

THE POWER OF THE PULPIT: A LOOK AT HOW  
CHURCH LEADERS DISCUSS POLITICAL  
ISSUES AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of Political Science

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas

May 2, 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Are church leaders still relevant in politics? How do church leaders discuss political issues in their sermons? These are the two questions this study addresses as part of the broader literature of the influence of church leaders on their congregations. This study seeks to fill the hole in the literature surround the topic in that the current literature is lacking in regards to what church leaders say from the pulpit and what their role is in regards to political activism.

This study begins with an overview of the literature surrounding the topic of the influence of church leaders on their congregations and political activism in churches. Hypotheses are then presented and a research design that tests these hypotheses will be discussed. Elite interviewing was determined to be the best method to study the topic, and as such, interviews were conducted with several church leaders in the area. The findings of the research are then presented and analyzed as they pertain to each hypothesis. The findings determine that the ideology of church leaders is irrelevant to how they see their role in regards to political activism, that the calendar set forth by the church does not affect the discussion of political issues in sermons, and that the church leaders analyzed would not endorse a political candidate. Following that analysis, further analysis takes place of the remaining data gathered from the research that does not pertain to an individual hypothesis. This analysis pertains to the discussion of abortion in sermons, as well as other issues. Finally, the conclusion proves that church leaders are relevant in politics. This study provides the basis to fill a hole in the literature surrounding how church leaders discuss political issues in their sermons.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, who supported me throughout this process and provided the strength to finish this paper. I would also like to thank the church leaders who voluntarily agreed to take part in this study. Without the participation of these individuals, this study would not have been possible.

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**Table 1-1**

Leader	Abortion	Same-Sex Marriage	Prayer in School
Baptist Minister	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative
Catholic Priest #1	Conservative	Conservative	Liberal
Catholic Priest #2	Conservative	Conservative	Not discussed
Lutheran Minister	Conservative	Liberal	Liberal
Methodist Minister	Not discussed	Not discussed	Liberal
Non-denominational Minister #1	Conservative	Conservative	Liberal
Non-denominational Minister #2	Conservative	Conservative	Liberal
Presbyterian Minister	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal

**Table 1-2**

Level	Description
0	No Discussion
1	Voter Participation
2	Guidance Facilitator
3	Voter Guide/Candidate Speech

**Table 1-3**

Leader	Activism Role Level
Baptist Minister	3
Catholic Priest #1	2
Catholic Priest #2	1
Lutheran Minister	1
Methodist Minister	2
Non-denominational Minister #1	2
Non-denominational Minister #2	1
Presbyterian Minister	2

**Table 2-1**

Leader	Endorsing a Candidate
Baptist Minister	No
Catholic Priest #1	No
Catholic Priest #2	No
Lutheran Minister	No
Methodist Minister	No
Non-denominational Minister #1	No
Non-denominational Minister #2	No
Presbyterian Minister	No

**Table 3-1**

Leader	Calendar Effect
Catholic Priest #1	Readings cannot be changed, but little effect
Catholic Priest #2	Readings cannot be changed, but little effect
Lutheran Minister	Readings cannot be changed, but little effect
Presbyterian Minister	Readings can be changed to fit sermon

**Table 3-2**

Leader	Calendar Effect
Baptist Minister	No Effect
Non-denominational minister #1	No Effect
Non-denominational minister #2	No Effect
Methodist Minister	No Effect

**Table 3-3**

Leader	Change sermon for political issue
Baptist Minister	Yes
Catholic Priest #1	Yes
Catholic Priest #2	Yes
Lutheran Minister	Yes
Methodist Minister	Yes
Non-denominational Minister #1	Yes
Non-denominational Minister #2	No
Presbyterian Minister	Yes

**Image 1-1**



**Image 1-2**

## INTRODUCTION

The study of the influence of church leaders on their congregations is the basis by which the relevance of church leaders in politics is analyzed. Historically, church leaders have had the ability to influence politics by rallying their congregations to support political causes, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. This influence has led politicians to account for church leaders in political campaigns and movements, and as such, it is important to continue to analyze this relevance. Are church leaders still relevant in politics? This question is the puzzle this study will contribute to solving.

