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# Veni, Vidi, Disseri

## Churches and the Promise of Democratic Deliberation

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As the most popular voluntary association in the United States, churches are sometimes touted as saviors of democracy. However, those who espouse deliberative models of democracy rarely see churches as nurturing the decision-making abilities of attenders. Thus, we examine the extent to which church small group sessions fulfill the conditions for deliberation as set forth by political theorists. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, we find that churches offer authentic opportunities through small group involvements and, accordingly, tentatively declare the existence of a religious civility, with churches acting in the service of democratic capacity.

**Keywords:** *democratic deliberation; political discussion; religion; clergy; churches; political diversity; political participation*

As the most popular voluntary association in the United States (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), churches are sometimes touted as the saviors of democracy, at least according to a model of democracy that sees the maximization of political participation as a prized democratic good. Many studies have reported a positive relationship between church involvement and various forms of political participation (Leege,

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1988; Wald, 2003), and religious institutions have often been credited with offsetting inequities in participatory resources by supplying civic skills to those who are otherwise disadvantaged by socioeconomic standing (e.g., Djupe & Gilbert, 2006; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

However, scholars adhering to a deliberative model of democracy rarely see churches as nurturing the deliberative capacity of attenders (e.g., Scheufele, Nisbet, & Brossard, 2003). Indeed, most express concern when entertaining church-based political discussions (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004; Sunstein, 2002; though see Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Gastil, 1993), arguing that interactions in these settings, to the extent that they take place at all (Mutz & Mondak, 2006), are likely among politically similar individuals with clergy acting to reinforce opinions.

In contrast, we suspect that many of the discussions that take place in churches—and, in particular, those that take place in any number of church small group sessions hosted by these institutions—fulfill many of the conditions for deliberation as set forth by democratic theorists. Thus, in this article, we ask about the extent to which church small group sessions resemble true deliberative forums: Are church small groups homogenous gatherings with opinions reinforced by clergy? Alternatively, are they in fact diverse groups exposed to a variety of viewpoints with clergy acting as neutral moderators? In the sections that follow, we first present a theory of church-structured deliberation, before employing several methodologies—specifically, statistical analyses on two unique data sets and structured observation sessions in several evangelical churches—to assess its validity.

## **The Deliberative Potential of Churches**

Scholars have long suggested the benefits of structured deliberation sessions (see Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004), and recently Ackerman and Fishkin (2004) proposed a national Deliberation Day that would bring together citizens from all walks of life, giving them the opportunity to meet in small groups prior to a major election. Of course, Americans have always gotten together in an essentially similar fashion without prompting, whether meeting in coffee shops (Walsh, 2004), town halls (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000), citizen assemblies (Button & Mattson, 1999), or numerous other venues from the workplace to the dinner table. Indeed, for many Americans, Deliberation Day has traditionally occurred throughout the week before, during, and after elections. Sunday (or another day for religious attendance)

stands out as a particularly opportune day for citizens to gather together to talk about public affairs, as many churchgoers<sup>1</sup> regularly meet for discussion either before or after worship.

Until recently, however, the prevailing view among scholars has been that church-based political conversations—to the extent that they happen at all—are gatherings directed at the reinforcement of a single viewpoint rather than an open exchange. In particular, this take is often articulated by Christian right elites in their own assessments, biased upward, of the grassroots strength of the movement. For example, Ralph Reed argued that one of the major advantages that his group has over its adversaries is that “liberals and feminists don’t generally go to church. They don’t gather in one place three days before the election” (quoted in Wald, 2003, p. 200).

A growing minority of scholars take the view espoused here, noting that churches are actually often host to a broad range of different opinions and can be quite diverse with widespread disagreement on many key issues (e.g., Coffin, 2005; Djupe & Gilbert, 2003, 2009; Mockabee & Sokhey, 2007). Scholarship has even yielded the counterintuitive finding that Christian right groups—organizations thought to number among the most extreme on the American political landscape—do indeed embrace deliberative norms (Shields, 2007).

We focus on small groups as forums for political discussion to explore the deliberative potential of churches. However, to assess the degree to which normative theory is potentially realized in these religious bodies on any given day of worship, our theoretical and empirical treatment focuses on (a) the composition and types of churches that hold such events, (b) how the rules of engagement are specified and followed in such gatherings (particularly by clergy acting as moderators), and (c) the processes of selection that go into these deliberative opportunities or, in other words, who decides to attend and participate. This three-pronged approach to church-based deliberation is grounded in the literatures on church groups, clergy influence, and political participation. In the next section, we make the case for a small groups approach while discussing these points, each of which will be the subject of empirical scrutiny.

### **Small Groups as Political, Deliberative Sessions: The Who, When, and How of Adult Education**

Most churchgoers do not simply receive a sermon and bolt for the door immediately thereafter, as “much of the active spiritual life within a large religious institution occurs in its subgroups” (Davie, 1995, p. 1; also see Schaller,

1980). Rather, many attend any number of adult education or other small group sessions sponsored by the church.<sup>2</sup> As one early observer noted,

[Adult education] . . . is a way of learning, voluntarily selected by an individual or group of people . . . *in which they carry on sustained inquiry*, with the objective of directing and organizing their experiences in such a way that they are able to create new and meaningful experiences in the improvement of themselves or their environment. (Essert, 1949, p. 122, italics added)

Adult education grew out of the Sunday School movement and typically is a group drawn together for the expressed purpose of “civic and political education” (Gandy, 1945, p. 384). Most importantly, it is in these small group settings that congregants are brought face-to-face, thereby reproducing the structure of the deliberative assemblies idealized by theorists.

Varieties of adult education can be found in essentially all religious traditions in the United States, though church adult education sessions are particularly prevalent in larger churches (Djupe & Gilbert, 2003; Thumma & Travis, 2007), where many congregants find a sense of belonging not cultured in the larger organization (Ernsberger, 1959; Schaller, 1980). Although “white persons with more education and higher incomes” seem to participate in religious adult education sessions at greater rates, all manner of individuals are involved in church small groups (Vogel, 1984, pp. 33-34). In fact, religious adult education gatherings attempt to be quite inclusive (Long, 1973).

It has been noted that many congregants develop the strongest attachments to their churches through their small group involvements, which present opportunities for active participation. That is, rather than passively receiving messages from the pulpit, adult education sessions give interested parties a chance to ask questions, listen to the opinions of other congregants, and hear presentations from guest speakers (Apps, 1972; Gandy, 1945). In line with the observations of others, we argue that adult education sessions can offer participants an opportunity to participate in group discussions where they engage in the give-and-take of genuine “*two-way communication*” (Ernsberger, 1959, p. 82, emphasis in original).

