

CHAPTER 1

The Political Transformation of Religious Institutions

Although intrinsically apolitical, religious institutions have consistently engaged in politics throughout American history. Scholars have long noted that many of the key ingredients that shape political behavior can be found in religious contexts (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Tocqueville 1945). Places of worship help shape political attitudes and mobilize individuals for political participation (Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Wald 1997; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). Churches, synagogues, and mosques provide a regular meeting place in which individuals interact and discuss public events and affairs. These institutions also present an image of what the nation should be and motivate members to become politically involved. As a result, connection with these institutions leads to a strong increase in political engagement (Brown and Brown 2003; Brown and Wolford 1994; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Guth et al. 1998; Jamal 2005; McClerking and McDaniel 2005; Tate 1993).

Moreover, in the twenty-first century alone, the political engagement of religious institutions can be seen at all levels of government. A growing number of religious groups have chimed in on contemporary political issues. In such areas as placing the Ten Commandments in government buildings, advocating bans on gay marriage, or adding creationism to textbooks, the intersection of religion and politics is becoming evermore salient in the American political landscape.

Given that religious institutions seek primarily to address the spiritual needs of their members, how and why do such institutions trans-

form themselves into political organizations? A religious institution becomes a political organization when it incorporates politics into its identity. That is, politicized religious institutions decide that politics is an important means of achieving their overall goals. In attaining this end, four conditions must be met. First, leaders must advocate organization-based political engagement. Rank-and-file members must also agree that it is appropriate for the organization to delve into politics. The organization itself must facilitate and sustain political activity. Finally, the context in which the organization exists must be amenable to political action.

I test my argument by focusing on the Black church, an ideal case for studying this phenomenon. More than any other U.S. religious institution, the Black church serves as a symbol of religious political action. The substantial variation in Black churches' levels of political activity and mobilization offers insight into the broader variation in political participation across religious entities. In addition, the dynamics that explain political activity within Black churches provide a useful starting point for a broader understanding of the role of religion in contemporary American politics.

While scholars have not ignored Black churches as political institutions, a coherent theoretical conceptualization of what constitutes a political church has not previously emerged or been tested. Researchers typically examine the behavior of members of these organizations instead of the organization itself. Accordingly, extant research provides an understanding of political churches as political mobilizers (Brown and Brown 2003; Brown and Wolford 1994; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Harris 1999; McClerking and McDaniel 2005; Tate 1993; Wilcox 1990b) but cannot speak to how the church exemplifies a politicized organization. Even the institutional studies fail to define clearly what signifies a political church. In his study of church social activism, Billingsley (1999) speaks of activist churches but never defines them. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) discuss politically active churches but differentiate them from other churches only by their actions—that is, whether they participate. Thus, this study integrates behavioral and institutional studies of the Black church to paint a more detailed illustration of a politicized church that captures its nature both within and outside of the electoral context. This approach provides a better means of assessing if and when civic institutions can repair breaches in American democracy.

DEFINING A POLITICIZED CHURCH

For the most part, conceptualizations of politicized or activist churches have been vague. Researchers tend to define a politicized church as a church that is politically active. Calhoun-Brown (1996) provides the most direct definition of political churches: churches that “provide an environment in which politicization can take place” (941). She further explains that these churches “communicate political activity as a norm” and that the political activity is “facilitated by the institution itself” (942). Tate (1993) argues that these churches provide a setting that encourages political knowledge and skills (95–101). These definitions describe a political church in terms of its activities but say nothing about why, when, and how these activities become part of a church’s repertoire.

Rather than being defined in terms of its outputs, a politicized church is best understood as a church that holds political awareness and activity as salient pieces of its identity. A church’s identity encompasses a set of characteristics that members feel are central, enduring, and distinctive (Albert and Whetten 1985). An identity establishes the focal or core set of attributes that denote the essence of an organization (Ashforth and Mael 1996)—for example, an organization’s mission statement. With respect to a Black church—or any church, for that matter—the main objective is to facilitate salvation. The essence of a church is to save souls.

In realizing this identity, however, churches may come to identify with other activities as well. Many organizations are hybrid organizations, meaning that they possess multiple identities (Albert and Whetten 1985). Like individuals, organizations identify with multiple activities or roles. Members of a church will recognize facilitating salvation as the core attribute of the organization but may also see a connection to political awareness and activity as an attribute of the church and choose to adopt a political identity. Similar to Olson’s (1965) and Wilson’s (1973) analyses of the creation of political organizations, the political identity of a church should be understood as a by-product of the church’s attempt to advance its central interests. The adoption of this political identity leads to the creation of a political church.