The influence of church leaders on their congregations begins with the sermon and preaching from the pulpit. The pulpit is more than a podium, alter or stage in that it carries a great deal of influence in its own right. It is placed at the front or the center of the church, with the congregation facing it, to highlight the importance of the pulpit. As such, individuals that speak from the pulpit carry the weight of that influence. Church leaders use this influence to convey the teachings of their church to their congregation. As such, what they say from the pulpit is essential to determining the influence they have on their congregations. The question of how church leaders discuss political issues from the pulpit is fundamental for the analysis of this influence and furthermore, the analysis of the relevance of church leaders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is considerable research found in regards to the relationship between religion and politics, within Christianity, much of the research is focused on Catholicism and historically African American churches. Leonard Gadsekpo's *The Black Church, the*

*Civil Rights Movement, and the Future*<sup>1</sup> asserts that historically, black churches were founded as a result of civil rights injustices by mainstream white churches and as such, political activism and civil rights are at the heart of the congregations of black churches. Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell further discusses this in her work *Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics*<sup>2</sup>. Harris-Lacewell makes the case that politicians have found that black churches provide the resources for their congregations to become politically involved and organized. As such, many politicians began to reach out to church leaders for political support or affirmation of their stances on issues. It is works such as these that represent the bulk of the literature surrounding the relationship between religion and politics.

While initially the intersect between faith and politics revolved around civil rights, there has been a shift in topics discussed. Kathleen Murphy Beatty and Oliver Walter discuss this shift in their work, *A Group Theory of Religion and Politics: The Clergy as Group Leaders*<sup>3</sup>. Beatty and Walter claim that there has been a shift from civil rights to social morality. Furthermore, they claim that people translate their religion into politics as a group led by clergy.

Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, the Catholic Church had largely been complacent with an inactive role in American government due to the Catholic Church being able to run schools, hospitals and charitable organizations with some government assistance, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Gadsekpo, Leonard. 1997. "The Black Church, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Future." *Journal of Religious Thought*. Vol: 53 (2): 95-113.

<sup>2</sup> Harris-Lacewell, Melissa V. 2007. "Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics." *Cross Currents*. Vol: 57 (2): 180-196.

<sup>3</sup> Beatty, Kathleen and Oliver Walter. 1989. "A Group Theory of Religion and Politics: The Clergy as Group Leaders." *Political Research Quarterly*. Vol: 42 (1): 129-146.

funding textbooks due to *Cochran v. Louisiana*. These services were not altered following *Roe v. Wade*, but the case marked a turning point in that it was a major political loss for the Catholic Church. This sparked a response among the Catholic leadership, particularly the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Jo Renee Formicola discusses this in *Catholic Moral Demands in American Politics: A New Paradigm*<sup>4</sup>. Formicola's research shows how Catholic Bishops began organizing pro-life activities. This initial push focused on education and support for pregnant women, but quickly became a push for overall political involvement. Formicola also points out that the rise to power of Pope John Paul II brought global support to American Bishops due to the new Pope advocating for Catholic political involvement. This advocacy from the Pope came from a belief that a moral culture was the result of a strong democracy. Formicola's research even includes Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, also known as Pope Benedict XVI, who at the time claimed that political participation, more specifically voting, was a moral obligation. Formicola's research also discusses how Catholic leaders frame their political opinions. Catholic Church leaders have a broad political platform that is advocated by the Church. Rather than advocating for particular issues, Catholic Church leaders have sought to advocate for a moral platform. Mary T. Hanna also discusses this in her work *Catholics and American Politics*<sup>5</sup>, which showed that instead of pursuing strictly the issue of abortion, Catholic Church leaders were advocating for a respect for life platform rather than discussing each issue individually. This also sheds light on the diversity of the Catholic population in that some individuals may agree with parts of the platform but not

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<sup>4</sup> Formicola, Jo Renee. 2009. "Catholic Moral Demands in American Politics: A New Paradigm." *Journal of Church & State*. Vol. 51 (1): 4-23.

<sup>5</sup> Hanna, Mary. 1979. *Catholics and American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

all of it. Also, parts of the platform fall under the scope of both political parties. Catholic Churches also adhere to a strict liturgical calendar that determines what biblical readings are read each Sunday of the year. Every Catholic Church in the world follows the same calendar. Thus, political sermons have to somehow pertain to the readings assigned for that day, thus hindering when Catholic priests can discuss issues.

