

RELIGION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN OKLAHOMA CITY¹

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This study investigates the rate of political participation among Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists in Oklahoma City. Using data collected by the 1991 Oklahoma City Survey (N=394), two competing hypotheses are tested. One hypothesis proposes that Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants (EFPs) strongly favor otherworldly preparations over personal involvement in political activities. This is found not to be the case. The competing hypothesis that the New Christian Right perceives a danger in the moral decay of American society and, therefore, participates more actively in politics also is found wanting. Participation in religious activities was found to be the significant indicator of political activity.

Religious commitment and affiliation only recently have become variables for investigation. Interest in the importance of religion and its effect on political affairs was spurred by the increased political activism of a "loose coalition of groups grounded in religious fundamentalism," often referred to as the New Christian Right [NCR] (Bruce 1988). This coalition, disturbed by their perception of a growing national trend toward immorality and led by outspoken preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, was a significant political factor in the presidential elections of 1980, 1984, and 1988 (see Hertzke 1993, Chapter 4).

Political science has not clearly demonstrated whether the coalition of Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestant denominations is a viable political actor. Two alternative hypotheses emerge from the literature. First, some contend that Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants (EFPs) focus on otherworldly concerns, such as assuring a place in "God's Kingdom," believing that all social and political problems will be solved at the "Second Coming." Thus, one would expect members of evangelical and fundamentalist denominations are less likely to participate in the political sphere than members of other denominations.

The second hypothesis proposes that evangelical and fundamentalist Prot-

estants are more active in politics than the members of other denominations. The argument for this is based on research suggesting that churches promote the fulfillment of civic obligations (Macaluso and Wanat 1979) and provide organizational skills and social contacts necessary to understand politics (Hougland and Christenson 1983). Churches provide a social context allowing for the transmission of implicit and explicit political messages (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). Participation in church decision making and other activities also has been found to “spill over” into political activity (Peterson 1992).

Using data collected from a random sample of Oklahoma City residents, the present research attempts to assess both arguments, while testing a potential third alternative — that participation in political activities is not determined by evangelical or fundamentalist beliefs.

RELIGION AS AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

Only recently has the impact of religion entered into political analyses. This fact is understandable when considering that most social scientists follow a “secularization” paradigm which suggests that as nations industrialize and become more socially developed, religion becomes less important in the public sphere of society. Following this paradigm, one concludes that because the United States is highly developed economically, Americans should live in a secular society. In fact, this is not true, as current public opinion evidence illustrates (Wald 1992, chapter 1; Niemi, Mueller, and Smith 1989; Benson 1981).

With the growing influence of the New Christian Right in the late 1970s and 1980s and the media attention given to American religions and religious leaders, political scientists began to include religious characteristics as independent variables in a variety of studies, including some on political participation (Guth, et al. 1988). Between 1976 and 1981, “ten studies, seven national and three local, compared the political activities and attitudes of evangelicals with those of persons with other religious views.” These studies found evangelicals to be the most active (Wuthnow 1983, 168). The increased political activity of EFPs created a “new” area of study for political scientists.

Prior to the 1970s, researchers found that while mainline Protestant denominations were active in political and social affairs, more conservative Protestants were not (Winter 1973). Members of conservative churches were following the direction of their leaders. Evangelical publications such as *Christianity Today* avoided discussing political issues except when admonishing readers to eschew politics (Wuthnow 1983, 172). Members of conservative Protestant denominations often were directed to the example of Christ:

He refused to enmesh himself or his followers in the economic, social and political problems of his day — problems certainly as serious as those we face today. . . . He made it crystal clear that we are to seek 'first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' — carefully pointing out that 'the kingdom is within you' (Pew 1966, 53).

The withdrawal from a secular and immoral society is illustrated well in Ammerman's (1987) case study of a fundamentalist denomination. Ammerman's study also provides another explanation for low political activity among EFPs: because most members of such denominations are active in church work, they are too busy to participate in other political activities. However, this conclusion is contradicted by evidence showing that church activity is positively related to political activity (Peterson 1992; Martinson and Wilkening 1987; Hougland and Christenson 1983; Macaluso and Wanat 1979).