Possessing multiple identities allows the organization to take part in a wider array of activities and services. In the case of a religious institution, adopting a political identity enables the church to engage in both secular and spiritual activities. Multiple identities, however, can also lead to role

conflict and overload (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Churches must determine how much political activity they can take on without sacrificing their primary mission and/or depleting their resources.

While multiple techniques for managing identities exist, churches mainly choose to aggregate their identities as a way of striking a balance between religion and politics. Pratt and Foreman (2000) define aggregation as the retention of multiple identities by creating an identity hierarchy.¹

The identities of the church are prioritized—the core elements of the church's identity will be ranked at the top, while the additional identities will be ranked in the order of importance to the church's immediate goals. Churches already have a primary identity—facilitating salvation. As long as political action comes secondary to the central goal of the organization, internal strife will be avoided.

Thinking about the process by which a church becomes politicized in terms of a struggle to manage multiple identities helps provide an understanding of why quite a bit of variance occurs in political activism both within and across churches. Aggregation of identities requires a large amount of capital. It requires the organization to disperse resources to multiple programs (Pratt and Foreman 2000). The political identity of most churches is expected to remain at a high level of the hierarchy—that is, the church is expected to remain politicized—for a relatively short time. Churches with greater resources are expected to hold political identity as highly salient more often and for longer periods of time than other churches. However, no church can perpetually sustain political activism.

CREATING A POLITICIZED CHURCH

But what initially leads a church to recognize politics as part of its identity? Establishing an identity must be understood as an iterative process of negotiations between leaders and members (Scott and Lane 2000). Thus, a politicized church represents the end result of the negotiation process between the leadership and members as they decide whether to adopt a political identity. As figure 1 demonstrates, however, other factors influence this negotiation process. While the pastor and members are the key actors in the negotiation, the negotiation is also shaped by the organization itself as well as the environment.

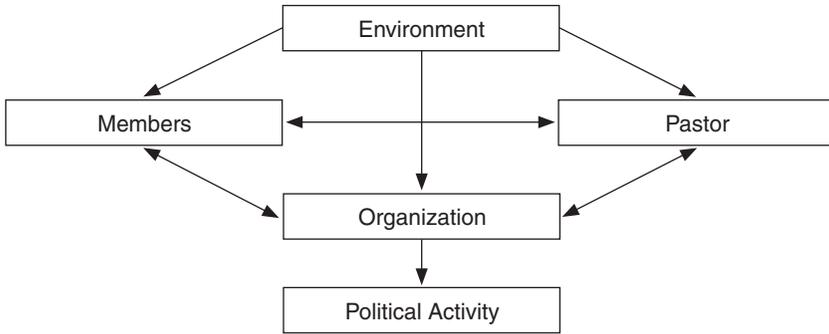


Fig. 1. Model of the creation and maintenance of a political church

Pastor

Like any other organizational leader, pastors become elite figures because they provide “a face to the organization” (Scott and Lane 2000, 47). While pastors’ first duty is to serve as spiritual leaders, many are also administrative leaders. Pastors are involved in all facets of churches and their direction.

If a church is a politicized organization, pastors become political elites. Zaller (1992) describes political elites as “persons who devote themselves to some aspect of politics or public affairs” (6). Kingdon (1995) discusses elites in terms of policy entrepreneurs, describing them as people with a “willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money, in the hope of a future return” (122). As church leaders, pastors behave as activists and incur the initial costs of politicizing the organization. Historically, clergy have taken on the role of the activist to achieve some political goal. Clergy have used the power of their pulpits to affect public opinion and to rally their members and communities around particular issues. Generally speaking, clergy facilitate the connection between religion and politics (Beatty and Walter 1989; Smidt 2004).

During the twentieth century, clergy clearly used their resources to change the American political landscape. During the Prohibition movement, for example, clergy used their authority to lobby not only local governments but also the national government to ban alcohol. Clergy also used their influence during the 1960s and 1970s to pursue social justice

issues, such as civil rights and opposition to the Vietnam War (Findlay 1993; Hadden 1967; Quinley 1974). More recently, evangelical clergy, a group that had historically remained outside of the political realm, have become involved and now exercise a strong presence in policy making (Guth et al. 1997, 1998). These evangelical clergy channel their messages to confront a variety of issues, including morality, education, and the environment (Crawford and Olson 2001; Jelen 1993).