Due to Catholicism being a geographically widespread denomination, politicians at any level will most likely have Catholic constituents, but that does not necessarily translate to grassroots involvement. While the majority of Brian Robert Calfano's work *The Power of Brand: Beyond Interest Group Influence in U.S. State Abortion Politics*<sup>6</sup> focuses on the branding of the abortion issue by Catholics and White Evangelicals, his research points out two qualities that are relevant to this paper. Calfano discusses how there is a Catholic parish in virtually every congressional district in the United States. This forces every politician in the country to consider Catholic voters, and as such greatly increases the influence of a united Catholic body such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. However, Calfano points out that Catholic voters are homogenous in population or political ideology, thus hampering the effectiveness of Catholic parishioners. One of Calfano's major claims is that Catholic political issues are advanced through the institution of the Catholic Church, rather than through the parishioners. Calfano also discusses White Evangelical Christians during his research of the framing of abortion. He concludes that the homogeneity among White Evangelical Christians provides a consistent political opinion for politicians to understand and pursue. This

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<sup>6</sup> Calfano, Brian Robert. 2010. "The Power of Brand: Beyond Interest Group Influence in U.S. State Abortion Politics." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*. Vol: 10 (3): 227-247.

allows church leaders to not only coordinate political activities themselves, but create an environment where leadership in political activism is encouraged and taught through small groups of parishioners. Calfano further concludes in another work, *Choosing Constituent Cues: Reference Group Influence on Clergy Political Speech*<sup>7</sup>, that church leaders recognize their role as framers and motivators of political discussion, but their activity and approach to this role is dependent on their parishioners.

David E. Campbell's *Acts of Faith: Churches and Political Engagement*<sup>8</sup> compares Catholic and mainline protestant churches with evangelical protestant churches. According to Campbell, Catholic and mainline church members have more activity within the community while evangelical church members have more activity within the church. As a result of this, Campbell asserts that evangelical churches form a cohesive unit around the church and have the potential of becoming a political machine. There is an adverse effect found in the Catholic Church as discussed by Paul A. Djupe and Jacob Neiheisel in their work *How Religious Communities Affect Political Participation Among Latinos*<sup>9</sup>. Djupe and Neiheisel reach the conclusion that while individuals who identify as Catholic are more likely to participate in politics, the Catholic Church as an institution does not provide opportunities for their parishioners to develop leadership and political skills. This puts the duty of leading the political charge on the church leaders, in this case the Catholic priests, themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Calfano, Brian Robert. 2009. "Choosing Constituent Cues: Reference Group Influence on Clergy Political Speech." *Social Science Quarterly*. Vol: 90 (1): 88-102.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, David E. 2004. "Acts of Faith: Churches and Political Engagement." *Political Behavior*. Vol: 26 (2): 155-180.

<sup>9</sup> Djupe, Paul A. and Jacob Neiheisel. 2012. "How Religious Communities Affect Political Participation Among Latinos." *Social Science Quarterly*. Vol: 93 (2): 333-355.

Charles T. Mathewes points out in his work, *Reconsidering the Role of Mainline Churches in Public Life*<sup>10</sup>, that churches are a source of public space. Mathewes makes the case that one of the reasons political activism is high in churches is that public space for organizations to meet is scarce and as such, churches can open up their doors and provide an atmosphere for political organization. Political activism among non-Catholics is focused on providing opportunities for parishioners to become politically involved and leaders in the community. Non-Catholic churches do not have the same organizational structure as the Catholic Church, and as such, united political activism among Church elites is not as prevalent. This leads to church leaders focusing more on their congregations and encouraging political advocacy there rather than attempting to directly engage politicians with other church leaders.

As evident by the literature discussed, there is a plethora of research in the area of religion and politics, but the literature is limited in regards to what church leaders actually say and do from the pulpit. There is plenty of research regarding the Catholic Church, particularly during the 1980s, African American churches in general, and Evangelical churches. However, there is a significant lack of literature in regards to mainline churches and the Catholic church recently. Most of this literature discusses the influence of church leaders outside of the church, but this paper will study what church leaders say and do from the pulpit. That is where this study will fit into existing literature, in an attempt to answer some questions not answered by previous literature.