Another reason to think that church small groups hold potential for real democratic deliberation is that adult education classes often embrace a variety of perspectives in the name of promoting community. As one practical handbook for church small groups notes, “Conformity is the opposite of community. Community embraces a variety of viewpoints, abilities, and experiences” (Gorman, 1993, p. 103; see also Coffin, 2005). Importantly, scholars have noted that the debates in these small group settings are not

isolated incidents but sustained dialogues spilling over into the church (Gorman, 1993, p. 121). Thus, adult education sessions would seem to satisfy most, if not all, of the formal conditions for deliberation articulated by theorists (see Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000).

Of course, though group discussions of any type are likely to boost congregants' capacity for deliberation, only those discussions that confront political issues can be rightfully held up as examples of political deliberation. Church small groups are often rife with talk of community, social issues (Apps, 1972). There is reason to believe that even adult education sessions expressly dedicated to the study of Scripture sometimes turn into political discussions, as group members are free to explore how their faith speaks to contemporary issues. Vogel confirms this suspicion, noting that religious education "should incorporate every aspect of being human . . . within the context of the social and political realities of existence" (1984, p. 86; also see Ernsberger, 1959).

### **Clergy as (Neutral) Moderators of Discussion**

To this end, clergy may guide small group participants to "see the relationship of political and economic questions to other questions they are discussing in light of the gospel" (Ernsberger, 1959, p. 78). More generally, clergy can play a major role in moderating the debates that crop up in their congregations (Coffin, 2005). Clergy have also been found to nurture the deliberative capacity of their congregants by presenting a diverse set of issue frames that likely enhance congregants' personal deliberations (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2008). Sermons may provide much of the raw material for the discussions that take place in adult education sessions, and clergy may play a role in providing the structure for these sessions. However, though divergent issue frames from the pulpit may serve to spur congregants into considering the different sides of an issue, social consideration is generally considered an essential component of deliberation (though see Gunderson, 1995; Lindeman, 2002).

Fortunately, clergy are likely to have more than just a passing involvement with their churches' adult education sessions (see Davie, 1995; Ernsberger, 1959). They are typically involved in creating the agenda, extending guest-lecture invitations, and setting the tone for the discussions that take place across an entire season of sessions.

Although some clergy surely work to narrow discussion, we argue that many religious leaders actually promote the free exchange of ideas and safeguard equal opportunities for participation by serving as relatively

neutral moderators. Thus, they facilitate the democratic value of adult education, affording parishioners with relatively frequent opportunities to speak their mind and engage one another. Stated another way, we argue that clergy may “act as sea walls against the tide of routine habits of reasoning” (Ryfe, 2005, p. 63) and encourage participants to “*focus on the ideas involved and not on feelings toward the individuals putting forth these ideas*” (Apps, 1972, p. 90, emphasis in original). Clergy can play an essential role in promoting deliberative exchanges in church small groups, serving as a guide rather than “as an authoritarian source of answers” (Apps, 1972, p. 77; also see Ernsberger, 1959; Gorman, 1993).

### **Potential Threats to Democratic Practice: Clergy Control and Self-Selection**

There are some concerns that must be addressed before we can begin to hail these small group meetings as ideal deliberative environments. For one, the presence of elites in any deliberative setting has its potential drawbacks (on this point, see Button & Mattson, 1999; also see Ernsberger, 1959). Clergy may intervene to make certain that the right values are being promoted. That is, clergy are liable to participate in some adult education sessions to admonish congregants to, as the sign outside one local church read, not “be so open minded that your brains fall out.” On this point, Conover et al. note that “churches are very open to some kinds of discussion but not other kinds” (2002, p. 33; Fishkin, 1995; Shields, 2007). Although we are concerned about this possibility and take multiple measures of it, we join Jon Shields in arguing that this may be a limitation of politics in general—there is simply no evidence to suggest that “citizens with a Socratic-like moral skepticism” (p. 112) have ever been able to have any real political impact.

A second aspect of adult education sessions that may be cause for worry from a deliberative standpoint is that small groups, though helping to make the big church small for many attenders, also potentially attract a select subset of the membership. Namely, they may attract those who agree with each other on any number of the issues. It is not hard to imagine that, even though a church may be host to a wide variety of viewpoints, those who feel that their opinions differ from the congregational majority may self-select into congenial small groups (Finifter, 1974) or simply opt out of organizational activities. In this way, diverse elements within a congregation can hide from the majority, leaving everyone hearing echoes of their own viewpoints—what Sunstein (2002) calls enclave deliberation. It is with these concerns in mind that we set out to investigate whether church adult education sessions have the makings of true deliberative forums.

## Data and Design

We bring a variety of unique data sources to this project, beginning with a snowball sample of Ohio churches. In the fall of 2006, the Ohio State University Political Science and Communication departments conducted a three-wave, phone-based panel study of Ohio voting-age citizens. One important question gathered in the final wave (after the elections) asked respondents for the name of the church that they were currently attending. Thus, on completion of interviewing and the compilation of the data set in February 2007, we used these responses to snowball survey respondents' clergy (this procedure has been used by other scholars—see, for example, the National Congregations Study [Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, & Barman, 1999]).

Our snowball stage was conducted by mail, and three waves of surveying an initial sample of 370 churches garnered 94 responses for a response rate of 25% (which is at the high end of typical, contemporary mail survey response rates). The distribution of respondents' religious traditions mirrors the proportions found in Ohio according to the 2000 religious census (Jones et al., 2002).<sup>3</sup> Mainline Protestants are slightly overrepresented (35% of churches in our sample vs. 29% of adherents in the census), as are evangelical Protestants (27% in the sample vs. 22% in the census). Catholics are underrepresented (35% vs. 44%), though their congregations are much larger on average than the Protestant churches—Catholics have 44% of the adherents in Ohio and only 9% of the congregations statewide. That is, given a small sample size, we have a fairly accurate picture of the state of Ohio, which, incidentally, also roughly resembles the nation. Moreover, we also have a diverse sample, though representation of much smaller religious traditions, such as Judaism, Latter-Day Saints, and so on, is too meager from which to draw meaningful conclusions.<sup>4</sup> The key innovation in this survey is a battery inquiring about political adult education sessions and, more specifically, whether those sessions devoted to political topics are based on deliberative norms.

These data (our Ohio data) are supplemented by the national survey of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Episcopal clergy and congregants conducted by Djupe and Gilbert (2003, 2006) before the 2000 election (ELCA/Episcopal data).<sup>5</sup> Importantly, their data are organized at the congregational level and ask about adult education participation. Therefore, we can assess whether adult education participant populations are distinctive, even self-selected, subsets of the entire congregation, which is a crucial test of our argument.

