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## Variation Within?: Exploring Intra-Congregational Differences in a Black Political Church

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*Previous research on the Black church's role in politics has highlighted the importance of "political churches" — churches with a significant political culture of communication and mobilization. We do not dispute the importance of political churches, but inquire whether their benefits are equally shared. In fact, given the semi-voluntary nature of the Black church, we should expect variance in what members take from the congregation. Using data gathered from a survey of members of one such political church, we look for variation in the ownership of significant political resources and in the degree to which congregants view their pastor and interest groups in the community as representatives. We find significant variation driven by political disagreement and the perceived efficacy of the pastor. What emerges is a sense of the diversity of the church experience within even highly political churches that challenges previous work.*

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We would like to thank the Atlanta area church that participated in our research.

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political activity into a church's identity highlights that engagement is not simply an unintended result, but can be a crucial part of the overall church mission.

Political African American churches are dominated by ministers who encourage and cultivate political activity through political cues (Cahoun-Brown 1986; Tate 1993; Brown and Wolford 1994; McKenzie 2004). Clergy can directly mobilize their congregations by conveying strongly worded policy stances, reminding them to vote, sign a petition, or send an email to an elected official (Berenson, Ellifson and Tollerson 1976; Tate 1993; Cahoun-Brown 1996; Harris 1999). Across denominational divisions a number, though not nearly all, of African American ministers do not hesitate to engage in these types of activities, publicly endorse candidates, and speak about relevant issues from the pulpit (Harris 1999; McDaniel 2003; Owens 2007; Magnum 2008). The results from these studies parallel the behavior of white evangelical ministers who mobilize their congregations in similar ways to their African American counterparts (Guth, Green, Smidt et al. 1997; Crawford and Olson 2001), while Mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy are less electorally involved (Guth et al. 1997; DiJupe and Gilbert 2003). As the central figure in the church, the minister provides an important source of encouragement that elevates the importance of an issue or election and can provide the decisive nudge to the voting booth.

The political Black church is important not only for organizational and social mechanisms but also for the psychological resources it provides church members that in turn encourages political action (Harris 1994). Critical to effective clerical encouragement are congregants' religious beliefs that provide the basis for wanting to be politically active. Harris (1994) argues that an individual's "internal religiosity" provides a baseline as to whether a church member is even interested in politics, and whether she feels she can make a difference through her political action. An individual's religious beliefs, according to Harris are part of the package of "psychological resources" that political churches provide their members with that in turn increases political participation.

Though they differ in the way they capture political churches, or whether an institutional description is even important, the link between these studies is that a political church hosts an environment loaded with political talk among members and political cues from the pulpit that give the church a political identity. If this type of atmosphere is present, the mechanisms are in place to encourage and enhance and political activity levels. These assertions resonate with findings outside the Black church, where organizational, social, and psychological resources have been found to be crucial mechanisms that contribute to individual

political involvement and may constitute the church's culture that can be recruited to aid political efforts (Wood 2002). For instance, churches that offer a number of small groups contribute to an individual's organizational skill set by providing opportunities to learn how to preside over a meeting, which may serve to increase a member's political participation (Leege 1988; Peterson 1992; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; DiJupe and Gilbert 2006). Also, a church's social environment that is rich with political discussions and clergy messages provides mobilizing cues that are essential to encouraging recruitment and packaging political involvement (DiJupe and Gilbert 2009; Wood 2002).

### A Critique

A critique of the existing organizational approach to studying political churches and examining their effects is that research to date ignores an important possibility: Congregations may not have universal and unified effects on political attitudes and behaviors of their members. Attitudinal and/or behavioral minorities within a congregation may have reduced communication networks for exchanging political information, and therefore may identify less with their church than congregants in the majority, and therefore may not only with the dominant culture in the congregation. Any differences in political attitudes and behaviors among congregants within the same church may not only be linked to church involvement levels but may be generated by some of the same democratic dilemmas that churches have been posited to solve.

DiJupe and Gilbert (2006) find, for instance, that already resourceful church members are most likely to practice civic skills in church small groups, as are those in the group majority. This dynamic has a negative impact on the civic return women and other power minorities receive from their church involvement (DiJupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert 2007). A similar negative effect is repeated for women relating to political efficacy. While increased feelings of religiosity positively affect political efficacy in men, this is not the case for women (Cahoun-Brown 2010). Women who attend church frequently feel less civic efficacy and empowered, and the application of civic skills does little to lessen this effect (Cahoun-Brown 2010).

The attitudinal and behavioral location of the individual in the congregation may also bear on the willingness of the individual to accept political cues and from whom. Political minorities resist the opinions of the church majority, but are more willing to accept cues from clergy, at least in mainline Protestant congregations where the clergy are likely to disagree with the congregational majority

(Djupe and Gilbert 2009). However, if the clergy agree with the congregational majority, then minorities would be left quite isolated from easy sources of political information and mobilization. This dynamic is likely to be reinforced in congregations in which members select the clergy person, and especially in political churches where incorporation into the political culture of the organization is an important selection criterion for a clergy member. In such cases, the link between the clergy and majority is likely to be especially tight, leaving political minorities with few options but exit and conflict avoidance.