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<sup>10</sup> Mathewes, Charles T. 2002. "Reconsidering the Role of Mainline Churches in Public Life." *Theology Today*. Vol: 58 (4): 554-567.

## HYPOTHESES

1. Whether or not a church leader has liberal or conservative views on controversial issues will not correlate to how they approach discussing issues, nor how much they encourage political activism. There has not been significant evidence in the literature to suggest that particular political beliefs will influence a church leader's discussion of political issues.
2. If a church leader has a member of their congregation running for office, then they will not endorse that individual from the pulpit. Furthermore, all of the church leaders will stop short of endorsing any political candidate. This hypothesis stems from the idea that churches are tax-exempt entities and will most likely not be willing to endanger that by endorsing political candidates.
3. If a church leader is Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian, then they will be less likely to adjust their sermons to a current political event due to the strictness of their liturgical calendar. This hypothesis is due to Catholic, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches following a set liturgical calendar set forth by their governing bodies. While some other denominations, such as Methodism, have the option to follow a lectionary, or set liturgical calendar, the decision resides with the ministers themselves and as such it is unlikely to have any effect on current events.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

For discussing how church leaders go about discussing political issues in their sermons, elite interviewing was determined to be the most effective way to gather data. All of the participants were selected from the Fort Worth area and are currently in a role



within their church that allows them to preach on a regular basis. However, there are many downfalls to the methodology that must be accounted for.

The mode utilized for this research was elite interviewing. Elite interviewing involves interviewing members of a community that are specific to a particular rank or title. In this case, all interview participants are a church leader. For the purpose of this research, a church leader shall be defined as a priest or minister that preaches from the pulpit on a regular basis. Regular basis does not necessarily mean weekly sermons by the individual, but rather someone who is not unaccustomed to preaching multiple times a year. That is not to say that individuals cannot be church leaders without preaching, but for the purpose of this research, they will be in an attempt to analyze their communication. Each interview consisted of a battery of questions that was asked to each church leader, and the details of those questions will be discussed later. There are many positive and negative aspects of elite interviewing.

Elite interviewing allows the participants to fully express their responses to the questions without the constraints of a survey. If the participants were subject to a survey, they would have had to select answers from predetermined options that may or may not accurately reflect their views. If the survey would have been an open-response survey in that the participants would have been able to write out their responses, they may have shortened their response to fit in a particular space on a page, or there is an expectation for how long their response should. With an open-response interview, participants had the freedom to fully express their opinion without any constraints. This ability to speak openly allows the participant to thoroughly explain each response. Also, due to the nature of this study being about the subject of communication, verbal communication was

deemed the most reliable source of data in that it is the same form of communication that this research is studying.

While there are many positive aspects of elite interviewing, there are negative aspects that must be taken into account. While it is not true for all interviews, there is the possibility that participants will give responses that they believe the interviewer is looking for. To minimize this effect, the interviewer did not reveal any personal political opinions or religious affiliation prior to each interview. Any assumptions made as to the personal opinions of the interviewer by the participants may have come from an assessment of the interviewer's race, gender and university, but none of these assumptions were discussed or furthered by the interviewer. In regards to elite interviewing, there is also the concern that an interviewer may attempt to influence answers via verbal or nonverbal cues to a participant. The interviewer prepared for such attempts by taking the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's Humanities Responsible Conduct of Research course. The interviewer also refrained from any comments or motions during the interviews that were not pertaining to the questions or could be seen as prompting a particular response. One final negative aspect of elite interviewing is that the time required for each interview lessens the number of participants that can participate in the study. Due to financial and time constraints, hiring or enlisting an additional interviewer was not feasible. Had a different mode been chosen to conduct this research, more participants could have participated, but the data would not be as thorough.