Finally, we also conducted structured participant observations of adult education sessions in a number of houses of worship, including several nondenominational (evangelical) churches that most typologies would rank among the most conservative and that many regard as among the least likely to culture open-ended discussion and reasoned debate. By doing so, we hope to get a better handle on how well our argument applies across denominational lines, how well the deliberative norms outlined by theorists are met in these settings, and how truly democratic clergy and other church leaders are when they moderate such groups.

## The Provision of Political Opportunities

Initially, we are concerned with the extent to which adult education opportunities are available and the kinds of churches that play host to them. A first look at the provision of these opportunities in the Ohio data, by topic and religious tradition, is available in Table 1. The most common issue covered in adult education sessions in Ohio churches was hunger and poverty in the United States, an issue that clergy almost universally address publicly (Djupe & Gilbert, 2002; Guth, Green, Smidt, Kellstedt, & Poloma, 1997). These churches certainly did not shy away from controversy and engaged tough, current policy controversies, including immigration, race relations, gay rights, abortion, and the war in Iraq. Very few addressed the 2006 elections (directly) or church and state issues, which is not surprising given the relative lack of attention that the latter received in the fall of that year.

Turning to the frequency of sessions, out of this small sample of Ohio churches, 45% held at least one session, and the typical number of sessions held within sponsoring churches was three. These portions vary among traditions; the highest percentage holding at least one session occurs among Catholics (55), with mainline Protestants close behind (53). About a third of evangelical Protestant churches in the sample held a session, whereas just under a sixth of nondenominational churches (very likely evangelical) held a session. This pattern of results is suggestive of the effect that vertical, denominational ties have on drawing out churches to address worldly issues (Hunter, 1993). Among sponsoring churches, the highest average number of sessions was held by mainliners (nearly 4), followed by Catholics (2.76), and then Evangelicals (1.8). To corroborate the figures for mainline Protestants, the ELCA/Episcopal Church data ( $n = 2,240$ ) yield similar results: 48% sponsored at least one session and, among those that

**Table 1**  
**Adult Education Sessions Held on Twelve Political Topics**  
**and Summary Statistics**

Issue	%	Issue	%	Issue	%
U.S. hunger and poverty	29	Abortion	12	War on terrorism	6
Environmental stewardship	15	Gay rights	11	Church and state issues	6
Race relations	14	War in Iraq	10	Minimum wage	5
Immigrants and immigration	13	Economy	9	2006 elections	4
Sponsored at least one session	45	Average number of sessions provided			2.98
Mainline Protestant	53	Mainline Protestant			3.88
Catholic	55	Catholic			2.76
Evangelical Protestant	35	Evangelical Protestant			1.83
Nondenominational	14	Nondenominational ( <i>n</i> = 1)			NA

Source: 2007 Ohio Churches Survey.

did, 3.25 sessions were held on average (there were no differences on these statistics between the ELCA and Episcopal churches).

In a sizable minority of churches, therefore, political forums are held on issues of current import. Although these forums engage issues that are, to be sure, traditionally of greater concern to churches,<sup>6</sup> they also clearly address more difficult political issues about which citizens can potentially learn a great deal and practice tolerance for those with dissonant opinions. Of course, as noted earlier, the deliberative potential of adult education sessions all depends on (a) the composition of churches that host such forums, (b) how the rules of engagement are specified, and (c) who shows up. We now take up each concern in turn.

### Church Settings

In an optimistic vision for idealized deliberation, adult education would be held in all churches without regard for political divisions, civic capacity, or the political interests of the leadership. In practice, we suspect that typical explanatory factors for organizational formation and citizen participation in organizations structure the provision of adult education. After all, there is variance in terms of which churches hold adult education sessions—clergy are quite sensitive to the needs, wants, and capacities of their congregations (Djupe & Gilbert, 2003; Olson, 2000)—and in many ways churches function much like any other organization (Warren, 2001).

**Table 2**  
**Negative Binomial Regression Estimates of the Amount**  
**of Adult Education Provided by Churches**

Variables	Ohio Clergy Data		ELCA/Episcopal Clergy Data	
	Coefficients	SE	Coefficients	SE
Church size, logged	0.045	.138	.524	.040***
Church activity	-0.007	.008	.003	.001***
Church social class	1.233	.354***	.323	.075***
Church political disunity	-0.435	.252*	.019	.019
Clergy views versus congregation's	-0.185	.221	-.040	.023*
Clergy political speech	0.063	.016***	.293	.024***
Clergy have influential capacity			-.057	.016***
Mainline Protestant	0.984	.392**		
Evangelical Protestant	0.527	.518		
Constant	-1.260	1.216	-1.129	.148
<i>N</i>	84		1,951	
Log likelihood	-116.728	†	-4163.221	†
(Dispersion parameter) alpha	.591	†	.153	†

Note: ELCA = Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Source: 2007 Ohio Churches Survey; 1998-1999 National ELCA/Episcopal Church Study.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed tests). † $p < .01$  (chi-square).

Accordingly, we need to assess the degree to which adult education sessions are available and under what conditions clergy deem such forums to be risky ventures versus wise investments. In Table 2, we estimate the number of adult education sessions offered in churches using the two samples: the 2007 Ohio churches and the national ELCA/Episcopal data. Fortunately, the available predictors are essentially the same, which allows for easy comparison and a rough reliability check. As the dependent variable is a count, we use negative binomial regression—a technique appropriate when there is overdispersion in the data. Overdispersion can drive Ordinary Least Squares to produce inefficient, inconsistent, and biased estimates and inefficient Poisson regression estimates with biased standard errors (Long, 1997, pp. 217, 230). The results are largely parallel between the Ohio and ELCA/Episcopal models, with some exceptions.

The first three variables listed in Table 2 tap elements of social capital that might serve to support organized political discussion in church. In the Ohio sample, larger churches do not have more adult education sessions,

though they do in the ELCA/Episcopal model, in part because these churches have more of everything. The percentage of members involved in church activities (the second variable) is also insignificant among Ohio churches, but it is highly statistically significant in the ELCA/Episcopal Church model.

However, both effects are confounded to an extent by religious tradition. That is, the Catholic churches in the Ohio sample are enormous, with several claiming membership in the 8,000-10,000 range, and the Catholic priests estimated a much lower percentage of members claiming involvement. Thus, these results suggest Verba et al.'s (1995) findings that Catholic churches have lower levels of voluntaristic activities inside the church (though see Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001), although activity in affiliated organizations (such as the Knights of Columbus) can and often does subsidize that deficit. Whether a group meets inside or outside of the church may be an unimportant distinction for generating civic skills (for instance), but it may be much more critical for the possibility of deliberative discussion. That is, church members self-select into community groups based on interest, creating homogenous pools of people, which then have less of an impetus to engage each other within the church where more heterogeneous groups collect.

