Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and some Lutherans) tend to connect their affiliation and church with political and social attitudes, whereas the atypical members were drawn to the respective churches for more theological reasons. In the Roman Catholic group, the typical members chose their particular

parish because of its efforts to translate church teachings into tangible social justice. It is important to note that these groups were in predominantly white congregations, where political viewpoint and partisan diversity are more present than they would be in places like historically African American churches and denominations (Calhoun-Brown 1998; McClerking and McDaniel 2005; Shelton and Cobb 2017).

Typical members of the ELCA group, atypical Methodists, and some typical Presbyterians embraced the diversity of opinion within their church walls—reflecting the theological and political variance among congregants in churches in the theological middle. That is, typicality within these denominations may be murkier than for those on the theological extremes, whose members tend to be more homogenous in political and religious beliefs. The only atypical evangelical in that focus group embraced ambiguity and a reasonable debate about church teachings. These were not shared by the more typical group members, who indicated more staunch attitudes about the settled nature of church doctrine. If atypicality is related to an individual's incongruity with other church members' political attitudes or to a difference in the acceptance or perception of diverse opinions, the consequences could be a reduction in political participation or the avoidance of political discussion (Djupe and Gilbert 2009).

Finally, simply adding another variable to the mix is not helpful unless it can explain beyond the commonly replicated religiosity measures. Our focus groups, while clearly not representative, hinted that typicality in an adult population may be more related to political congruency and the perception or acceptance of conflict within one's faith community, at least with some mainline Christian denominations (but see Margolis 2018). Partisan elites seek to exploit these relationships. For example, several journalists and partisan operatives have pointed out that evangelical Christians are strong supporters of President Donald Trump, despite Trump's multiple divorces, payoffs to adult film stars with whom he had engaged in sex while married to the First Lady, lack of familiarity with the Bible, and so forth. The contemporary media ecology tends to reinforce connections people make between social identities such as their faith and their partisan identity (Mason 2018; Wagner et al. 2014). This appears to be especially true when it comes to the expression of political views or the decision to stop talking politics with someone altogether (Wells et al. 2017). When considered in religious networks, individuals who participate in small groups may have more politicized social networks, be receptive to clergy cues, and connect their religion and politics (Djupe and Gilbert 2009).

Indeed, recent work on rising rates of secularization points to political conflict and/or polarization in churches as contributing to those who leave and could otherwise disengage from other parts of civic life (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey 2018). Our findings suggest that political divides rooted in denominational affiliations have not been displaced by the rise of the differences in religious traditionalism and modernism among people of faith across denominations, contributing to a more comprehensive explanation of the role that religion plays in the American political system—a role that appears to cement polarized partisan identities for many while excluding others from a political system that does not represent them.

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