The participants selected for the interviews were selected by proximity, diversity of affiliation, and availability and willingness to be interviewed. Initially, data from the

Association of Religion Data Archives was used to determine the dispersion of Texas citizens across different Christian denominations. From that data, ten interviews were to be established with two for each of the top four denominations, and one for two of the remaining denominations. That accounted for two interviews with ministers from the Baptist denomination, Roman Catholic, Non-denominational, and Methodist. There was to be one interview with a minister from the Assembly of God, and one from the Episcopal denomination. Unfortunately, upon completion of the a single Catholic priest interviews, a single Methodist minister interview, a single Baptist minister interview, and a single non-denominational minister interview, the interviewer became ill and interviews were cancelled. Upon recovery, an additional Catholic priest and non-denominational minister were able to be interviewed, but the remaining Baptist minister, Methodist minister, Assembly of God minister, and Episcopal minister were unable to be rescheduled. As such, interviews were conducted with a Presbyterian minister and a Lutheran minister to maintain diversity throughout denominations selected, proximity, and availability. Proximity was determined to be a factor in selecting the participants for two reasons. Firstly, the interviewer was confined to participant in the Fort Worth Area due to travel restrictions. Secondly, in an attempt to minimize the difference in populations of congregations, close proximity to Texas Christian University was emphasized. This attempt was made to minimize the effect of a church leader curtailing their answers due to the population they serve.

While attempts were made to gather a representative sample of church leaders, there are negative aspects of the selections made and potential conclusions that can be drawn. Firstly, the selected ministers cannot be claimed to represent the entire

denominations they are a part of. It is unreasonable for one to assume that a Methodist minister in Fort Worth, Texas will give the same answers and speak in the same fashion as a Methodist minister from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is partially due to diversity within the clergy of each denomination, but also due to the diversity of the populations they serve. While attempts were made to minimize the difference in the populations of each congregation with the hope of minimizing the effect of different populations, this limits the research to only discussing a single population. Also, due to the necessary adjustments to the selection of denominations for participants, some of the sample is simply a convenience sample.

The independent variables for this study are the church leaders themselves, while the dependent variable is the approach they take to discussing political issues in their sermons. Seeing as the independent variables are the church leaders themselves, none of the questions in the interviews specifically pertain to the independent variable. Therefore, all of the questions asked during the interviews pertain to the dependent variable.

The first question asked to the participants was three-fold. How do you go about encouraging political activism? Do you see yourself as a moral guide? Do you encourage voter participation? The purpose of these initial questions is to establish how each church leader sees their role in regards to politics. This questioning was used to determine the level of which each leader is willing to influence political decision making. A church leader who merely encourages voter participation will be considered the lowest level, with a moral guide being the next level. Finally, some church leaders go to the extent of allowing candidates to speak from the pulpit or print out a voter guide. A voter guide in this situation lists the candidates and their stance on specific issues. This will be

considered the highest level of political activism. This data will provide information to analyze the first and third hypotheses.

The second question asked to the participants was also three-fold. The participants were posed the following statement: Now I am going to ask you about three controversial issues and I would like to know what your church's stance is on each, if there is one, and how you discuss it, if you do. The three issues posed to the participants were abortion, same-sex marriage and organized prayer in school. These answers will help establish how each church leader feels about each political issue and how they go about discussing each issue. This, combined with the data from the first question set, will be able to answer the first hypothesis.

The third question pertains to the calendar of each denomination. This stems from certain denominations having specific readings assigned for each Sunday that are used throughout the entire denomination. The third question asked goes as follows: Now I am going to ask you about the calendar of your church. How is the calendar set up for your services, such as the readings and sermons? If there is a major political issue going on, such as a debate on abortion or legislation regarding same-sex marriage, do you alter the calendar to discuss the issue? If you cannot alter the calendar, do you discuss the issue? The answers to this set of questions will provide data to analyze the second hypothesis.

The fourth question is the final question. If a member of your congregation runs for office, what do you do, if anything? This question provides additional data for the first hypothesis, in that it can establish how far a church leader may go to support a candidate. It also provides data for the third hypothesis.

## FINDINGS

### Hypothesis 1

To analyze the data gathered to address the first hypothesis, two scales were developed. Due to the nature of this study, the scales were designed by the author. The scales are unique to this study due to the lack of precedence.