One troubling (though unsurprising) finding in Table 2 is that churches with a higher social class have far more adult education sessions, but this is precisely the group of citizens that needs the benefits of exposure to collective discussion the least. The effect for Ohio churches is greater than that in the ELCA/Episcopal data—Mainline Protestants have a higher set point, to which the Ohio model attests with its significant dummy variable for mainline Protestants. In terms of the predicted values, upper-middle class Ohio congregations have just under two more adult education sessions than middle- or lower-class congregations. In contrast, the high end of the class spectrum among ELCA/Episcopal congregations hosts about one more adult education session compared to the low end of the spectrum (these are predicted probability counts derived from the estimates holding other variables at their means). Higher-status congregations have a greater capacity for political engagement, but they also demand more opportunities for this kind of involvement.

The next set of three to four variables taps the political structure of the congregation and the clergy's relationship to the congregation. Among the Ohio congregations, political disunity among church members reduces the number of adult education sessions offered (please see Appendix A for variable coding). Though congregational disunity has no effect on ELCA/Episcopal adult education, the political distance between the clergyperson and

their congregation erodes inspiration for adult education (which is often established by clergy in the first place). Both effects, in their own ways, acknowledge the sensitive nature of political discussion in a nonpolitical organization, and neither is especially salutary. In fact, one would hope that political forums would be held under precisely these conditions, where more diverse arguments are likely to be aired.

One important possibility, though, is that the clergy's perceptions of political division are not rooted in actual division. Perhaps some politically split churches are able to manage the diversity of opinion and thus are not perceived to be divided. Using the ELCA/Episcopal data, we find that in actuality there is a positive relationship between the distance of church mean ideology from the scale midpoint (this is 3) and perceptions of division ( $r = .259$ ,  $p = .067$ ,  $n = 51$  churches). This suggests that there is an alternative understanding in clergy's perceptions of political division: Congregations with more strident ideological leanings boost the presence of politics and call out an embattled minority, whereas truly split congregations, with evenly matched sides, appear to downplay politics to avoid the appearance of division. Therefore, adult education sessions actually tend to be held under the more ideal conditions of a mixed organization, where the participants are more likely to be diverse.

In both models, the more clergy speak out on politics, the more adult education sessions the church holds. These consistent, strong effects highlight the importance of a clergyperson's agenda (Djupe & Gilbert, 2003; Guth et al., 1997; Neiheisel & Djupe, 2008) but in some ways belie a developmental process of building and sustaining a constituency willing and able to engage each other in earnest dialogue. That is, elites appear essential in initiating deliberative processes, but citizens must take up the call for elite efforts to take root.

Finally, in the ELCA/Episcopal Church model, we test one particularly important relationship with respect to clergy. When clergy believe that they have great potential to influence the views of congregation members, do they initiate more or fewer sessions? A rational actor model would posit the former because action is pointless without belief in its efficacy. However, the results suggest the opposite: Congregations with clergy who do not believe that they have the potential to influence their congregations actually host more adult education sessions. At the very least, the result tells us that clergy in this tradition do not intend for adult education to be an indoctrination session. The more important point is that these clergy consciously intend a more constructive democratic role for themselves, facilitating citizenship instead of dictating politics.

## The Rules of Engagement

Fortunately, we also have data to assess this very point in both practice and structure, having asked Ohio clergy a few questions about their role in adult education. From the results in Table 3, it is clear that some clergy allow themselves a direct role—A third played the neutral moderator, whereas most probably remained more aloof. Those who did not involve themselves as moderators are also unlikely to get involved to make sure the right values are promoted in adult education (the two are strongly correlated:  $r = .555$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $n = 40$ ). Fortunately, very few frequently get involved to sanction particular views—A strong majority (60%) report rarely or never doing so. It is also fairly rare that these clergy invite a guest lecturer into their congregations; less than a quarter do it often, though higher-status churches are more likely to do it (as they can afford it). Beyond being interesting, these percentages are relevant to our story as guest lecturers may bring a gloss of expertise that can impede the free flow of ideas (Button & Mattson, 1999; though see Walsh, 2007).

We also asked about the degree to which clergy install deliberative norms into the structure of adult education sessions; overwhelming majorities reported doing so.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, 80% agreed or strongly agreed (henceforth we combine these into agreed) that participants are explicitly encouraged to consider the opinions of others; just under three fifths reported agreeing that it is essential for everyone to participate, and three quarters indicated that a range of views are presented (and not just available). It was almost unanimous among the sampled clergy (>90%) that “it is important that participants learn how to talk through their differences in opinion.”

At the same time, there was hearty support for the notion that adult education would instill “our values” (Table 3, bottom). Of course, one of the essential purposes of a deliberative forum is to connect values to policy (with the hope that the values are first collectively derived before policy commitments are made). That may indeed be the case here, but the sentiment also acknowledges the reality that social influence is potent, and that a number of forces may come to bear on dissenters. By and large, however, we find overwhelming support for and employment of the norms that political theorists have specified as essential for deliberation to occur: equal participation, the presentation of a range of perspectives, and real deliberative discussion.

As a final test on this point, in a further analysis with an index composed of the five norms listed in the bottom portion of Table 3 ( $\alpha = .753$ ), we observed no differences of means according to the structure or resources of the Ohio congregations. There are, however, expected differences

**Table 3**  
**Deliberative Values for and Select Practices in Adult Education Sessions**

How Often Did the Following Happen in Adult Education in the Past Year (2006)?	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely or Never
I served as a neutral moderator.	9.8	24.4	22.0	44.9
I sometimes participated to ensure the forum participants promote the right values.	4.9	4.9	29.3	61.0
We invited a guest lecturer.	4.7	18.6	37.2	39.6
Do You Agree or Disagree With the Following Statements?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
We explicitly encourage participants to think seriously about the opinions of others.	20.0	62.2	13.3	4.4
It is essential that all those present participate.	7.3	51.2	24.4	17.1
It is essential that a range of views are presented.	7.0	69.8	18.6	4.7
It is essential for participants to learn how our values relate to social/political issues.	34.1	45.5	13.6	6.8
It is important for participants to learn how to talk through their differences in opinion.	20.9	69.8	4.7	4.6

Source: 2007 Ohio Churches Survey ( $N \sim 43$ ).

between evangelicals and mainline Protestants, with the former showing less support for deliberative norms (the difference is significant, but not large). Importantly, clergy in congregations with higher rates of participation in church small groups demonstrated a greater commitment to deliberative norms. In essence, we find that churches that offer adult education sessions are supportive of deliberative norms, with only minor variation by religious tradition.