Exit may be unlikely in this case. The "semi-voluntary" nature of the Black church, particularly in the rural South, means that church attendance is compulsory if an individual wants social legitimacy, and a "gateway to 'respectability' and social opportunity" (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, 1430). This suggests, in part, that we should expect some diversity of political attitudes within Black churches, as church members attend for a variety of different reasons, spiritual and otherwise. Moreover, we might consider those attending Black churches to be rational actors in how they evaluate where to place their loyalties. That is, since the Black church is central to the Black community, individuals may have diverse motives for attending, and therefore the translation of church involvement to political representation may not be automatic.

### Hypotheses

We deduce three primary hypotheses about intra-congregational variation in how members acquire politically-relevant resources. Our first hypothesis is that a political church's organizational resources will benefit those who are more involved in church activities than those who are less involved. The intuition for this classic hypothesis, generated from multiple theoretical perspectives, is that those exposed to the church through worship attendance and involvement in small groups and activities will gain what the church has to offer (Green, Guth, Smidt et al. 1996; Withrow 1999; Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Involved members can receive a participatory advantage if they draw on the politically charged atmosphere that a church can offer, exercise civic skills in group settings, and are positioned to receive recruitment attempts, all of which can help them take advantage of opportunities for political development and participation. The more distant congregants are from the daily life of the political church, the less likely they are to receive the self-confidence, skills, and cues that can heighten their political participation.

Our second hypothesis is that resourceful church members will rely less on clergy cues than others in the congregation. Clergy are key figures within a political church dispensing messages and cues that can serve as a call to action (Guth, Green, Smidt et al. 1997; Harris 1999; Crawford and Olson 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; McDaniel 2005; Owens 2007). However, it is likely that resourceful church members receive political information from external sources and possess the wherewithal to acquire and process political information from more proximate sources to political decisions (Zaller 1992).

Our third hypothesis is that political minorities in the church will have less support for the church as an advocate, pay less attention to clergy, as well as have weak identification with community interest groups. Since people are motivated to confirm their prior attitudes (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), political minorities in the church will report paying less attention to political cues from the pulpit. It is possible that congregants who know their political opinions are in the minority will view clergy messages as targeted to the majority, and thus dismiss the relevance of cues that emanate from the pulpit. In addition to potentially feeling like an outsider there is evidence to suggest that those in the political minority are demobilized toward political action because of their dissonant attitudes and views (Mutz 2002; McClurg 2006, 360). For example, individuals who find themselves in the political minority "retreat" from political engagement to avert any social awkwardness that might arise from unpleasant political confrontations (Mutz 2002, 851). Therefore, congregants in the political minority will see the church as less supportive of their political beliefs, will not look it to advocate on behalf of their attitudes, and will be less motivated to act on ministerial cues.

There are additional implications for a congregant who feels distant from the dominant political attitudes found in their church. These weakened ties with the Black church may extend to other key African American organizations, such as the NAACP or the Urban League, who have close connections with many Black churches. A tight connection with organizations such as these are important for a variety of the ways in which individuals engage the political process, because the closer an individual feels to these groups the stronger her racial identity will be (Allen, Dawson, Brown 1989). A durable racial identity is developed by encouragement to become more involved, which may open the congregant in accord with the political culture of the congregation even more so to the message and mobilization these groups seek to supply (Reese and Brown 1995).

## Data and Methods

We selected Atlanta as the site for our study. Atlanta is a majority-Black city with a rich history of Black Protestantism and politicized congregations. The Atlanta-based Fund for Theological Education assisted us in identifying a purposive sample of Black congregations to participate in our study. We contacted the senior pastors of five congregations in the city, ranging in size from fewer than 500 attendees a week to approximately 6,000 a week. Each congregation had a public identity as a "politicized church."<sup>1</sup> Their pastors were political elites seeking to influence elections and policymaking; congregants encouraged clergy and member activism in public affairs; congregation-based resources were leveraged to increase participation in public affairs to influence political outcomes; and the congregations existed in an environment that expected their participation, especially on behalf of the interest of Black communities (McDaniel 2008, 12-19).

All but one congregation declined to participate in the study. The church that agreed was ideal for the purposes of this study. Founded in the early part of the twentieth century and growing from mergers of smaller congregations, the church is one of the largest in the city. Approximately 3,000 worshippers a week attend its services. The number of congregants, observed over the course of a few weeks, accords with the standard categorization of a megachurch (Thumma and Travis 2007, Tucker-Worgs 2011). Additionally, the church has members from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Church members include executives of major corporations and nonprofit organizations, and federal, state, and local government officials, including retired congressmen and mayors, and working-class and poorer individuals. This church is atypical in comparison to other religious institutions because of the high level of political activity.

Furthermore, the church is an activist church. That means its activities correspond to what McRoberts (2003, 100) describes as the "very extroverted forms of religious presence — forms that somehow benefit not only congregation members but people who do not belong to the church." For instance, it supports and operates a variety of ministries to assist low-income people and communities, including assistance for the homeless, veterans, and ex-prisoners. It does this despite being located in a relatively affluent Black community just inside the city's limits. Moreover, the church prides itself on converting members into volunteers. To paraphrase its mission, the church is a place that educates its members to identify and use their spiritual gifts and talents to improve the community, especially for children.