The 1960s and early 1970s comprised a turbulent period in American history. Mainline Protestant churches joined protests for civil rights and against American involvement in Vietnam. Among the more conservative denominations, there was confusion. Although most were in favor of civil rights, Southern congregations did not accept the methods used to bring the segregation problem to the public's attention. Empirical studies conducted before the mid-1970s showed that evangelicals were politically inactive. These studies found that "orthodox religious belief correlated negatively with support for clergy being involved in political activities" (Gibbs, et al. 1973); direct communication between public officials and churchgoers was less common for evangelicals than nonevangelicals (Davidson 1972); and religious commitment was inversely correlated with political activity (Wimberley 1978).

Since the late 1970s, research (and conventional wisdom) has provided evidence that the New Christian Right is taking a more active role in politics. Born-again churchgoers were as likely to be registered to vote as other churchgoers according to a 1976 Gallup Poll, and would have been more likely to vote if other demographic characteristics had been controlled (Wuthnow 1983, 168). Another survey "found that persons scoring high on a scale of conservative religious commitment were more likely to have voted in local elections than were persons scoring low on the scale" (Wuthnow 1983, 169; also Macaluso and Wanat 1979; Martinson and Wilkening 1987).

There are three possible reasons for the discrepancy between early and more recent examinations of the political participation of EFPs. First, and most obvious, is that Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants are actually participating more actively in politics today than before.

The second reason could lie in methodological difficulties. Wuthnow contends that studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s may have been "biased

against evangelicals” because of the subjects under examination (1983, 171). Many researchers in the 1960s and 1970s were trying to understand the political activism of the liberal churches and how activism was transferred from clergy to parishioners. The surveys may have carried connotations about issues, particularly civil rights, which members of conservative denominations may have found difficult to answer (Wuthnow 1983, 171-172).

Researchers have also been unclear about the distinctions between fundamentalists and evangelicals. Usually social scientists group the many Protestant denominations into a small number of categories which vary along some dimension of religious conservatism to religious liberalism (e.g. Wilcox 1986). Other more empirically based schemes, like Glock and Stark (1965), failed to take into account the proliferation of new Protestant denominations.

The discrepancy between the two threads of argument could depend upon a third reason, that of issue salience. EFPs are mobilized politically only on issues they see as important for maintaining the moral fiber of the United States. The social issues important to the New Christian Right are articulated well in documents like the “Christian Bill of Rights” advocated by the Moral Majority (Wald 1992, 233-234). The “amendments” include opposition to abortion, support for prayer in public schools, government maintenance of the traditional family unit, and “noninterference” by the government in the activities of Christian schools. Ammerman (1987) also suggests that fundamentalist Protestants yearn for the evolution of the United States into a “Christian nation” and follow the direction of their church leaders in working toward that goal.

HYPOTHESES

In sum, previous research suggests two hypotheses. First, EFPs forsake political activity for other worldly preparations. This political abstinence hypothesis is supported if these EFPs score lower on participation scales than the other religious groups tested. Second, because of the perceived moral decay of this country, EFPs participate more fully in politics than do other religious groups. High scores of political participation would support this contention. Research also points to the importance of participation in church activities as a precursor to political activity (Peterson 1992; Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; Hougl and Christenson 1983). A third alternative is possible — that religious beliefs have no impact on political participation — and would be supported if the relationship between religious denomination and political participation do not withstand the effects of socioeconomic control variables.

SAMPLE

Data to compare political activity across categories of religious affiliation were collected as part of the annual Oklahoma City Survey conducted by the Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, in spring 1991. A simple random sample of 394 adults (18 and older) was drawn from the *R.L. Polk Directory* for the city. The respondents completed the survey instrument in face-to-face interviews with trained research assistants. Members of the original sample who refused to participate or who could not be located were replaced by random selection.² Non-Christian respondents were deleted leaving 375 cases for the analysis.

MEASURES

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is measured by a series of 12 items coded 1 if the respondent has engaged in the activity and 0 if not. The items were adapted in whole from Verba and Nie's seminal work (1972, Appendix B). The items, their means, standard deviations, and factor loadings are presented in Table 1. Principle components analysis of the 12 items yielded three factors. The items loading best on each of the three components are combined as scales. The first three items (Component 1), combine to form "Voting." The next four items (Component 2) are combined as "Campaign Activity." The last three items (Component 3) combine to form "Collective Activity." These orthogonal factors represent three of the four modes of political participation described by Verba and Nie (1972).

The fourth mode of political participation identified by Verba and Nie (1972) is "citizen-initiated contacts," partially measured by two items. Since these items did not load cleanly on a factor they are removed from further analysis.