### Supply Side Explorations: Who Shows Up

Of course, who attends these sessions is just as important as the structure of the sessions. That is, although organizers may hope that diverse views are represented in these gatherings, the true test is on the ground. If participants in adult education are distinctive—and especially more homogenous—samples of the congregation, then deliberation is precluded regardless of any structural commitment to deliberative norms. To explore this crucial point regarding the distribution of adult education attendees, we use the ELCA/Episcopal Church data set, which asked about adult education participation (as well as about religiosity, political opinions on a host of issues, and comparisons with other congregation members). In our first

**Table 4**  
**Difference of Means Tests for Deviations From the Mean for**  
**Adult Education Participants and Nonparticipants**

Deviations From Church Means	Nonparticipant	Participant	<i>p</i>	Difference in Means as a Proportion of the Range
Government should do less	0.866	0.865	.972	.000
Environmental protection not needed	0.795	0.704	.006	.023
Abortion should be restricted	1.021	0.942	.055	.020
Gay rights should not be equal	0.914	0.828	.020	.021
Partisanship	1.819	1.901	.169	.014
Ideology	0.626	0.692	.051	.017
Political interest	1.135	1.054	.024	.016
Education	0.920	0.905	.647	.004
Religious commitment	1.303	1.750	.000	.075
Similarity to congregation	0.233	0.218	.086	.015

Source: 1998-1999 National Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Episcopal Church Study (*n* ~ 972 nonparticipants, *n* ~ 391 participants).

test, we compare average deviations from the church mean on political issues (and other variables of interest) for those who did and did not participate in adult education sessions (see Table 4). This test gives us a sense of the breadth of the political and religious spectrum present in adult education sessions—the raw material of deliberation.

As Table 4 demonstrates, most of the indicators tested between participants and nonparticipants are in fact statistically distinguishable. However, the pattern varies by indicator. For instance, the mean deviation is greater among nonparticipants on environmental protection and abortion opinions, but it is greater among participants on partisanship and ideology (though it is only significant for ideology). Participants have a more constrained (less variance) but greater political interest level (higher mean), a much wider range of religious commitment, and a bit less deviation in their ratings of similarity to the congregation.

To get a sense of the magnitude of these differences, the differences in means are divided by the variables' ranges and reported in the final column of Table 4. Although participants and nonparticipants are statistically distinguishable on many items, the substantive differences are actually quite small. In fact, for all but one item the proportion remains below .03; the exception is religious commitment, where the difference in means

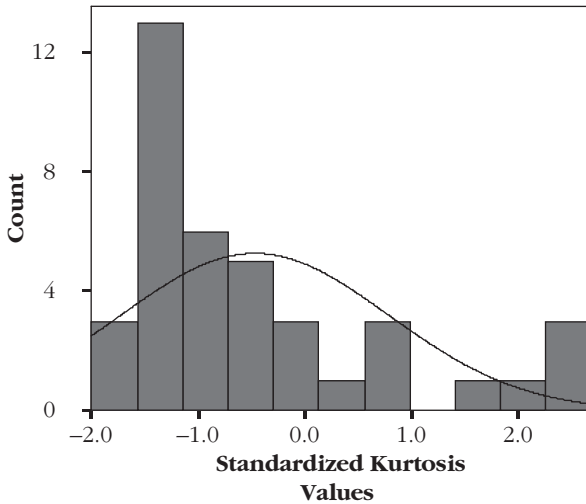
accounts for 7.5% of the variable's range. This larger difference indicates that people with greater connections to their church are somewhat more attracted to adult education sessions. Again, however, the take-away point from this analysis is that participants and nonparticipants in small group sessions are indistinguishable in terms of the resources that they bring to such activities (i.e., formal education) and differ only slightly, on average, in terms of their similarities to the congregation.

Although we are encouraged by these results, we are still concerned about the distributions of opinion within these small groups, as the particular shapes matter considerably for deliberative practice. Specifically, a normal distribution is not the optimal one for an interactive forum, as the concentration of participants at any point suggests imbalance and the potential for weight to be given to particular preferences. Thus, peakedness is something to avoid in truly deliberative democratic settings. Rather, such forums may represent views more optimally when they have a platykurtic, that is, flat distribution. Accordingly, this means that one distributional characteristic, kurtosis—which compares the peakedness of the curve to the normal curve—is worth exploring in some detail.

In Figure 1, we present kurtosis statistics (standardized by dividing by the standard error) for the partisanship of adult education participants for each of the churches in the ELCA/Episcopal Church data set ( $n = 51$ ). Positive kurtosis suggests peakedness, although negative kurtosis indicates a flatter and, in this case, more desirable curve. Kurtosis values greater than  $\pm 1.96$  suggest a significant departure from normality. The average kurtosis statistic is  $-0.47$ ; none of the churches have a significant negative kurtosis value and a handful have significant, positive kurtosis statistics. The distribution of kurtosis statistics (see Figure 1) is significantly skewed left—The skew statistic for this distribution of kurtosis statistics is roughly 3.5 times its standard error. That is, our data inside adult education sessions, inside churches, tells us that most church distributions of small group participants are indistinguishable from normal but are generally somewhat flatter than normal.

However, are adult education participants representative of the congregations from which they emerge, or are they distinctive subsets? Continuing with our examination of small group distributions, in Figure 2 we assess whether adult education samples are more peaked than nonparticipant subsets. Using a simple scatterplot, standardized kurtosis values for participants are plotted against that for nonparticipants. We care whether the kurtosis statistics are more consistently negative for the congregation versus adult education participants; this would suggest that deliberation is less likely to occur in adult education sessions. Fortunately, we observe a cloud of points with a

**Figure 1**  
**Histogram of the Distribution of Standardized Kurtosis Statistics of Adult Education Participants in Sample Churches**



