

Self-Selection, Church Attendance, and Local Civic Participation

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Prior research has shown that church attendance affects voting participation, but has a negative or no effect on more demanding forms of political participation. I argue that this differential for nonelectoral activity partially results from biases in how scholars conceptualize and analyze church attendance variables. To properly measure the influence of church attendance on nonelectoral participation, scholarship needs to account for self-selection biases that hinder accurate analyses. Consistent with the literature, a selection model finds that once fundamentalism's motivating effect is considered, church attendance plays no role in a respondent's participation in local government meetings. The present work provides a partial explanation for why attendance has no effect on more demanding political activity. These findings demonstrate that scholarship should focus attention on prior factors that influence congregants' attendance decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have noted the positive influence of church attendance on voting participation (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Macaluso and Wanat 1979; Hougland and Christenson 1983; Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Peterson 1992; Harris 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). However, church attendance was negatively or unrelated to demanding forms of political participation (Hougland and Christenson 1983; Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Harris 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Calhoun-Brown 1996). One explanation for the differential between electoral and nonelectoral participation is that current scholarship fails to accurately understand, conceptualize, and analyze prior processes that influence a respondent's church attendance decisions. Some congregants attend church frequently, while others rarely attend services. These differences matter in analyzing political data.

The participation literature has largely ignored the fact that church attendance is a voluntary, nonrandom act. The religious and political beliefs of frequent attenders differ from those of infrequent attenders. The decision to attend services is partially motivated by factors such as a respondent's fundamentalism beliefs. These beliefs have important consequences for political behavior. However, the local political participation literature has primarily treated church attendance as a random process (Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Peterson 1992; Harris 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Cassel 1999).

In a "classical" experiment studying the effects of church attendance, respondents would have an equal probability of being assigned into the various treatment (attender) and control (nonattender) groups (Campbell and Stanley 1966; Cook and Campbell 1979). Extending this logic, the effects of church attendance would then be examined for influences on local nonelectoral participation. In actuality, congregants' beliefs about fundamentalism affect how often they attend church services. When these beliefs determine which respondents appear in churches, then church attendance is no longer exogenous. To properly understand the influence of church attendance on political participation, scholars need to first model the attendance decision process and then model a respondent's political behavior.

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Churches are unique contexts that facilitate political participation by teaching citizens important civic skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). However, recent religious scholarship has noted that American denominationalism and choice of contexts has become increasingly voluntary and purposeful (Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988; Kellstedt and Green 1993; Green and Guth 1993; Welch, Leege, Wald, and Kellstedt 1993). Congregants are purposeful and choose churches that reflect their religious beliefs and moral precepts. Frequency of attendance can analogously be thought of as a voluntary and nonrandom process. The voluntary denominationalism and context choice literature is paramount to understanding American religious behavior. Therefore, it is surprising that previous work has failed to incorporate this reasoning into empirical studies of church influences on political behavior.

I posit that examining church attendance as a nonrandom process provides a more accurate way of assessing church attendance influence. Specifically, I argue that factors initially influencing attendance at services should be considered and modeled. Current political analyses of church attendance measures do not fully “unpack” the underlying theoretical meaning of frequency of attendance. Attendance measures are partially reflective of respondents’ religious beliefs. These processes inherently bias and confound our understanding of what church attendance variables mean and how this measure connects to political activity. This paper shows how current approaches to using attendance variables can lead to findings inconsistent with the literature on demanding political activity.

As an alternative, the present work demonstrates that once respondents’ fundamentalism beliefs are partially considered, church attendance plays no role in participation in local community board meetings.¹ This approach provides a partial explanation for why church attendance does not effect nonelectoral participation.

THE “RELIGIOUS FACTOR” IN LOCAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION

It has been shown that between three-fifths and three-fourths of adult Americans belong to churches and between 82 and 93 percent of all Americans are willing to use some religious designation (Leege 1993). Even given recent concerns (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993) about over-reporting, Leege noted that 29 to 39 percent of Americans, attend religious services (Leege 1993).

Religion affects local political participation in a variety of ways. Leege notes that local religious structures parallel the many points of access and the diffusion of power in the American political system (Leege 1993). Scholars have noted the importance of local contexts, observing that Catholic church parishioners view local parish loyalties as more important than the church at large (Leege 1987).