The present study is primarily concerned with understanding the role religion plays in political *behavior*. Thus, the survey items were designed to measure respondents' level of political activity by asking general questions about participation (Wuthnow 1983).

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

This research uses the General Social Survey by Smith (1990) to classify

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Factor Loadings for Political Participation Items

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Factor Loadings		
			Voting	Campaign Activity	Collective Activity
Voted in General Election in Nov. 1990	.64	.48	.930	.112	.038
Almost Always Vote in Local Elections	.56	.50	.816	.184	.079
Registered to Vote	.73	.44	.875	.120	.051
Tried to Show People Why They Should Vote for One of the Parties or Candidates in Past 3 or 4 Years	.46	.50	.130	.617	.195
Attended Political Meetings or Rallies in Past 3 or 4 Years	.19	.39	.023	.693	.213
Contributed Money to Political Party, Candidate, or Cause in Past 3 or 4 Years	.24	.43	.115	.518	.100
Have Worn a Campaign Button, Put a Sticker on Car or Sign in Yard or Window in Past 3 or 4 Years	.42	.49	.090	.724	-.040
Worked with Others to Solve Community Problems in Past 3 or 4 Years	.35	.48	.081	.103	.731
Took Part in Forming Group to Solve Community Problem in Past 3 or 4 Years	.14	.35	-.022	.008	.759
Demonstrated in Protest or Support of Some Action, etc., in Past 3 or 4 Years	.16	.36	-.006	.226	.528
Written to Official on County, State, or National Level in Past 3 or 4 Years	.35	.48	.167	.536	.340
Personally Contacted Member of Local Community about a Problem in Past 3 or 4 Years	.27	.45	.172	.330	.559

*Codes are as follows: 1=yes, 0=no, n=375

SOURCE: Author's calculations from 1991 Oklahoma City Survey.

respondents into affiliation categories. The scheme divides members of Protestant denominations into fundamentalists, moderates, and liberals. Because the sample does not contain enough liberals to include as a separate category, the liberal and moderate categories are combined to create a single category. The present study also adjusts the scheme to compensate for the lack of agreement in social science about the doctrinal and historical differences between fundamentalists and evangelicals (Kellstedt and Smidt 1991). The denominations Smith called "fundamentalist" are placed in the EFP category.

Self-reported affiliation is the measure of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. This measure is more parsimonious than using a scale of doctrinal beliefs (Burton, Johnson, and Tamney 1989; Hood and Morris 1985; Rothenberg and Newport 1984; Ethridge and Feagin 1979) and accurately follows from previous research on the relationship between religion and political activity (Peterson 1992; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988; Hougland and Christenson 1983; Macaluso and Wanat 1979).

Considering that Oklahoma City is in what is known as the "Bible Belt," it is not surprising that most respondents (53%) reported an affiliation with an Evangelical or Fundamentalist denomination. Methodists ($n = 45$) are the largest denomination in the liberal and moderate category which includes 26% of the respondents. While Smith's scheme probably contains some classification errors, it is still more empirically grounded than the schemes used in previous research (e.g., Hougland and Christenson 1983).

Persons identifying themselves as Catholics and those claiming no religious affiliation are included as separate categories comprising 11% and 8% of the respondents, respectively.

BIBLICAL LITERALNESS

In light of the controversy about identifying EFPs (e.g. Kellstedt and Smidt 1991), the questionnaire included four items measuring belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible. Each was answered on a four-point Likert scale with response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The items were:

- (1) I believe the miracles described in the Bible really happened; they are not just stories;
- (2) I believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible;
- (3) I believe that Jesus truly rose from the dead;
- (4) I believe that those who do not accept God will go to hell after their death.

Factor analysis indicates one factor which is labeled Biblical Literalness. The linear composite of z-scores has a reliability of .83. The mean scores on this scale are +1.31 for EFPS, -.88 for Liberal and Moderate Protestants (LMPs), -1.08 for Catholics, and -3.95 for respondents claiming no religious affiliation. Pairwise comparisons show EFP means are significantly different from the means for each of the other categories ($p < .001$).

PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

Evidence suggests that high levels of public religious activity are positively related to political activity, or what is known as the "spillover effect" (Peterson 1992). The present research measures public religious participation using respondents' reports of (1) the number of times in the past month they had attended worship services, (2) the number of times in the past month they had participated in church-related activities other than worship services, and (3) the number of church-related groups (e.g., Bible discussion group, choir, sports team) to which they belonged.³ Participation in public religious activity is measured by the linear composite of the z-scores of these items. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .850, which indicates that each item is reliably measuring the same underlying phenomenon.

CONTROL VARIABLES

Standard socioeconomic and demographic variables found by others (Conway 1991; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba and Nie 1972) to correlate with political participation are included as controls. Gender is a dummy variable coded 1 for males (45%), and race is a dummy variable coded 1 for whites (83%). Age (mean = 46.7, standard deviation = 17.8) and education (mean = 13.5, standard deviation = 2.7) are interval variables measured in years. Post-high school training such as trade school is treated as equivalent to a year of college. Although other measures of socioeconomic status were considered as controls, Conway (1991) indicates that education is the primary socioeconomic variable which influences political participation.

ANALYSIS

Bivariate correlations (Table 2) show clearly that self-identified religious affiliation is not associated with Voting, Campaign Activity, or Collective Acti-

TABLE 2

**Correlation of Religious Affiliation (Dummy Variables) Religious Attitudes,
Sex, Race, Age and Education with Political Activity Measures.**

	Voting	Campaign Activity	Collective Activity
No Religious Affiliation	-.059	-.032	-.046
Catholic	.018	-.035	-.003
LMP	.057	.118	-.019
EFP	-.030	-.064	.044
Biblical Literalness	-.060	-.033	.005
Religious Participation	.261*	.130*	.177*
Male	-.028	.102*	.054
White	.096*	.057	-.077
Age	.245*	-.030	-.109*
Education	.221*	.231*	.201*
N=375			

*Significant at the .05 level.

SOURCE: See Table 1.

vity. None of the bivariate correlations approaches significance at the .05 level.

The Biblical Literalness scale also exhibits no correlation to the political activity measures. As predicted by the spillover effect, religious participation is positively and significantly correlated with the three modes of political participation (Peterson 1992).

Table 3 reports multivariate analyses in the form of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Since direction is predicted, one-tailed tests of significance are appropriate. The standardized regression coefficients (betas) are reported

to facilitate comparisons of the relative magnitudes of the effects of the independent variables. In the twelve equations of Table 3, the four religious affiliation categories are captured by dummy variables for No Religious Affiliation, Catholic, and LMP. EFP is the suppressed category coded 0 on all three of the other denominational categories. Thus, the coefficient for any one of the dummy variables compares that denomination category to EFP, with all other variables controlled. These coefficients are expected to be negative because it was contended in one of the hypotheses that EFPs participate in political activities more than members of other religious groups with other variables controlled.

Table 3 reports four equations for each mode of political participation analyzed. Equation I includes only the denomination variables. Equation II introduces the religious participation scale and Equation III adds control variables. Equation IV includes the Biblical Literalness scale. Across the three modes of participation, Equation I indicates that affiliation fails to have a significant effect on level of political activity. The introduction of religious participation in Equation III shows that this variable has a significant effect on Voting and Collective Activity, but a less significant effect on Campaign Activity. The introduction of the control variables in Equation III suggests that EFPs closely resemble other denominations in levels of political activity. The strengths of the relationships in Equation III are not weakened by including Biblical Literalness into the model.

Age and years of education have the strongest direct effect on Voting while Religious Participation also has a significant effect. Education has a significant positive effect on Campaign Activity. Religious participation and gender (coded 1 for male) have significant positive effects ($p=.035$ and $p=.043$, respectively). Years of education and religious participation have similar direct effects on Collective Activity. These findings confirm the findings of earlier research on the correlates of political participation (Conway 1991; Cobb and Elder 1983; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972; Pateman 1970).

DISCUSSION

The present research examines the relationship between religious affiliation and activity and political activity among Oklahoma City residents. The data failed to support either hypothesis: that EFPs participate in political activities less than persons in other religious groups or that EFPs participate more than persons in other religious groups. The political participation of EFPs appears to be affected by the same influences as other persons.