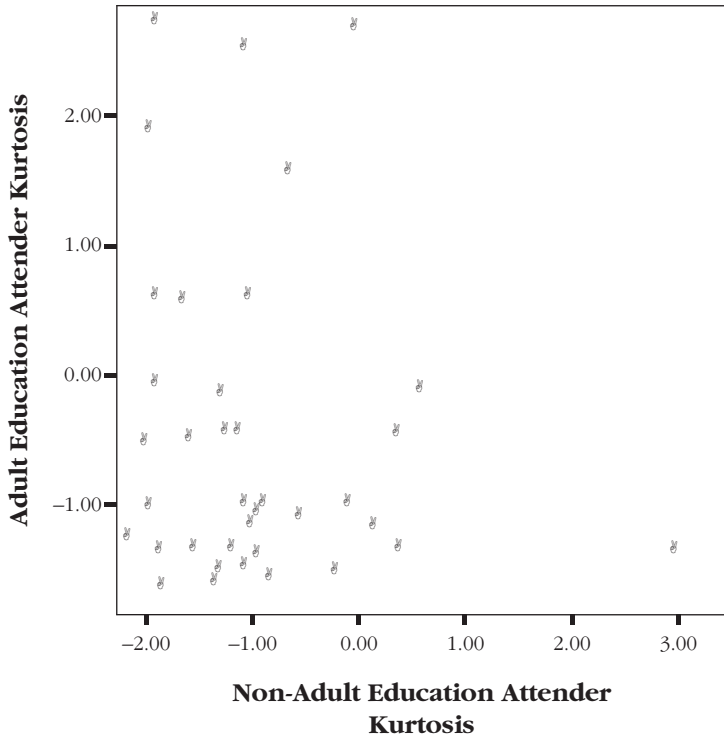
Source: 1998-1999 National Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Episcopal Church Study ( $N = 39$ ).

few outliers—that is, a classic zero correlation ( $r = -.045$ , minus the bottom right outlier; the correlation is not close to statistical significance).

Finally, Figure 3 helps us assess more systematically whether the partisanship distributions for adult education participants and nonparticipants are different within our sample of ELCA/Episcopal churches. The figure presents the distribution of  $p$  values for the Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K-S) test, which reports whether the distributions of the two samples are different (it does not concern kurtosis specifically). Overall, only 15% of the  $p$  values are below the generous statistical standard of  $p = .2$ , and most of the values denote nothing close to statistical significance (note the clustering of values toward the right where  $p = .1$ ). That is, we find strong evidence that adult education, in most churches, attracts a cross section of the congregation.

In addition, we compared the peakedness of adult education participants to nonparticipants for each church (standardized kurtosis of participants minus the standardized kurtosis of nonparticipants) to see whether anything

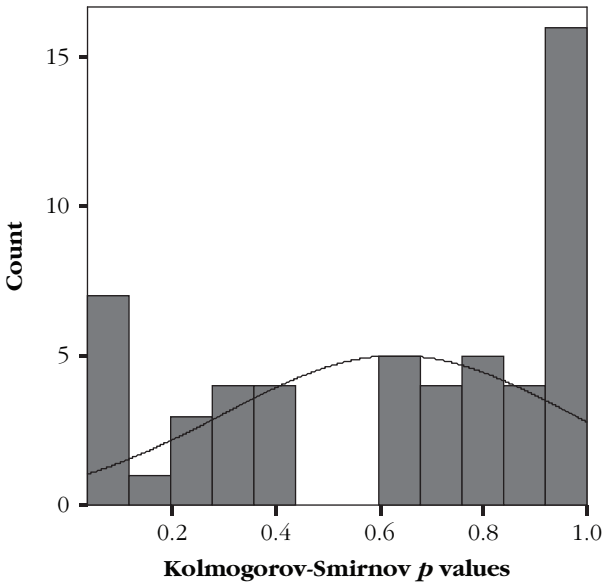
**Figure 2**  
**Scatter of Standardized Kurtosis Values for Adult Education Participants Versus Nonparticipants in Each Church**



Source: 1998-1999 National Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Episcopal Church Study.

helped to systematically flatten the partisan distribution of participants (results not shown). There are very few significant correlations because of the low sample size ( $n = 38$ ), but several were covered by a generous  $p < .1$  standard (one-tailed test). The results indicate that the distribution is flatter when (a) more of the congregation is involved in the life of the church (through small groups, adult education, and practicing civic skills in church), (b) when congregants rank higher and are more diverse in their religiosity, and (c) when they are more Republican (which tends to mean a less overtly political church in the ELCA/Episcopal sample). In the absence

**Figure 3**  
**Histogram of the Distribution of Kolmogorov–Smirnov Significance Values Comparing the Partisanship of Adult Education Participants and Nonparticipants in Sample Churches**



Source: 1998-1999 National Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Episcopal Church Study ( $N = 51$ ).

of these connections, we might infer that political calculations attend the decision to participate in political adult education sessions, bringing a more alpine partisan distribution to adult education. Essentially, greater commitment to the primary purpose of a nonpolitical organization brings in a wider selection of people to engage a political topic and augments the possibility of a deliberative encounter.

One might well wonder if these results concerning the distributions of opinion within adult education sessions are limited to the mainline. Although we do not have data to answer this question authoritatively, there are churches in the ELCA/Episcopal Church sample that identify with a movement outside of the mainline. In fact, about a third of clergy in the total sample (44% in the ELCA, 22 in the Episcopal Church) indicated that evangelical describes their religious views very well. These clergy are more

religiously orthodox, and their congregants have a more literal view of the Bible (though very few are ardent literalists). Therefore, these congregations may provide a rough approximation of how evangelical Protestant churches might look.

Importantly, we find that these churches mirror our findings concerning evangelicals from the Ohio data—On average, they are more conservative and offer fewer adult education opportunities. However, the relative skewness and kurtosis of adult education participation in these churches is no different than that in their fellow mainline congregations. As noted above, it is possible that because these evangelical-like churches tend to be less political they may actually have adult education populations that are more representative of the rest of their congregations.

## Adult Education in Two Evangelical Churches

Although self-reported survey results are useful measures, data from direct observation is always a welcome complement. Thus, to generate more confidence in our understanding of the distribution of deliberative norms in church small groups, to test our ideas across denominational lines, and to assess the validity of our clergy/group leadership measures, we searched for deliberative practice in the very place that conventional wisdom would suggest it should be relatively unlikely to exist: evangelical churches. Over the course of several months in early 2008, we conducted structured participant observations in two different evangelical churches in Madison, Wisconsin—A locale chosen in part because one of the pioneering studies of church small groups was also conducted in this city (Apps, 1972). Most typologies would place the two observed churches on the far right in terms of their theological beliefs and political views, and in many respects these churches did reinforce commonly held conceptions of the typical evangelical church.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, both churches strove to be all things to all people, with a number of different activities going on at all times. One church was formerly a megachurch, but dwindling numbers had reduced the size of the congregation considerably, making the large sanctuary hall an odd sight with rows of pews empty on Sunday mornings. Adult education classes, however, were very well-attended.