The individual level influences of church attendance are better understood at the local level. Local politics and issues typically involve different facets than the national level (Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993). As a result, local issues are seen as more important to church attenders when compared to national issues (Leege 1987). Local political activities have a different meaning and importance to church attenders because of the kinds of issues dealt with by local officeholders (Martinson and Wilkening 1987). Local community issues may involve a diversity of concerns. For example, Pattillo-McCoy (1998) found that churches can influence local participation in issues such as curbing youth delinquency, closing a neighborhood drug house, and attracting voters. Local communities serve as important settings for analyses of religious influence.

CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Scholars since Tocqueville ([1835, 1840] 1958) have noted that churches are important training grounds for teaching basic democratic skills. (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Wald, Kellstedt, and Leege (1993) demonstrated the positive impact of church involvement on political

participation. Legee noted the impact of religion on the participation behavior of the righteous believer: "righteousness was evident in religious rectitude, economic diligence, and civic involvement" (Legee 1993). Additionally, Reese and Brown (1995) produced findings indicating that civic awareness messages are presented at places of worship.

The political behavior literature has examined various links between church attendance and political activism. Harris (1994:46) notes, "most of these studies found that regular church attendance led to civic-oriented participation, giving citizens a sense of civic obligation that leads them to participate regularly in elections." Verba and colleagues (1995) showed that participation in church organizations increased political participation by cultivating and nurturing civic skills. Harris also showed that the psychological mobilization effects of church attendance are positively and directly linked to voting.

Scholarship has demonstrated that church attendance effects work through contextual influences, social interaction influences, increasing perceptions of efficacy, and mobilization. Individuals who regularly attend religious services receive politically relevant cues from the pulpit, information from social interactions within and beyond worship services, and training and practice in important civic norms and networks of engagement (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Jelen 1992).

FUNDAMENTALISM, ATTENDANCE, AND SELF-SELECTION

Recent religion and sociology scholarship has found that denominationalism is increasingly voluntary and that more religiously active people choose contexts that reinforce their moral precepts (Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988). This literature observes that among evangelicals, self-selection that may account for membership (Wuthnow 1988; Roof and McKinney 1987; Legee 1993).

Many factors influence church involvement. Peterson (1992:129) showed that active participants in their church tended to be fundamentalist and more apt to accept the Bible as literal truth. Despite the literature on factors motivating attendance, no prior work employed a simultaneous-equation model incorporating these insights. I utilize the theoretical framework provided in prior research to suggest a method for modeling the confounding bias in the attendance measure. Specifically, I focus on the role of fundamentalism.

THE DATA

The data on which this research is based comes from Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) American Citizen Participation Study (CPS). The CPS began with a telephone screener study of a representative sample of over 15,000 adult Americans conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory of Northern Illinois University and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) during the last six months of 1989. This initial sample was then stratified by race and ethnicity and by level and type of political participation. African-Americans, Latinos, and political activists were oversampled. In the spring of 1990, NORC conducted in-person interviews of an average length of almost two hours each with 2,517 of the original 15,053 respondents. These latter interviews are used for the present study. A benefit of using the CPS data is that it is a large national sample containing a comprehensive battery of religious activity and community politics questions.

MEASURES

Local Civic Participation

This paper focuses exclusively on explaining why church attendance has no effect on non-electoral participation. Accordingly, I employ a measure of nonelectoral activity from the CPS

that represents how citizens communicate with local political leaders: attending local community board meetings. Respondents were asked if, in the past year, they had attended a local government board or council meeting. Attending community and organizational meetings is viewed as a more demanding form of citizen involvement in local affairs. Prior work has combined local and national participation activities and used them as dependent variables (Peterson 1992; Harris 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). I avoid this approach in order to sort out the independent effects of church attendance on strictly local nonelectoral activity. This will facilitate an analysis of religious effects on participation at the local level.

Church Attendance

I used a church attendance measure in the present analyses. Recent studies by Hadaway et al. (1993) raised important concerns about the reliability of church attendance measures as reported in national surveys. They note that inaccuracies in common measures of attendance may result from nonresponse rates, social desirability, and personal desirability biases (Hadaway et al. 1993). Even in light of these possible measurement concerns, scholars widely agree that church attendance measures proxy for a respondent's religious commitment. For comparability with previous work (Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Peterson 1992; Harris 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), I employ a church attendance measure, noting the concerns raised by Hadaway and colleagues. Respondents were asked, "How often do you attend religious services?"