The first scale utilized is a conservative to liberal scale on the three areas discussed in the interviews. This scale was based off of traditional American politics ideologies. For the issue of the abortion, the conservative label was utilized to describe a minister or priest that described their view as pro-life, or against abortion, and the liberal label was utilized to describe a minister or priest that described their view as pro-choice, or in favor of the availability of abortion. On the issue of same-sex marriage, those

**Table 1-1**

Leader	Abortion	Same-Sex Marriage	Prayer in School
Baptist Minister	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative
Catholic Priest #1	Conservative	Conservative	Liberal
Catholic Priest #2	Conservative	Conservative	Not discussed
Lutheran Minister	Conservative	Liberal	Liberal
Methodist Minister	Not discussed	Not discussed	Liberal
Non-denominational Minister #1	Conservative	Conservative	Liberal
Non-denominational Minister #2	Conservative	Conservative	Liberal
Presbyterian Minister	Liberal	Liberal	Liberal

ministers identified as conservative described their position as in favor of traditional marriage, or opposed to the legal marriage of couples of the same sex. Those identified as having a liberal perception on same-sex marriage described their position as in favor of the legal marriage of couples of the same sex. The subject of school prayer was much

more difficult to identify as strictly conservative or liberal in that school prayer has not been a prevalent political issue in the past few years, so the line dividing conservative and liberal is somewhat blurred. While a viewpoint described as in favor of organized prayer in schools could certainly be described as the conservative perspective, those opposed to organized prayer in schools does not necessarily describe the liberal perspective. The liberal perspective could be described as someone who is opposed to all forms of organized prayer in school, or those in favor of a moment of silence. A moment of silence could also be described as a conservative perspective in that it allows individuals to pray privately. However, for the purpose of this study, a minister in favor of organized prayer in school will be described as having the more conservative perspective and a minister in favor of a moment of silence will be described as having the more liberal perspective. Finally, there were ministers who had not discussed some of the issues and as such, they had not articulated their position to their congregation. Table 1-1 articulates this scale, using the color red to denote a conservative perspective, blue for liberal, and purple if the issue is not discussed.

To further analyze the first hypothesis, a second scale was developed to codify the activism of the minister from the pulpit on controversial issues. Once again, there is not a

**Table 1-2**

Level	Description
0	No Discussion
1	Voter Participation
2	Guidance Facilitator
3	Voter Guide/Candidate Speech

precedent from previous research, so this scale is unique to this study. A level of activism was determined based on the answers of the respondents to the first set of questions in the interviews. A level of 0 was assigned to

respondents that did not discuss any political issues from the pulpit. A level of 1 was assigned to respondents that saw their role as encouraging voter participation, but rarely more than that. A level of 2 was assigned to respondents that saw their role as a guidance facilitator, one who ought to guide their congregation towards particular opinions on political issues based on the teachings of their denomination. Finally, a level of 3 was assigned to those ministers that saw their role including the printing of a voter guide or allowing a candidate to speak from their pulpit. A voter guide entails the publishing of a pamphlet that details the platforms of political candidates by describing where each candidate falls on particular issues, but stops short of calling for an individual to vote for a particular candidate. The idea is that the individual is to draw their own conclusions based off of the teachings of the church. Table 1-2 articulates this scale.

Finally, Table 1-1 and 1-2 are combined into Table 1-3 to analyze the first hypothesis. Each leader is codified by the color of the background of their cell based off of the political alignment of their responses to the second set of questions in the interviews. This does not necessarily reflect the overall political ideology of the leader or their denomination, but solely for the three areas discussed in the interviews. Different shades of red and blue were utilized to show the degree of which the minister falls into each ideology. For the case of the Methodist

**Table 1-3**

Leader	Activism Role Level
Baptist Minister	3
Catholic Priest #1	2
Catholic Priest #2	1
Lutheran Minister	1
Methodist Minister	2
Non-denominational Minister #1	2
Non-denominational Minister #2	1
Presbyterian Minister	2



minister, the minister was coded as purple due to the lack of discussion on two of the three controversial issues. The leader is then matched to their activism role level based on Table 1-2 and their responses to the first set of questions in the interview.

The first hypothesis can be addressed using Table 1-3. The first hypothesis contends that whether or not a church leader has liberal or conservative views on controversial issues will neither correlate to how they approach discussing issues, nor how they encourage political activism. The hypothesis is proven correct by the data, but further testing should be done to substantiate the claim. Due to the majority of the ministers surveyed maintaining a conservative ideology among the three issues discussed in the data, the data is lacking in diversity of opinion, thus hindering the strength of the claim. However, there is neither a correlation among those ministers that identified as having a liberal perspective on the three issues discussed and activism role level, with an average of 1.5, nor those that identified with the conservative perspective on the three issues discussed, with an average 1.8. Therefore, the first hypothesis is proven correct, but further research is necessary to substantiate the claim.