On average, about 30 people a week came to the classes in each of the two churches, and these were held in one of a number of classrooms immediately after the first service of the day.<sup>9</sup> Classes were heavily concentrated

on scripture (as one might expect in an evangelical church), though these discussions dovetailed nicely with the day's sermon. This dynamic was repeated time and time again, and suggests a necessary condition for deliberation, as one key component is that discussion be sustained.

## **Inside the Sessions**

The adult education classes in the first church were often run like lectures, with the group leader doing a fair amount of the talking. Though the sessions were more structured than anticipated, participants were always free to ask questions, to interject with their own ideas about the lesson's meaning, and to even disagree with the group leader, which many did. We found the level of observable disagreement interesting, though perhaps not entirely unexpected, given clergy's responses in our Ohio data. In terms of thematic content, an analysis of the church's lesson notes from 7 weeks of adult education classes revealed that in 4 of the weeks a segment of time was explicitly dedicated to open discussion about the week's topic. Although many of these discussions were focused on the scriptures, other topics included issues of professional versus lay control of the church, egalitarian versus complementarian relationships between men and women, and the racial composition of the congregation. Issues of sexual identity, war, and immigration were also discussed, though to a lesser extent.

All in all, the amount of political discussion in this particular evangelical church was not overwhelming, and there were several points at which this particular church's adult education classes did not meet the deliberative standards that we set out to observe (Appendix B lists our structured observation checklist). In particular, the group's leader often held a great deal of agenda control over the discussions, thereby confirming the worries of some scholars who have argued that the presence of elites can be problematic in deliberative forums (e.g., Button & Mattson, 1999; though see Walsh, 2007).

There were some similarities in the second church that we observed, as the group leader again did much of the talking. In contrast to our other experience, however, this leader often submitted a number of competing viewpoints on the issue under discussion, urging group participants to then consider these positions on their own. One particularly memorable adult education class dealt with a presumably divisive topic: whether the United States is a Christian nation. Although we fully expected to see the group leader push a particular perspective on the matter, instead he admitted that he did not know the answer to the question before promptly handing out

reading guides listing books on both sides of the debate. Likewise, in that same session he invited a local politician (and member of the congregation) to speak for a few minutes but took a great deal of time to explain how it would be wrong for him to endorse this politician or the politician's views. All in all, although this group leader did a good deal of the talking, we found that he also did much to take on the role of a real moderator, consistently organizing and providing information without advocating a cause or position. Importantly, we got the same sense with respect to the church's clergy, as sermons facilitated a noticeably conservative yet nondogmatic atmosphere.

These two evangelical churches provide us with mixed evidence, with one church offering support for our argument and evidence, and the other suggesting that clergy and other leaders within some churches frequently sidestep deliberative democratic norms. Across both institutions, a number of the ideal conditions emphasized by theorists were present in the observed adult education classes, though quite a few were not.

In the end, then, between our survey data and in-church observations, we find more to like than fear in church-based groups. After all, it would be simply unreasonable to expect any deliberating group to meet all of the idealized conditions during every encounter. Though there is tremendous variation within religious traditions and even churches from week to week, even in evangelical churches participants in adult education classes often gain exposure to a variety of different perspectives on politically salient issues, are free to disagree with group leadership, and are frequently reintroduced to issues that they have encountered elsewhere.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Most previous studies, to the extent that they touch on diversity in churches at all, assume or claim unity (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Scheufele et al., 2003; Sunstein, 2002). Mutz (2006), for instance, finds that discussion partners connected through church are the least likely to have different views (see also Mutz & Mondak, 2006), and under this condition, deliberation of anything approaching an ideal form is simply not possible in houses of worship. Sunstein also shares such a view of the discussions that take place in church, suggesting that "such organizations tend to strengthen group members' religious convictions, *simply by virtue of the fact that like-minded people are talking to one another*" (2002, p. 183, italics added). However, inspiring this work, Djupe and Neiheisel (2008) procured water

from what most consider a stone, finding many clergy modeling an approximation of the deliberative process for their congregations.

In this article, we expand well beyond constructed social networks to look inside church small groups, finding—in a plurality of churches—the conditions that support the serious engagement of political ideas. We identified adult education sessions as a likely source for that engagement and then dug through the contexts in which they are hosted, the rules under which they are run, and the distributions of those who attend them. Our survey instruments and our own eyes and ears give us at least some measures of the actual interaction processes taking place in these groups (also see Coffin, 2005).

We found evidence to suggest that churches hold real deliberative potential. However, we note that this potential is partly circumscribed by forces that cannot be overlooked, such as the education level of the congregation, which dilute the societal impact of church-sponsored deliberation. That is, higher-status churches tend to sponsor adult education. In addition, we uncovered some agenda control by church elites.

However, in those churches that do offer adult education, sessions often entertain a variety of topics beyond the analysis of religious texts, and most clergy are not taking it on themselves to reinforce a certain viewpoint via these gatherings. Although our structured observation sessions in evangelical houses of worship reminded us that not all clergy are neutral moderators (the survey data also show variance on this front), our other empirics suggest that religious leaders seem to be filling a positive role by promoting discussion, encouraging participants to consider the views of others, and helping to ensure that all group members have an equal chance to voice their opinions. Critically, our observations suggest the widespread employment of deliberative norms in religious organizations that offer adult education sessions—These norms cross denominational divides and extend well beyond the mainline and the Catholic church (see also Shields, 2007).

More importantly, our models answer questions about the selection processes tied to participation in these groups; they appear to be a far cry from the isolated enclaves of like-minded individuals who have been the subject of much hand-wringing among theorists. In fact, these groups tend to be offered in churches where partisan diversity reigns. However, adult education is less common in politically unified churches and in those in which clergy perceive a great deal of influence. Thus, taking measurements of the diversity of churches and of deference to clergy strike us as essential questions for scholars pursuing research in this vein.

On a final note, it is worth mentioning how our results bear on the study of social influence, which has moved from the consideration of contexts to social networks, in part because of the methodological problems that are avoided in doing so (see Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004, pp. 17-19 and Zuckerman, 2005, for a review). However, abandoning the small group for the network is problematic for many reasons pointed out here and elsewhere (Mendelberg, 2005). Formally structured groups bring together a greater diversity of individuals than do self-constructed networks, and such bodies are able to establish and enforce norms that are imperfectly established or generally evaded in discussion dyads. If gauging democratic aptitude is of great concern, we suggest that more progress may come from considering individuals' involvement with groups and their informal interpersonal interactions in tandem.