Black clergy in particular have historically taken on the role of political elite. As the primary symbol of the Black church, the most independent Black institution, clergy have been called on to employ their resources to influence policy. During slavery, Black clergymen such as Richard Allen, Daniel Payne, and Henry Highland Garnet were ardent abolitionists (Harding 1969; Pinn and Pinn 2002). Nat Turner, a Baptist minister, led the Southampton slave revolt (Greenberg 2003). Many of the first Black elected officials in the South during Reconstruction were clergy. Clergy in the Black Methodist and Black Baptist denominations also lobbied government to help protect the rights of the newly freed men and women (Hamilton 1972; Pinn and Pinn 2002). Later, C. H. Mason, the founder of the Church of God in Christ, was arrested several times for protesting U.S. involvement in World War I (Sanders 1996). In the post-World War II era, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. used the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City's Harlem to create a political power base that provided him with a great deal of influence in Congress (Hamilton 1972; Wilson 1960). The prime example of Black clergy serving as political elites came during the civil rights movement, when Black clergy used their influence to mobilize their members, transforming attitudes so that parishioners recognized the need for political activism (Harris 1999). Both Aldon Morris (1984) and Charles Payne (1995) recognize pastors' influence as one of the reasons why people joined the movement. Black clergy also used their resources to provide meeting space and to raise funds for organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Today, Black clergy remain important as political elites. The Reverend Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns in the 1980s showed that clergy could use their status to recruit support (Tate 1993). Furthermore, George W. Bush has made several attempts to appeal to African Americans by recruiting Black clergy. Most recently, the presidential campaign

of the Reverend Al Sharpton attempted to rekindle some of the same activities associated with the Jackson campaign (Walton and Smith 2006).

Members

Members too play key roles in the organization. They comprise the lifeblood of a church, resembling stakeholders in a corporation. Members are the church's capital, providing financial resources as well as labor. Because churches are voluntary organizations, they depend strongly on members' support. If congregants choose to reduce their support, either in terms of financial contributions or labor, the church will be harmed. Thus, although the pastor serves as the face of the church, without the support of the members, the organization will crumble. Pastors and members therefore must work together to develop the church's identity.

Black clergy have an image of independence, but like other political elites, they are constrained by their constituencies. Members of the U.S. Congress are accountable to the people in their districts; pastors are responsible to their congregations. Several studies demonstrate that clergy have less independence than was earlier believed to be the case: during the social movements of the latter half of the twentieth century, White liberal clergy clashed with their congregations. Quinley's (1974) study of activist clergy in California during the 1960s describes the consequences of the activism: many pastors faced decreased giving, membership losses, and in some cases removal. Campbell and Pettigrew (1959) find that White ministers who supported the integration of the public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, faced a great deal of opposition from members, which led to decreased attendance and funds. Hadden (1967) records similar findings at the denominational level: when the "new breed" of socially liberal Presbyterian clergy came into contact with socially conservative congregations, the denomination faced substantial losses. These instances are not confined just to that era. Jelen (1993) documents the admitted failure of one White clergyman to address racial issues in a town with a strong Ku Klux Klan presence because he feared the repercussions from his congregation. Similarly, Guth et al. (1997) find that pastors who believe that members or potential members disapprove of political activism either refrain from participation or lower their levels of participation.

Black clergy have also encountered these limitations. During the civil

rights movement in particular, many clergy faced opposition from members of their churches. Ture and Hamilton (1967) document that some Black clergy resisted joining the movement at least in part because of congregants' sentiments. Hamilton (1972) documents cases of clergy who wanted to be active but could not gain the support of their congregations. One young Black Episcopalian minister, for example, wanted to be politically active, but his largely West Indian and African congregation did not relate to the issues he sought to address. The congregants ridiculed him for his actions, and he consequently discontinued his political activity to prevent conflicts in the church.

Other works show that congregation members can also serve as catalysts for clergy activism. Chong (1991) argues that selective incentives, such as prestige and reputation, were used to bait clergy into joining the movement. Charles Payne (1995) documents how the women of churches in rural Mississippi pushed their pastors into the civil rights movement to protect their children. Payne also details how in some cases, crowds of people chided their clergy for not taking part in the movement:

Pillars of the community were being denounced by name, ridiculed as cowards and hypocrites before God, and audiences of four or five hundred people were cheering and stomping. Deacons and church mothers sat in those audiences and laughed along with everyone else. (198)

Lee (2003) finds that congregants at the Second Baptist Church of Evanston, Illinois, removed their pastor because they felt that he was not responding to their call for activism. Finally, Harris (1999) argues that Blacks' overwhelming support for church-based political activism explains why Black churches are more active than White churches.

Regardless of whether political activity is initiated by church members or the pastor, one point is clear: the existence of a political church requires a consensus on the part of the pastor and the members. The creation of an environment that allows for political communication and mobilization requires the commitment of the entire organization—both members and pastor.