Fundamentalism

Bolce and De Maio (1999) noted that one of the tenets of fundamentalism was the preservation of the transcendent and inerrant authority of the scriptures. Peterson (1992) demonstrated that fundamentalism influenced religious involvement. Accordingly, respondents' beliefs about the Bible were used to operationalize their degree of fundamentalism. This approach has been employed in other studies. Consistent with prior work (Peterson 1992; Layman 1997; Manza and Brooks 1997), I used responses to the question, "Here are four statements about the Bible. I'd like you to tell me which is closest to your own view. . . . The Bible is God's word, God inspired the Bible, Bible was written by men, or Bible was written long ago."

Socioeconomic Status and Control Variables

Measures of party identification, ethnicity, education, political interest, age, sex, number of children at home, and income have been used in previous studies of local participation (Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Peterson 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). I also include an age-squared variable to control for the nonlinear effects of age on the dependent measures (see Fox 1997:68–72). It seems reasonable to include these measures as control variables in the present analyses.

A SELECTION MODEL APPROACH

A major shortcoming of the religion and participation literature is its treatment of church attendance as an exogenous variable. This approach fails to consider how an individual's degree of fundamentalism may bias results. To properly examine church attendance effects, it is necessary to separate out the independent influence of a congregant's fundamentalism beliefs. Current research fails in this regard.

By neglecting to examine and disentangle the effects of fundamentalist beliefs, the estimated "church effects" will not converge to the true value. Previous work (Peterson 1992) has attempted

to control for “self-selection” by adding fundamentalism variables in a regression equation. Achen (1986:3–4) notes, “the problem with adding control variables is that controls leave intact the logic of analyzing outcomes as though they were the result of randomized assignment.” Peterson’s controls for self-selected church involvement failed to disentangle and remove the effects of the underlying attendance decision. The present approach of modeling selection effects is preferable because it explicitly models both the attendance decision and the overall outcome of local meeting participation. This method demonstrates how fundamentalism beliefs bias political analyses of nonelectoral behavior.

In this paper, I employ a selection model. In examining the effects of attendance, a solution to the self-selection bias problem can be found by utilizing a variable that affects church attendance, but not local meeting participation (see Achen 1986:38). The measure of fundamentalism serves this purpose.

The participation literature acknowledges the effects of fundamentalism on national level, congressional, and senatorial voting behavior (Green, Guth, and Hill 1996; Johnson, Tamney, and Burton 1989; Perkins 1989; Wilcox 1992). However, current research does not support the notion that fundamentalism exerts direct influence on local, nonelectoral political activities. Perkins (1989) speculated that fundamentalists’ quest to affiliate with national candidates, coalitions, and parties focused their efforts at the national level. In this paper, the fundamentalism measure is used as an instrumental variable because it has a substantive and statistically significant effect on church attendance, but no effect on local meeting participation. I employ a simple two-equation model, which partially accounts for the biases present in the attendance variable.² I utilize a more intuitive simultaneous equation approach that allows for an ordinal dependent variable in the selection equation and a dichotomous dependent variable in the participation equation. I use the following simultaneous equation system:

1. The Selection Equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Frequency of Church Attendance} = & a_1 + b_1(\text{fundamentalism}) + b_2(\text{Gender}) \\ & + b_3(\text{Ethnic Group}) + b_4(\text{Income Control}) \\ & + b_5(\text{Age}) + b_6(\text{Age Squared}) + b_7(\text{Kids}) + u_1 \end{aligned}$$

2. The Participation Equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Local Board Meeting Participation} = & a_2 + b_8(\text{Church Attendance}) + b_9(\text{Gender}) \\ & + b_{10}(\text{Ethnic Group}) + b_{11}(\text{Income}) \\ & + b_{12}(\text{Education}) + b_{13}(\text{Political Interest}) \\ & + b_{14}(\text{Party ID}) + b_{15}(\text{Age}) + b_{16}(\text{Age Squared}) + u_2 \end{aligned}$$

This system of equations is identified.³ The variable for fundamentalism facilitated identification. Furthermore, the rank, order, and identification conditions are met by considering the fundamentalism variable as excluded information in the outcome equation (Greene 1997). One can think of other specifications of this system, including adding a denominational affiliation variable. However, to keep the analysis as straightforward as possible, this simpler approach was used. Multistage modeling of religious and political phenomena often result in a diminution of cases for analysis. Analyses of these potential effects reveal no theoretically grounded, systematic tendencies that would alter the findings presented here.