Variation Within?: Exploring Intra-Congregational

The church also uses its resources to shape political attitudes and behaviors. Its pastor, for instance, speaks out on public issues (e.g., opposition to the reelection of Troy Davis by the state of Georgia), endorses political candidates (e.g., Barack Obama in 2008), encourages electoral participation (e.g., reminds congregants to register to vote and encourages and supports congregants to become candidates), and is a member of organizations and associations that give him access to a variety of political elites in the city (e.g., Leadership Atlanta, 100 Black Men, Regional Council of Churches). The consensus of the congregation is that its pastors must be politically involved and influence the involvement of others. At a minimum, political engagement by its pastor extends the political legacy of the church. Public influence is a hallmark of the church, evidenced by the behavior of its previous pastors, particularly those who held key positions in the Civil Rights Movement, especially the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The church is fairly typical of Southern African American churches where the congregation has a certain level of influence with the minister. Tension may exist between a congregation and minister if they do not agree with the level of activity or what issues a clergy member engages in. As McKenzie notes, "worshippers may not agree with their religious leaders about which issues events warrant political action" (2004, 622). As noted above, this congregation asks its ministers to be as politically active as they are. Also, the denomination of the church encourages political engagement by its clergy.

We believe that the church's political characteristics make our case study analytically useful precisely because citizens in Atlanta and members recognize this church as political. As a result it is likely that selection effects would be differences in behavior and attitudes difficult to tease out. In other words, there should be fewer differences in a highly active church because congregants may be knowingly choosing to attend a church that has a reputation as being political.<sup>1</sup>

We developed an original survey instrument to collect data from the congregation to test our hypotheses. The instrument queried respondents on their individual political attitudes and behaviors, including their thoughts and actions

<sup>1</sup> Using data from the 2007 Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life serves to highlight the atypical nature of the Atlanta church. Fifty-eight percent of respondents from the Pew study attend church once a week, 80% of those from the Atlanta church attend church once a week or more. In addition, 22% considered themselves "liberal" from Pew data, while 98% identified as Democrats from the Atlanta area church. Finally, 53% from Pew had a college degree. In comparison 31% from the Atlanta church had a college degree, and 47% had a Master's or doctoral degree. In short, the Atlanta area church is more involved, more liberal, and more educated than the sample from the national Pew study underscoring how the Atlanta church is different from other black churches.



regarding relevant local public issues. It also included a few questions requested by the pastor. We administered the survey in person to congregants in January 2011. The church's weekly bulletins announced the survey in advance of our administration of it.

The pastor allowed us to distribute the survey during six consecutive worship services (four Sunday services and two Wednesday services) over two weeks. Church ushers distributed our two-page questionnaire along with the church bulletins as adults entered the sanctuary. During the information sharing portion of the worship services, the pastor allowed a representative of our study to address congregants for a few minutes from a lectern located near pulpit. Congregants heard a description of the study's purpose, the process for giving informed consent, and instructions for completing the questionnaire. After our representative sat down, the pastor appealed to attendees to complete the survey. The appeal mentioned the value of education and scholarship, the history of Black churches as sites for understanding important issues about the practice of religion, and the potential to learn something new about politically active churches. Respondents (adults 18 years of age or older) completed the questionnaire on site at the conclusion of each worship service. Study staff collected questionnaires as respondents exited the church. Approximately 40 percent of the total membership of the church completed the survey (N = 475).

#### *Dependent Variables*

To assess the variance in "institutional treatment" within this political church, we engaged a wide range of dependent variables capturing individual dispositions toward politics, toward the pastor and church, and toward community groups that often advocate for the interests and preferences of Black communities. To test our second hypothesis we tapped political efficacy and political interest to measure a motivated congregant. We argue that an individual who believes that she has an effect on government and is interested in politics are hallmarks of an engaged and determined citizen. To evaluate the third hypothesis, we used attention to the pastor about politics; trust in the pastor to be a political advocate; and feeling close to community interest groups.

To capture political efficacy, we asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement, "People like me don't have much say over city government." This measure of external political efficacy gauges whether an individual believes that government listens to voters and then responds accordingly (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). Generally a high level of political efficacy suggests heightened political participation, although this does not consistently apply equally to men

and women (Calhoun-Brown 2000). As part of the second hypothesis, we expect that the political minority in the church will have reduced external political efficacy because they may not take the minister's message to heart like those in the majority. We use a traditional measure to gauge the level of interest in political campaigns: "How about you? How interested are you in the 2010 political campaigns?"

Based on previous research (Djupe and Gilbert 2009) we expect that those in the political minority may already be less attuned to the details of the 2010 election. This potential isolation within the church may put further distance between themselves and messages coming from the pulpit and may serve to compound the effect of being in the political minority.

To measure the level of influence a clergy member has on individual congregants we asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: "I pay a great deal of attention to what my pastor says about social and political issues."

We expect that those in the political minority will report paying less attention to the clergy, which will also result in less engagement with interest groups. We also assessed the degree to which congregants trust their clergy member to be a political advocate: "In the past year, did you trust your pastor to advocate your concerns to government officials?" While greater church involvement should boost such trust, we also suspect that trust is undermined by the presence of resources, since the resourceful need not rely on other elites for representation.