## Hypothesis 2

To analyze the data needed to discuss the second hypothesis, answers to the first and fourth set of questions will be analyzed. Respondents were asked about their perception of their role in regards to political activism, and how they would respond to an individual from their congregation running for office. Table 2-1 articulates whether or not the church leader would endorse a candidate.

The second hypothesis can be addressed using the data presented in Table 2-1.

The second hypothesis claimed that if a church leader has a member of their congregation running for office, then they will not endorse that individual from the pulpit. Furthermore, all of the church leaders will stop short of endorsing any political candidate. The second

**Table 2-1**

Leader	Endorsing a Candidate
Baptist Minister	No
Catholic Priest #1	No
Catholic Priest #2	No
Lutheran Minister	No
Methodist Minister	No
Non-denominational Minister #1	No
Non-denominational Minister #2	No
Presbyterian Minister	No

hypothesis was proven to be correct in that all of the church leaders specifically said in each interview that they would not tell their congregations to vote for a particular candidate from the pulpit, thus qualifying as an endorsement. Some respondents said they would potentially say who they were thinking about voting for in private conversations, but they would not use their role as a minister or any of the amenities that come with that role.

### Hypothesis 3

To analyze the data needed to discuss the third hypothesis, the answers to the third set of questions in the interviews must be presented. For the third hypothesis, the respondents were divided into two groups. The first group contains the two Catholic priests, the Lutheran minister, and the Presbyterian minister, based off of the large structure of these denominations. The Baptist minister, the two non-denominational ministers, and the Methodist minister were grouped into the second group, due to the lacking of a large structure, or a larger autonomy presented to ministers in those denominations. The church leaders' responses to the question regarding the calendar of their church were then codified into Table 3-1 and Table 3-2.

**Table 3-1**

Leader	Calendar Effect
Catholic Priest #1	Readings cannot be changed, but little effect
Catholic Priest #2	Readings cannot be changed, but little effect
Lutheran Minister	Readings cannot be changed, but little effect
Presbyterian Minister	Readings can be changed to fit sermon

**Table 3-2**

Leader	Calendar Effect
Baptist Minister	No Effect
Non-denominational minister #1	No Effect
Non-denominational minister #2	No Effect
Methodist Minister	No Effect

Using the respondents answer to the second part of the third set of questions, pertaining to whether or not the church leader would change their scheduled sermon to address a relevant political issue, Table 3-3 was created.

**Table 3-3**

Leader	Change sermon for political issue
Baptist Minister	Yes
Catholic Priest #1	Yes
Catholic Priest #2	Yes
Lutheran Minister	Yes
Methodist Minister	Yes
Non-denominational Minister #1	Yes
Non-denominational Minister #2	No
Presbyterian Minister	Yes

Using the data presented in Table 3-1, Table 3-2 and Table 3-3, the third hypothesis can be analyzed. The third hypothesis states that if a church leader is Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian, then they will be less likely to adjust their sermons to a current political event due to the strictness of their liturgical calendar. According to the data presented in Table 3-1, the calendar has little effect on the sermon for the day for the Catholic priests, Lutheran minister and Presbyterian minister, and as such, the sermon can be curtailed to fit the events that the church leader would like to discuss. Similarly, the calendar does not have an effect on the sermon for the day for the Baptist minister, the non-denominational ministers, and the Methodist minister. However, one of the non-denominational ministers stated that they would not change a sermon to discuss a political issue. As such, the third hypothesis was proven to be incorrect.

#### ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

There were many findings in this study that did not pertain to a particular hypothesis, but are germane to the topic of church leaders discussing political issues in

their sermons. These findings are results of the second set of questions asked in the interviews, and as such pertain to the discussion of the three controversial issues discussed in this study.