ANALYSES

The analysis proceeds in three stages. Following the current literature, I first estimate the effects of church attendance on participation at local meetings using a traditional logit model. I demonstrate that this specification leads to biased estimates of attendance influence that are contrary to the literature’s findings on nonelectoral participation. Secondly, I consider and model

the confounding influences of fundamentalist beliefs. In the third phase, I address the fundamentalism bias by modeling both fundamentalist influence and participation. I show how this alternative selection approach partially explains important sources of bias. Finally, I compare the logit model to the selection model and discuss the statistical and substantive interpretations of changes in coefficient estimates and standard errors, focusing on the church attendance variable.

Logit Estimates

I estimated the influence of a traditional church attendance variable on local meeting participation (a more demanding activity) using a logit regression model. This procedure is necessary to estimate the purported direct influence of church attendance. This step also produces coefficient estimates, standard errors, and significance levels for church attendance and other variables that will served as a baseline for comparison in subsequent model specifications. Table 1 contains the logit estimates of the local board meeting participation model.

Table 1 shows the effects of church attendance on one's propensity to attend a local community meeting. The overall model is statistically significant and has a fair amount of explanatory power. I primarily focus on the attendance variable in this section. Results for the other variables in the model are fairly consistent with prior work given the coding schemes employed.

The logit model demonstrates that church attendance has a positive and statistically significant effect on increasing a respondent's chances of attending local government or council meetings (Table 1). This finding is contrary to conventional wisdom, which posits no attendance effect for demanding political acts such as local community meeting participation. These illusory attendance effects result from biases in the attendance variable. The observed "effect" is confounded by failing to account for influential, purposeful decision processes. Disentangling, sorting, and modeling this bias will produce findings more consistent with the literature.

TABLE 1
BASELINE LOGIT MODEL: PREDICTING LOCAL, NONELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
Church Attendance	0.06*	0.03
Education	0.09*	0.03
Gender	-0.33*	0.13
Ethnicity	-0.58*	0.18
Income Control	0.09*	0.02
Political Interest	0.96*	0.10
Age	-0.01*	0.00
Age Squared	-0.00*	0.00
Party	0.01	0.09
Constant	-6.68*	0.77
N = 1705		
Prob > chi2 = 0.00		
Pseudo R-squared = 0.15		
LR chi2 (9) = 262.05		

Note: *p < 0.05.

Source: 1990 American Citizen Participation Study.

TABLE 2
MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS: SELECTION EQUATION PREDICTING
CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
Fundamentalism	1.14*	0.08
Gender	0.33*	0.11
Ethnicity	0.18	0.14
Income Control	0.06*	0.02
Age	-0.02	0.02
Age Squared	0.00*	0.00
Kids	0.24*	0.05
Constant	1.19*	0.50
N = 1782		
Prob > F = 0.00		
Adjusted R-squared = 0.14		

Note: *p < 0 .05.

Source: 1990 American Citizen Participation Study.

The Attendance Model

To show that fundamentalism effects church attendance, I present a model that predicts respondents' frequency of attendance. The results from Table 2 show that a respondent's fundamentalism beliefs exert a statistically significant effect on frequency of church attendance. This finding is consistent with prior work (Peterson 1992). The SES and control variables perform as expected by the literature. The only exception is the ethnicity measure. A number of specifications using interaction terms were estimated. However, due to concerns of missing data, the present model is employed for its parsimonious properties. These results demonstrate that church attendance can be explained by a number of important factors. Contrary to the present literature, church attendance is not exogenous or a "given" behavior. Fundamentalism influences who shows up at church services.

Selection Model Estimates

The religion and sociology literature notes that self-selection processes operate in church attendance and affiliation decisions. To identify the sources of attendance bias, I utilize the voluntary denominationalism and context choice literature and model the selection bias of fundamentalist beliefs. This approach produces different results. By comparing the baseline logit model to a selection model, we see if accounting for fundamentalism beliefs affects the previous findings. Again, I focus on the attendance variable.