We also suspect that political minorities will trust clergy less. Given the tight connection of the Black church to community and broader interest groups as expressed in our third hypothesis, we suspected that congregational dynamics would have implications for how members thought about other representational vehicles. Specifically, we asked, "How close do you feel toward these groups active in Atlanta politics? NAACP, Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, and Urban League of Atlanta." The index averages these scores and ranges in value from 1 (very far) to 5 (very close). If Allen et al. (1989) are right then identification with the larger African American community and with Black political elites, which these organizations would be considered, define a person's racial identity. We suspect that political minorities in the congregation will feel more distant from these organizations. Lastly, some people simply do not know about their representational options — they have no opinions about interest groups that might represent their interests before government. In order to test one of the propositions in our third

hypothesis as to whether political minorities would have weaker identification with community interest groups we created an additive index ranging from 0 to 3, gaining a point when the respondent indicates being "not familiar" with NAACP, Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, or Urban League of Atlanta. Similar to the closeness variable this captures whether a respondent is aware of these particular groups. Respondents who have a strong identity with these particular groups would receive a 0 in our data. Political minorities in the congregation and those who otherwise feel distant from the pastor and congregation may turn down a search for political information from community organizations with which the church is connected.

#### *Control Variables*

We control for contextual church variables and demographic measurements. The contextual variables include: church attendance, church involvement beyond worship, support for the pastor and the church. The minister variables measure whether a congregation agrees with their clergy person's involvement in political activities, and if they believe the minister has influence with elected officials. These two variables work together to provide a picture as to whether a minister has political legitimacy with the congregation.

The demographic measurements are partisanship, gender, education, and age. Little attention has been paid to African American's attachment to a political party. It is clear that Black voters overwhelmingly vote for Democratic candidates (Tate 1993), yet there have been persistent efforts by the Republican party to make inroads to African American voters (Philipot 2004). These efforts have achieved little success, but demonstrate that the possibility exists that there may be Black Democratic voters who could be "up for grabs" by a moderate, or independent political candidate, especially in a tenuous economic environment (Lizza 2008). Here, there are very few Republicans and many strong Democrats, but not all are strong Democrats. Our key measure of partisan minority status is whether the respondent is a strong Democrat (=1), a weak Democrat (=2), or a category composed of all the other partisan identities – all independents and Republicans (=3). We generally expect to see a negative effect of partisanship if our hypotheses about partisan minority status hold.

We include dummy variables derived from responses to two experiments we embedded in our survey. We randomly provided congregants with either a control or one of two treatment stories that dealt with the cooperation of a Black clergy person by a big city mayor. The context of the story was a church that had received a grant from the city to build apartments in an underdeveloped

neighborhood. In the treatments, the clergy person either criticized the mayor and had the grant revoked or was threatened not to critique the mayor or the grant would be revoked. As we shall see, the treatments had no effect in this highly educated, highly politicized congregation. We include the dummies for the treatments given their part in the design of the project, but otherwise ignore their presence given their embrace of the null.

#### **Results**

To provide an overview of the political nature of this study's church we present summary statistics for three key dependent variables: political efficacy, political interest, and the attention paid to the minister about politics.

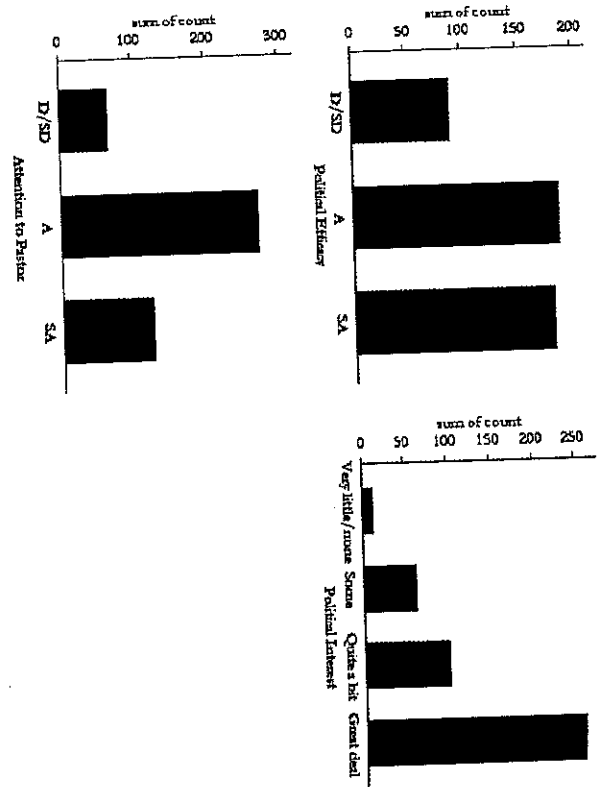
These descriptive statistics reflect a congregation that feels very strongly that their voices have an impact on local government. There is an overwhelming amount of political interest and the majority of respondents pay attention to their clergy member when it comes to politics. Taken as a whole these respondents represent church members who are alert to political messages from their ministers, are very politically active, and feel like government is responsive to them. Though we have never before seen this kind of distribution from within a particular Black church, this is, perhaps, the quintessential depiction of a political church.