**Image 1-1**



The discussion of abortion in sermons has occurred consistently in churches following the Roe v. Wade decision due to the legalization of abortion. Many Christian denominations view the

act of abortion as the killing of a human life and as such, are opposed to it. The discussion of abortion by most of the church leaders in this study is incomplete. Image 1-1 reflects the single solitary event of abortion. This discussion of abortion as a single solitary event is how most church leaders discuss the issue. In reality, an abortion is the result of a series of events, as shown in Image 1-2. The road to an abortion begins with a

**Image 1-2**



woman having unprotected sex. Then the woman finds out she is pregnant, and determines that the pregnancy is unwanted. She then is presented with options on what to do with the unwanted pregnancy. These options may vary based on the situation facing the woman, such as the woman being forced to abort the fetus or being forced to keep it. A decision is made on what to do with the fetus, and if abortion is determined to be the course of action, then the abortion occurs. The problem with the current discussion of abortion in the majority of sermons is that the discussion begins with the abortion itself. The discussion begins with the woman in the doctor's office about to go through the

procedure, but the abortion began long before that. While some church leaders interviewed did discuss programs encouraging women to keep the fetus or pursue other options such as adoption, the majority of the sermons discussed begin with the discussion of the abortion itself. It is similar to discussing a baseball game beginning with the seventh inning stretch, glossing over the first six and a half innings.

The discussion of school prayer in sermons is difficult to analyze due to the framing of the issue. Through the answers in the interviews, there was often a blurred line between organized prayer in school and public prayer in school. None of the church leaders interviewed took issue with the idea of a student praying in a school. As one church leader pointed out, students can be seen praying all the time in the hope of doing well on a test or not having a pop quiz. However, the issue is organized prayer in school, which is a different subject. The line becomes blurred when the idea of not allowing organized prayer in school is seen as an attempt or the first step to eliminating all prayer in schools. As such, church leaders have the ability to frame the issue of school prayer to fit the direction they would like to take the discussion. If a church leader is concerned that the banning of organized prayer in public school may lead to the banning of all prayer, including moments of silence, then the church leader may connect the two issues and blur the line. Those church leaders that were adamantly opposed to organized prayer in school approached the issue from the perspective that the church ought to be the one to be the spiritual guide of their children. This perspective sometimes came from the idea that the prayer spoken in an organized prayer may or may not align with the specific beliefs of their Christian denomination. As such, they were not comfortable with such a prayer occurring in a public school for their children.

Finally, this study only questioned church leaders on three controversial issues, but that does not mean that those are the only political issues discussed from the pulpit. Many of the church leaders described political activism around other, less controversial issues such as voter drives and human condition initiatives. Human condition initiatives are initiatives that church leaders pursue that seek to improve the condition of people less fortunate than themselves, such as soup kitchens and clothing drives. Some church leaders also described past events where they had taken up causes relevant to their congregations, in which an individual within their congregation felt passionate about a particular issue, or a particular issue resonated with the congregation, and the church leader took action, leading their congregation down the path of political activism. Some of these issues included adoption and school lunches for underprivileged children.

### CONCLUSION

Are church leaders relevant in politics? That is the question this study began with, and the answer to that question is yes. Church leaders have the freedom to discuss political issues from their pulpit, and they use that freedom to articulate the beliefs of their denomination to their congregations. The relevance of church leaders is less prevalent than it was during the Civil Rights Movement, but that does not mean that it is still not prevalent. For politicians, this study shows how church leaders discuss political issues, and as such, how they should approach reaching out to these church leaders. Politicians ought to be encouraged to talk to church leaders in their area, but depending on their ideology, they should highlight different planks of their platform. For instance, a politician opposed to abortion would be wise to discuss pro-life policies with a church leader that shared their ideology. However, if another politician is pro-choice, that does

not mean they should not speak to a minister that is pro-life, but rather they should find another issue that they agree upon, and steer the conversation towards that issue.

The other question proposed in the beginning of this study was how do church leaders discuss political issues and political activism from the pulpit? This study began to answer this question by analyzing how different church leaders go about discussing the controversial issues of abortion, same-sex marriage, and school prayer. While the majority of the findings in this study pertain to whether or not the subject is addressed and the activism by which they address it, this study provides a base for further research in the area. More research is required in this area to continue to study this question and topic. If this study were to be conducted again, it should be greatly expanded, perhaps delving into a particular denomination, rather than spreading data across several. This study falls short of assessing a particular denomination due to the low quantity of church leaders interviewed in each denomination.

This study begins to fill the hole in the literature surrounding the influence of church leaders on their congregations. By studying how church leaders discuss political issues from the pulpit itself, politicians and political scientists can grasp a clearer picture of this influence.



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