The findings confirm that political participation is best predicted by the

TABLE 3
OLS Regressions of Voting, Campaign Activity, and Collective Activity on Religious Affiliation and Control Variables.*

Equations:	Voting				Campaign Activity				Collective Activity			
	I Beta	II Beta	III Beta	IV Beta	I Beta	II Beta	III Beta	IV Beta	I Beta	II Beta	III Beta	IV Beta
No Religious Affiliation	-.046	.029	.937	-.024	-.013	.025	-.018	-.004	-.053	-.005	-.032	-.027
Catholic	.025	.065	.030	.015	-.011	.008	-.013	-.006	-.016	.010	-.003	-.001
LMP	.055	.078	-.005	-.024	.113**	.124**	.090	.099	-.032	-.017	-.025	.011
Religious Participation		.274**	.193**	.209**		.137**	.114**	.106		.177**	.162**	.159*
Biblical Literalness				-.079				.039				.011
Male			-.024	-.031			.103**	.106**			.051	.052
White			.063	.063			.057	.057			-.044	-.044
Age (years)			.289**	.288**			-.032	-.031			-.098	-.098
Education (years)			.244**	.221**			.193**	.203**			.164**	.168*
R ²	(.01)	(.08)**	(.19)**	(.20)**	(.01)	(.03)**	(.09)**	(.09)**	(.00)	(.03)**	(.08)**	(.08)**

*EFP is the suppressed category in the dummy variables for religious affiliation.

**Significant at .05 level, one-tail.

SOURCE: See Table 1.

standard socioeconomic variables examined in much previous research. However, there is also a spillover effect with those persons participating in public religious activities participating in partisan activities as well. These findings support the recent analysis of General Social Survey data by Peterson (1992), where he finds a spillover effect between religion and politics.

On the whole, this research contradicts most research on the effect of religion on politics. The findings here do not repudiate the theory that Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants eschew politics. But they also do not support the conventional wisdom that Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants participate more actively in political affairs. The answer to the contradiction presented here could lie in matters of time and space. Because political participation is less static than presented by this research, it is quite possible that EFPs would participate in political activity more when such activities are stimulated by a salient issue.

This research is a case study of one community and not a definitive study of the relationship between religion and political participation. Since EFPs are the major religious group in the city, members of this group may feel comfortable in a community where their beliefs and values are shared by many others. Many of the political leaders they choose hold the same religious and moral beliefs which are transformed into public policy. Of course, the minority denominational groups also exhibited little political activity. For example, the local daily newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*, discourages the religious from participating in politics by describing government as ineffective and corrupt.⁴

To better understand the findings from Oklahoma City, similar studies should be conducted in other regions of the country. The factor of time also needs to be considered. While Oklahoma City may seem comfortably moral for evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants today, the environment may change later in the decade.

Another possible explanation for the seemingly contradictory findings presented in the research could lie in the theological differences among EFPs. The denominational groups can be divided into two doctrinal "camps": premillennialists and postmillennialists. Pretribulation EFPs believe that Christ will come after the moral state of the world has decayed into crisis, and are less likely to participate in secular political activity. Posttribulation EFPs believe that Christ will return only after Christians have evangelized. Thus, political activity is necessary to return society to a high moral and ethical standard. Wilcox, Linzey, and Jelen (1991) contend that premillennialists can be mobilized by church leaders to participate in politics even if they view such secular activity as futile, by casting such activity as a fight against the Devil.

Unfortunately, Smith's classification scheme does not allow such distinc-

tions within the EFP category. One speculation is that premillennialists in the sample could be obscuring the political activity of the postmillennialists. The political and social environment in which churches exist has an effect on the political participation of parishioners. As a sizable majority of the population, EFPs in the Bible Belt, may not feel threatened. Since they do not perceive a threat, these Protestants may not find it necessary to take part in political activities to return their community to more Christian values (Ammerman 1987). Thus, the premillennialists are not mobilized to action and prefer to retreat into their "otherworldly" preparations.

NOTES

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²To assure that the sample is representative of the population, it was compared to the 1990 Census data from Oklahoma City. The sample does not differ significantly from the 1990 population in percent male (46% in the sample; 47% in the population) or percent white (82% in the sample; 84% in the population).

³The distributions of all three items are skewed in a positive direction. To correct for skewness, positive outliers were recoded to the 90th percentile. The truncated items were subjected to a principal components analysis revealing the presence of a single factor.

⁴In the course of presenting my findings to several groups of worshipers at EFP denominations, most agreed that the influence of *The Daily Oklahoman* could be dissuading religious persons from becoming active in politics.

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