In the models that follow, we attempt to be sensitive about the nature of causal claims. Given our cross-sectional data, our ability to make confident causal claims is by necessity limited. Our goal, however, is to showcase patterns in the data that are consistent with the effects of structural location (i.e., minority versus majority position within the congregation). Moreover, our dependent variables are clearly related to each other and we have tried to piece together what seemed like a reasonable story in order to include as many of them as possible in each model.

Essentially, we place efficacy first, suggest it may have an effect on interest and both interest and efficacy can affect how individuals perceive their clergy, congregations, and community interest groups. Because of its ambiguous causal relationship, we left out support for the pastor and church in the model of attention to the pastor's political pronouncements. We thought it sensible that closeness to interest groups may promote trust in the pastor to be an advocate and vice versa. Surely other researchers could easily make the case for other combinations; we simply found these to be sensible choices that served the interest of introducing as many controls as possible while examining the direct effects of partisan minority status.



The dataset contained missing data, so we used Stata's multiple imputation (mi) routine to help estimate what those data would be if they were not missing. We chose to generate 20 imputed datasets. In this procedure, models are estimated for each variable needing imputation and a range of 20 values for each missing cell is generated using the model estimates.<sup>2</sup> Then, for each dependent variable of interest, models are run with each of the new 20 sets of imputed data and the estimates are averaged. The results shown in Table 1 are, thus, averages of estimated effects across these 20 datasets.



<sup>2</sup> We used a simple model consisting of religious guidance, church attendance, and political conservatism.

*Political Efficacy*

Our ordinal logit estimates of congregants' political efficacy are shown in the first column of Table 1. The results reveal the importance of partisan status, interest group closeness, and a few personal resources. Contrary to expectations, the positive coefficient for partisanship suggests that those who self-identify as weak Democrats or independents are more likely to disagree that they don't influence city government -- they are more likely to disagree that they don't have influence. This effect holds, and actually strengthens, if we control for political interest in this model. Respondents who feel closer to political interest groups -- NAACP, Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, and the Urban League of Atlanta -- feel more efficacious. Especially in Atlanta, a tight connection to powerful interest groups in the Black community should relate to efficacy, but one technique interest groups employ to justify membership retention is to highlight their accomplishments (Kooniz and Johnson 2004). This effect dovetails with the positive effect of support for their pastor, though the effect is statistically quite marginal.

For the "political efficacy" model we included a church attendance variable and church activities variable to capture the organizational resources argument in our first hypothesis. These variables did not produce statistically significant results. Indeed, across the five models that we could discuss. We believe not result in a statistically significant result that we could discuss -- that, in part, this could be explained by the sophisticated sample that we used -- very politically active and educated -- and, as a result, church resources did not influence individual behavior.

The demographic variables of gender, education, and age do not present any surprising results. Women and highly educated respondents feel more efficacious. Younger respondents feel more efficacious than older congregants, which may reflect a less cynical view of politics.

*Political Interest*

The ordinal logit estimates of congregant political interest model are presented in the second column of Table 1. The central findings from this model are in line with our expectations for group closeness and partisanship. Partisanship has a negative relationship with political interest -- strong Democrats express more interest in politics than weaker Democrats. This, of course, is a classic finding about partisan strength, which reflects an investment in shaping the direction of government. The negative relationship between partisanship and interest, by itself, does not implicate the church. It does suggest that a control for political

interest is necessary in models about respondents' connection to the church and interest groups to help isolate the effect of partisan status in the church.

Similar to the political efficacy model, respondents who express a feeling of closeness with external political interest groups are more interested in politics. Surely this relationship is reciprocal as interest promotes learning about interest groups and ongoing group communication promotes interest in the political process. The other results follow general expectations, too. Respondents who are more educated and older are more interested in politics, as are the more efficacious.

#### *Attention to Pastor*

Column three in Table 1 shows the ordinal logit estimates of the amount of attention congregants pay to what their clergy member says about social and political issues as expressed in the second hypothesis. This is one of the four most important models we estimate, allowing us a glimpse of whether congregants respond differently to their church and community interest groups depending on their partisan status in the church. The central finding from this model is the negative relationship between partisanship and paying attention to the minister. Respondents who are stronger Democrats report paying more attention than weaker Democrats or independents (by about 6 percent, on average). Importantly, the effect is not the result of political interest, which as expected is positive and significant (boosting attention by about 11 percent), but instead the status of the congregant in the congregation. Those just outside the congregational political majority are more likely to report tuning out the political messages from the pulpit.

Another notable and expected result is that greater closeness to interest groups is positively related to paying greater attention to the pastor (at about the same rate as political interest). Following the pattern from the political efficacy and political interest models, the positive correlation suggests that the closer a member feels to an interest group the more attuned they will be to a minister providing a consonant political message.

Interestingly, paying attention to the clergyperson is not affected by the level of efficacy the individual has, but their perception of how much efficacy the clergyperson has. The more the respondent feels the clergyperson "has more influence with government than you do," the more likely they are to report paying attention (by about 8 percent). This result showcases that congregation can be instrumental and conflicts with a few results in the literature. Using samples of white mainline Protestant clergy and congregants and with different questions, Djupe and Gilbert find that clergy are more likely to speak out on political

matters (2003) and that congregants more accurately perceive clergy cues (2009) when their views are not well represented in the community. This result strikes us as diametrically opposed to the current result. Assessing just when congregants tune in to their clergyperson — when they are in the majority and have influence or when they are in the minority and need representation — is a project of great significance.