At the same time, the import of our findings is profound for understanding the place of religion in American public and political life. America's civil religion is typically conceptualized as a set of ideas above American government to be used as a guide and rubric (Bellah, 1967). The constitution establishes this pattern: Religion may function freely without state control and without the power of the state to promote its vitality. In this vision, the role of churches is to form preferences outside of state control to hold the state accountable. However, our work here suggests another role for churches that might be called religious civility, in which churches act in the service of democratic capacity. Clearly, a good number of religious leaders have reserved a much more nuanced democratic role for themselves than school master. Instead, they have an abiding belief in the power of engagement with others to encourage mature citizenship. In few other non-political organizations is politics such a frequent guest, and rarely is such care taken to encourage serious, respectful discussion of the ends and means of public life.

## Appendix A

### Variable Coding

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- Church size: The number of adult members of the congregation, logged.
- Church activity: About what percentage of adult members are active in the church beyond attending weekly services in any activity (governing boards, small groups, programs, etc.)?
- Church social class: Would you say that members of your congregation are primarily (1) *working class*, (2) *lower-middle class*, (3) *middle class*, (4) *upper-middle class*, (5) *upper class*.
- Church political disunity: Would you say that your congregation is politically united, that members agree on political issues? (1) *politically united*, (2) *somewhat united*, (3) *somewhat divided*, (4) *politically divided*.
- Clergy views versus congregation's: How would you compare your own views on political issues with congregation members' views? (1) *about the same*, (2) *mine somewhat more liberal/conservative*, (3) *mine much more liberal/conservative*.
- Clergy political speech (Ohio data): An averaged additive index ranging from 1 to 5 from the following question: How often did you address the following issues publicly in any way during the fall of 2006? national security/war on terrorism, religious expression in public, minimum wage, immigrants/immigration, ethical scandals in Congress, global warming, environmental stewardship, abortion, gay rights/homosexuality, health care/health insurance, war in Iraq, state of the economy. Each is coded 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *seldom*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *very often*.
- Clergy political speech (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA]/Episcopal): An averaged additive index coded as above, but including these issues: hunger and poverty, environment, education, civil rights, women's issues, unemployment/economy, gay rights, government spending/deficits, family problems, gambling laws, homosexuality, current political scandals, capital punishment, abortion, prayer in public schools, national defense.
- Clergy have influential capacity: Ministers have great capacity to influence the political and social views of their congregation. 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*.
- Mainline Protestant: Coded to include American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, ELCA, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Unitarian-Universalist, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church.
- Evangelical Protestant: Coded to include all other Baptists, Churches of Christ, nondenominational churches, and many other smaller denominations.
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## **Appendix B**

### **Checklist for Guided Observation of Church Small Groups and Adult Education Classes**

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1. Are the meetings open to the public? Are church small group meetings advertised in any way?
  2. Does a general consensus form around the issue(s) being discussed, or do participants make up their minds individually? Does the group move toward a decision on the issue together?
  3. Are specific procedures followed—certain rules of order?
  4. Do small group attendees have an equal opportunity to participate?
  5. Do decisions turn on arguments, not coercive power?
  6. Are multiple viewpoints considered? Do people listen to one another?
  7. Is there an exchange of information?
  8. Are the discussions that take place in church small groups carried over at all into other aspects of the church? For instance, are the topics dealt within group sessions often discussed informally as well? Do clergy speak to the same issues from the pulpit?
  9. Do these small groups meet on a regular basis?
  10. How many people typically attend such groups?
  11. Provided that the group is not gender specific (i.e., a men's group), are there roughly even numbers of men and women in attendance?
    - (a) On this same note, are people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds represented in the group?
    - (b) Do men participate more than women? Are those in the racial or ethnic majority more likely to talk than those in the minority?
  12. Are the arguments introduced based on general principles and appeal to the common good, not exclusively to self-interest? Do participants voice rational reasons for their preferences?
  13. Does anyone make statements that are impassioned or extreme in nature?
  14. If there is a group leader, what is his or her role? Does he or she serve as a neutral moderator and help to keep the discussion open, or does he or she push the discussion in a certain direction at the expense of some viewpoints? What role do clergy play in these groups? Are the groups led by clergy?
  15. Are guest speakers ever present at these small groups?
-

## Notes

1. We use the word church as a shorthand for the more inclusive, but awkward, houses of worship and do not mean to suggest that our discussion applies only to Christians.

2. In discussing previous studies, Vogel notes that roughly 31.3% of 1955 adult education participants “were involved in education programs sponsored by religious institutions.” In 1981, another study indicated that this trend had continued, estimating “that 25 to 50 percent of all adult church members are generally enrolled in church-sponsored classes” (1984, p. 32; also see Gorman, 1993, and Long, 1973).

3. We acknowledge that this comparison is somewhat inexact as we are comparing proportions of adherents in Ohio (from the church census) to the proportion of churches in our sample, so to the extent that church sizes are different we are comparing apples to oranges. Nevertheless, in at least one sense, the comparison suggests that we have a representative sample.

4. The sample also has a poor representation of Black churches (those churches with a substantial number of Black members in any religious tradition or churches in historically Black Protestant denominations). This has been a problem nationwide; in fact, historically, Black denominations elected not to participate in the 2000 church census. Moreover, response rates to sample surveys remain abysmal among Black clergy (e.g., McDaniel, 2003), necessitating heroic efforts (Smith, 2003, pp. 293-294).

5. Djupe and Gilbert surveyed a random sample of 3,000, each of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Episcopal Church clergy; the resulting clergy data set has 1,400 ELCA pastors (47% response rate) and 930 Episcopal priests (31% response rate). To gain a church member sample, Djupe and Gilbert contacted a sample of clergy respondents for their church membership lists and, in the end, surveyed samples from 60 church lists to net 1,050 ELCA (30% response rate) and 550 Episcopal church members (25% response rate).

6. To illustrate, the top issues ELCA/Episcopal Church congregation members reported attending concerned, in rank order, (a) hunger and poverty, (b) family problems, (c) denominational issues, and (d) a specific denominational issue (full communion between the two denominations, which was eventually adopted).

7. Whether clergy honestly and accurately report their behavior in these settings is a legitimate question, as one could imagine it being socially desirable to overreport the democratic moderation of adult education sessions. Though there is surely some inaccuracy in clergy reports, on the whole, we have little reason to suspect that our measures are invalid, and our structured observations sessions provide evidence to this point. We discuss this in greater detail in the penultimate section.

8. For instance, sermons tended to reflect a sense of isolation from the surrounding community and were often cast in terms of personal sin and redemption.

9. Both churches also host a variety of small groups that, according to many of the participants we talked to, were more discussion centered. Unfortunately, these participants were hesitant to let us observe these small group meetings, as they believed that the presence of outsiders would throw off the dynamic that they had worked so hard to cultivate. We can only speculate as to whether these closed groups are more or less deliberative (Fishkin, 1995).

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