Table 3 shows that once we account for factors influencing respondents' attendance decisions, the church attendance variable becomes insignificant. This means that a respondent's prior fundamentalism beliefs produced a substantial bias in measuring attendance influence. By accounting for these prior influences, we obtained a theoretically grounded explanation for why attendance fails to influence nonelectoral participation. This two-stage model is statistically significant and does a fair job of explaining local meeting participation. The SES and control variables perform according to expectations. By examining, separating, and statistically modeling the attendance decision, the results of the selection model now conform to the literature's expectations for demanding political activity.

TABLE 3
NONELECTORAL PARTICIPATION MODEL AFTER ACCOUNTING FOR
FUNDAMENTALISM BIAS

Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error
Church Attendance	0.02	0.01
Education	0.01	0.00
Gender	-0.04*	0.02
Ethnicity	-0.06*	0.03
Income Control	0.01*	0.00
Political Interest	0.10*	0.01
Age	0.01*	0.00
Age Squared	-0.00*	0.00
Party	-0.01	0.01
Constant	-0.37*	0.10
N = 1551		
P-Value = 0.00		
"R-squared" = 0.13		

Note: *p < 0.05.

Source: 1990 American Citizen Participation Study.

CONCLUSIONS

Three recent church attendance and participation studies raised important concerns about the possible influence of self-selected church attendance on political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:331; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Cassel 1999). However, these works failed to develop a coherent explanatory model about the individual self-selection process and how it affects political behavior. Furthermore, these studies did not empirically model congregants' selection decisions. The present study addressed these shortcomings.

The findings demonstrated that congregants' decisions to attend church frequently or infrequently partially reflect their underlying beliefs about fundamentalism. Present political behavior scholarship fails to account for the confounding influences of these types of personal motivations for church attendance. Additionally, I showed how modeling this bias partially explained why church attendance does not influence local, nonelectoral political participation. These findings suggest that religion and politics scholarship should consider the role of individually motivated decisions to attend religious institutions. An improved local participation theory would consider individual self-selection processes as antecedents to contextual, church attendance effects.

This paper is an explicit examination of individual-level influences of churches on participation. Sociologists and political scientists both agree that churches serve important mass mobilization, psychological resource, and organizing functions in local communities. The results of this paper do not attempt to dispute those findings. Instead, this work focuses on prior personal motivations that influence church attendance decisions.

The results presented are not the final word on self-selection into churches. Instead, this paper represents an important step in thinking about how individual decisions to attend church matter politically. The theoretical and methodological approach employed provides a useful way of understanding how voluntary religious choices affect outcomes.

This study considers only local, nonelectoral political activities. Future research on selection processes should consider a broader range of participation activities. This line of thinking would

benefit from further substantive and methodological refinements. Further work should explore, examine, and develop theories about how selection processes work in other institutions.

NOTES

1. This paper focuses exclusively on local, nonelectoral political activity. This approach was followed due to concerns with missing data on the local voting measures in the CPS. A number of specifications of electoral models were tried, without convincing, stable results. Additionally, I argue that the dearth of research explaining why attendance does not affect more demanding participatory acts is sufficient motivation for a separate study of nonelectoral activity.
2. Specifically, this paper uses an instrumental variables estimator (Achen 1986; Greene 1997) to “clean” the church attendance variable of its association with the error term in the participation equation. This approach leads to unbiased estimates of the influence of church attendance. One can think of alternative approaches to modeling this particular situation. However, for interpretation purposes, I decided that the present two-stage approach would be more reader-friendly. In this paper, I report 2SLS results, noting concerns about standard errors. Achen (1986) suggests an efficiency correction for cases with dichotomous outcome variables. However, error correction methods rarely produce changes that would invalidate my findings. Kennedy (1998:5–17) provides an intuitive discussion of “preferred” estimators. The author noted that the ultimate choice among estimators is influenced by the purpose for which the estimate is sought. The bias reduction qualities of the present estimation approach made it the preferred method of examining a respondent’s attendance decisions. Ultimately, I am interested in promoting the substantive findings of the paper using methodology as a lens for examination.
3. Computer output containing the proofs for these conditions and exclusions are readily available from the author. I avoid a detailed technical discussion in the text to facilitate easier reading.

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