#### *Trust Pastor to be a Political Advocate*

Trust Pastor to be a Political Advocate  
 Logistic regression estimates of congregants' trust in the pastor to be a political advocate are in the first column of Table 1, continued. Here, partisanship is negative, but insignificant. Instead, the central result in this model is the positive relationship between the respondent's closeness to community interest groups also contributes positively to trust in the pastor as a political advocate. However, these results are swamped by the sense of efficacy they feel for the pastor. The effect of advancing a standard deviation in feeling closer to interest groups produces an 8 percent bump in trusting the pastor. A one standard deviation change in supporting the church advances the likelihood of trusting the pastor by 6 percent. But feeling the pastor is efficacious increases that trust by 28 percent. This dovetails clearly with the result from the previous model highlighting the instrumental calculations employed by members — they place their trust in representatives who can get the job done.

#### *Closeness to Interest Groups*

This model uses ordinary least-squares regression to gauge how close respondents feel to three Black advocacy organizations — an important independent variable in previous models. It is important to highlight the negative, statistically crisp relationship of partisanship to group closeness. In comparison to weaker partisans in this sample, strong Democrats are likely to feel closer to distant than groups — independents are likely to feel over a half point more distant to strong Democrats (in a 4 point range). Additionally, those who pay attention to a minister giving political messages and trust the pastor to be a political advocate feel closer to these groups (by .4 across the full range in the former, and by 1.5 points in the latter). Given the interrelationships between these variables, it is clear that the effects of being in the political minority compound to reduce trust, increase distance, and weaken attention to clergy representatives in the Black community.

**Table 1: Ordinal Logit Estimates of Political Efficacy, Political Interest, and Attention to the Pastor's Political Speech**

| Variable                   | Political Efficacy | Political Interest | Attention to Pastor about Politics |
|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
|                            | $\beta^*$ (SE)     | $\beta^*$ (SE)     | $\beta^*$ (SE)                     |
| Treatment 1                | -.25 (.23)         | .13 (.26)          | -.01 (.24)                         |
| Treatment 2                | .16 (.24)          | .24 (.27)          | -.40 (.25) †                       |
| Church attendance          | .05 (.16)          | .03 (.17)          | .25 (.17) †                        |
| Church activities          | .05 (.08)          | -.05 (.08)         | .08 (.08)                          |
| Female                     | .51 (.23) **       | -.18 (.25)         | -.04 (.24)                         |
| Education                  | .23 (.11) **       | .32 (.12) ***      | -.16 (.12) †                       |
| Age                        | -.02 (.01) *       | .03 (.01) ***      | .00 (.01)                          |
| Pastor's influence w/ govt | -.26 (.22)         | -.30 (.26)         | .91 (.23) ***                      |
| Partisanship               | .22 (.12) *        | -.37 (.13) ***     | -.21 (.13) *                       |
| Support for pastor         | .23 (.17) †        | .18 (.19)          | —                                  |
| Support for church         | -.10 (.14)         | -.02 (.16)         | —                                  |
| Group closeness            | .20 (.11) *        | .37 (.12) ***      | .31 (.12) ***                      |
| Political efficacy         | —                  | .77 (.15) ***      | .07 (.15)                          |
| Political interest         | —                  | —                  | .40 (.14) ***                      |
| Cut 1                      | 2.24 (1.19) *      | -2.26 (1.30) *     | 1.10 (1.15)                        |
| Cut 2                      | 4.17 (1.21) ***    | -.19 (1.25)        | 4.23 (1.17) ***                    |
| Cut 3                      | —                  | 1.21 (1.25)        | —                                  |

Source: Atlanta Church Data  $n=402$  (20 imputations)  
 \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .10$  (two-tailed tests), †  $p < .10$  (one-tailed test)

**Table 1, continued: Estimates of Trust in the Pastor, Closeness to Interest Groups, and Having an Opinion on Closeness to Interest Groups**

| Variable                     | Trust Pastor to be a Political Advocate (logit) | Closeness to Interest Groups (OLS) |
|------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|                              | $\beta^*$ (SE)                                  | $\beta^*$ (SE)                     |
| Treatment 1                  | -.14 (.27)                                      | .08 (.11)                          |
| Treatment 2                  | -.32 (.28)                                      | .03 (.11)                          |
| Church attendance            | .33 (.19)                                       | -.01 (.08)                         |
| Church activities            | .03 (.09)                                       | .01 (.04)                          |
| Female                       | .18 (.26)                                       | -.04 (.10)                         |
| Education                    | .05 (.13)                                       | -.01 (.05)                         |
| Age                          | .00 (.01)                                       | .01 (.00)                          |
| Pastor's influence with govt | 1.37 (.25)                                      | *** .10 (.11)                      |
| Partisanship                 | -.15 (.14)                                      | -.18 (.06) ***                     |
| Attention paid to pastor     | —   | .21 (.08)                          |
| Support for pastor           | —   | .01 (.08)                          |
| Support for church           | .23 (.13) *                                     | .05 (.07)                          |
| Group closeness              | .22 (.13) *                                     | —                                  |
| Trust in pastor              | —   | .15 (.10) †                        |
| as advocate                  | -.00 (.16)                                      | —                                  |
| Political efficacy           | .14 (.15)                                       | —                                  |
| Political interest           | -3.82 (1.36) ***                                | 3.18 (.56) ***                     |

Source: Atlanta Church Data  
 \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .10$  (two-tailed tests), †  $p < .10$  (one-tailed test)

## Discussion

Taken together, the results reveal an expected pattern, that Black political churches are tightly linked to community interest groups, such that alienation within one is likely to cascade into feelings of distance from the other. It is not absolutely clear which way the directional arrow points and a case could be made for either one. At this point in history, identifying that direction may be nigh impossible. But the fact that they are linked is the important story, especially for the degree to which congregants are able to connect with them for political representation.

Prior research establishes that a high level of racial group consciousness, or a feeling of closeness with people of the same racial group, generally produces enhanced political participation (Miller, Gurin, Gurin, and Malanchuk 1981; Dawson 1995). A key element of a racial group consciousness is an individual's own racial identity — she must identify with a racial group in order for her to construct her racial consciousness (Miller, Gurin, and Gurin et al. 1981). An essential and significant part of the development of a racial group consciousness is religiosity (Allen, Dawson, Brown 1989). Religiosity may only be linked to the development of a Black identity when politics are a part of the church environment (Reese and Brown 1995). But this raises a question — is religiosity, political communication, and/or racial identity important or could the same results be generated by simply capturing political dynamics within a congregation?

Our design is inadequate to provide a comprehensive answer to this question, but the results above are suggestive. It is notable that throughout Table 1, almost none of the variables that demonstrate the degree of involvement in the church, and hence components of “religiosity”, relate to reliance on the pastor or community interest groups as representatives. Instead, as we have demonstrated throughout, a reliance on clergy and interest groups is often rooted in simple political agreement. Perhaps, then, the mechanisms that connect individual and representative in the Black community are more democratic and pluralist than we thought. Adding weight to this counter-explanation is the unexpected importance attached to the perceived efficacy of the clergyperson. Congregants did not automatically translate their religiosity to their political support, but instead calculated that their pastor was worthy of their attention given his clout. This is a far different portrait than one painted by socialization or religiosity explanations.

An individual church's political culture is a crucial aspect to consider in a case study such as this one. Wood (2002) asserts the significance of this element in his work, demonstrating the importance of liturgy and other parts of the religious experience as pivotal factors leading to a politically engaged and active

congregation. This exchange of spiritual and political guidance is predicated, however, on agreement between church leadership and congregants. If a church member finds herself in disagreement with a particular Sunday sermon or a political stand the minister has taken, what options does she have to voice her concern? Scholarly literature has thus far not fully considered this quandary and has perhaps taken this relationship for granted, especially within the African American church, that church members are in lock step with each other and clergy. The results from Wood's study (2002) suggest that the church's culture reflect and will help to sort these disagreements. To take this a step further, our focus on political minorities pushes the cultural concept to reassert the importance of the individual in discussions of congregational engagement and whether there is an equitable distribution of political resources, civic skills, and the like.

We have already discussed many of the limitations of this study, though there is one limitation of most all work in this area that deserves special attention — the omission of the community. In our study, we do not know if members live close or far and commute to attend a high status congregation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we do not know much about the relationship of the congregation to the community — is long congregation in the majority? Is it well integrated or does it exist apart? It is long established that the political opportunity structure is an essential component to any social movement organization's engagement (e.g., McAdam 1982; Oliver 2001), though significant questions remain about a number of features of the operationalization and effects of the concept (Meyer 2004). That uncertainty is even greater in the religion and politics literature, where only fleeting attempts to systematically incorporate congregations' relationships with the community have been made (Djupe and Gilbert 2003, 2009; Olson 2000). As future work pushes into the inner workings of congregational life, we urge scholars to remember the connections with and opportunities structured by the community.

## Conclusion

The central findings of this study are that adopting clergy and interest groups as representatives in the Black community is a linked choice, adoption of these representatives is driven by political agreement and the rational calculation that such support will payoff, and religiosity does not affect that choice. These results run in quite a different direction than previous work has, driven in part by a different research design.

<sup>3</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this particular formulation.

We are far from embracing this set of results, however, given that they are based on a single case study. It is clear to us that understanding the role of Black churches in politics in future projects will grow considerably with a research design that includes cluster sampling of congregations and then sampling congregants. We need to understand the structural location of congregants, gain measurements on what information congregants are exposed to, and enable comparison of how people respond to that information and its source, especially the clergy. Such a design would address the validity of our results. In particular, we wonder whether political minorities still gain by being a part of a political church, or, restated, how much less minorities gain from their congregation than majorities in political and non-political churches. That is, our results in just one congregation could mask the possibility that political minorities are still more resourceful and participatory in this political church than they would be in a less politicized church environment. The very fact that this possibility can be addressed with the tight design choices should provide sufficient motivation.

While we have learned a great deal from past studies, data generated from a sample of individuals disconnected from each other cannot illuminate inequalities in congregational effects (though for a valiant attempt see Calhoun-Brown 2010). Finding a correlation between being in a political church and participation is open to several interpretations, including that only the majority benefits, everyone benefits, and some mixture of the two. At the least, we should not assume that everyone benefits until we have systematic evidence to support that claim.

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Appendix: Variable Coding

*Dependent Variables*

- Political efficacy – "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? People like me don't have much say over city government." 0=strongly agree or agree, 1=disagree, 2=strongly disagree.
- Political interest – "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? How interested are you in the 2010 political campaigns?" 1=none or very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, and 4=a great deal.
- Attention to pastor about politics – "I pay a great deal of attention to what my pastor says about social and political issues." 0=strongly disagree, disagree, or don't know, 1=agree, 2=strongly agree.
- Trust Pastor to be a Political Advocate – In the past year, did you trust your pastor to advocate your concerns to government officials? 0=no, 1=yes
- Closeness to Interest Groups – Is an averaged index composed of the following items. How close do you feel toward these groups active in Atlanta politics? NAACP, Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, and Urban League of Atlanta. Each is coded 1=very far, 2=far, 3=neutral, 4=close, and 5=very close. The index averages these scores and thus ranges in value from 1 to 5.

*Independent Variables*

- Control condition (excluded) – "City Works with Church" A bad economy and few affordable option in the neighborhood moved Old Rugged Cross Church to apply to partner with the city to provide affordable housing in its neighborhood. The city awarded Old Rugged Cross a \$1 million grant to rehabilitate a vacant warehouse into affordable apartments.
- Treatment 1 – "Minister Criticizes Mayor, City Pulls Funds" A bad economy and few affordable housing options in the neighborhood moved Old Rugged Cross Church to apply to partner with the city to provide affordable housing in its neighborhood. The city awarded Old Rugged Cross a \$1 million grant to rehabilitate a vacant warehouse into affordable apartments. But, the proposal hit a major bump after Old Rugged Cross's Senior Pastor Smith publicly criticized the mayor's decision as "racist" after the mayor proposed closing a free clinic in Old Rugged Cross's poor, largely Black neighborhood. Sources later revealed that high ranking city officials threatened Pastor Smith: If he criticized the mayor for the hospital decision Old Rugged Cross would lose its \$1 million grant. Pastor Smith went ahead with the press conference and the city awarded the \$1 million grant to another organization outside of Old Rugged Cross's neighborhood.

Treatment 2 – “City Works with Church if Minister Doesn’t Criticize Mayor” A bad economy and few affordable housing options in the neighborhood moved Old Rugged Cross Church to apply to partner with the city to provide affordable housing in its neighborhood. The city awarded Old Rugged Cross a \$1 million grant to rehabilitate a vacant warehouse into affordable apartments. But, the proposal almost hit a major bump. The mayor moved to close the free clinic in Old Rugged Cross’s poor, largely Black neighborhood. Old Rugged Cross Senior Pastor Smith was expected to hold a press conference to sharply criticize the mayor’s decision as “racist.” Instead, it was canceled at the last minute. Pastor Smith refused to comment on why he canceled the event or the closing of the clinic. Sources later revealed that high ranking city officials threatened Pastor Smith: If he criticized the mayor for the hospital decision Old Rugged Cross would lose its \$1 million grant. The redevelopment project is still on track to build 40 apartments by this spring.

Church attendance – Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend church services? 5=Twice a week, 4=Once a week, 3=Once or twice a month, 2=A few times a year, 1=Seldom.

Church activities – How many congregation activities and small groups are you involved in? Ranges 0 to 9.

Female – 0=male, 1=female

Education – What is the highest level of school you completed? 1=Didn’t finish high school, 2=Finished High School or got a GED, 3=Took some college courses or got an Associate’s degree, 4=Graduated from a 4 year college, 5=Worked for or received a master’s or doctorate.

Age – In what year were you born? Measure subtracts the year from 2011.  
Pastor’s influence with gov’t – In the past year, did you believe that your pastor has more influence with government officials than you do? 0=no, 1=yes.

Partisanship – Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent? 1=strong Democrat, 2=Weak Democrat, 3=independents.

Support for pastor – How much do you support your pastor’s involvement with social and political issues? 1=strongly oppose, 2=oppose, 3=not sure, 4=support, 5=strongly support.

Support for church – How much would you support <name of church> partnering with government to provide social services to the community? 1=strongly oppose, 2=oppose, 3=not sure, 4=support, 5=strongly support.

<sup>1</sup> Five congregations may seem like a small number. But the reality is that conducting surveys in Black congregations is difficult (see DiJupé’s 2008 review of Owens’ God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America). As one informant cautioned, “It is going to be hard to find a large Black church that is willing to do something like this.” The caution was warranted. One congregation responded to the invitation and numerous phone calls. Additional reasons why the congregation agreed to participate was that our proposal didn’t require any additional work from the church.

<sup>2</sup> Backing up this claim, this is the only time when one of the treatments has even a marginally significant (and negative) effect – those exposed to a story about a detypist’s cooperation by a government official weakly drives down the likelihood of paying attention to their own pastor.