Organization

Beyond the members and the pastor, the nature of the church itself has some bearing on its ability to engage in political matters. Various aspects

of the organization—specifically, resources, process, and culture—can influence the attitudes and actions of the members and pastor. An individual church's resources are the various forms of capital it possesses (McKinney et al. 1998). Several studies show that churches with higher levels of resources are more likely to be socially and politically involved (Billingsley 1999; Chaves 2004; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). For example, Charles Payne (1995) notes that financial stability played a strong role in determining whether Black churches chose to become involved in the civil rights movement. Just as resources are important for individuals (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), they are also important for organizational-level political participation. A person in poverty would not be expected to make campaign donations; similarly, storefront churches should not be expected to hold political rallies. In both cases, the individual and the organization lack the resources or capacity to take part in that type of political activity.

Process relates to an individual church's rules and policies regarding decision making and actions (Dudley 1998). For example, some churches have specific rules guiding political involvement, such as bylaws stating that political leaders may not speak during services or forbidding the church from making political statements. Additional operating procedures may govern actors' levels of influence in the church's decision making. In some churches, pastors have sole decision-making authority, while in others they have no role at all in the decision-making process.

Organizational culture is defined by the practices and traditions of the group's members (Hatch and Schultz 2002). Organizational identity tells us who we are, while organizational culture tells us how we do things (Hatch 1993; Pratt 2003; Schein 1984). Each individual church has its own culture developed through the church's history, symbols, and rituals (Ammerman 1998; Becker 1999). Because churches regularly bring people together and foster social networks, members of churches may develop a shared worldview (Ammerman 1998; Becker 1999; Wald 1997). As new members and clergy enter the church, they learn this culture. Attempts to change a church's culture can lead to strong conflicts (Becker 1999; Hamilton 1972; Warner 1988). One conflict that many churches face involves worship services. Churches have specific methods of conducting worship services. Members want to hear certain songs and practice certain rituals and may expect that services will not exceed certain time limits. Moving away from established practices may lead to disgruntled members. Many churches have faced a great deal of conflict

over changes to the worship service because these changes did not reflect the church's usual way of doing things.

Culture is also important for understanding the negotiation process. Churches that have traditionally stayed out of political matters should be expected to remain out. Becoming involved would change their culture. Conversely, churches with histories of political involvement are more likely to continue this involvement. For example, any pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem should be expected to continue its tradition of community activism. The combination of the reasons for the church's founding—racial discrimination (Hamilton 2002; Pinn and Pinn 2002)—and Powell's activities should lead to the expectation that any new pastor will be socialized into this culture of church-based political activism.²

Environment

The final and arguably most important component of the identity negotiation process is environment, which affects a church's members, pastor, and organization. Churches are social institutions that exist within social contexts comprised of various forces. While a church may affect its environment, it is also influenced by the prevailing forces within this context (Eiesland and Warner 1998). Changes in the environment can affect how an organization identifies itself (Albert and Whetten 1985; Dutton and Dukerich 1991).

In decisions regarding political activity, the political environment is particularly important. Specifically, a discussion of church-based activism is incomplete without an examination of perceived threats to the interest of the members of the church and the local community as well as the opportunities for political activism provided by the environment. Historically, Black Americans have been a resource-poor group. Legally restricted by slavery and Jim Crow, Blacks have had few outlets through which to work for political, social, and economic equality. This legacy remains in contemporary politics. First, African Americans have not been integrated into America's political institutions—no African American has ever served as president, and only two African Americans have served as U.S. Supreme Court justices, for example. Moreover, “of the more than 11,000 persons who have served in the Congress, only 112 have been Black (107 in the House, 5 in the Senate)” (Walton and Smith 2008, 170). Second, relatively few interest organizations represent the African American community, and there are even fewer Black political action commit-

tees. Furthermore, compared to other interest groups, Black interest organizations are poorly funded (see Walton and Smith 2008, 117, for a comparison of membership and budgets of Black and non-Black organized interests). Finally, even after the 1965 Voting Rights Act, registration and voting restrictions still systematically disenfranchise a significant proportion of the Black electorate.

Given these barriers to traditional avenues of political participation, African Americans have transformed existing institutions into political organizations. By using churches as means of organization, socialization, mobilization, and participation, African Americans have realized some of their political goals. Nevertheless, the ability to do so has not been constant. Historically, windows of opportunity have opened, such as Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the Black freedom struggle. In these instances, African Americans have entered the political arena using the Black church. However, Blacks have historically been a marginalized group, and this characteristic has been transferred to the organizations in which they exercise membership. As Blacks themselves were restricted from activism, their organizations suffered a similar fate. In some instances, the same barriers that have prevented Blacks as individuals from participating politically have also constrained the activities of the church.

In summary, neither the organization nor its members exist in a vacuum. The outside world affects the decisions, actions, and identity of the organization, its members, and its leaders. To become a political organization, the Black church must be located in an environment that not only requires political action but also fails to place external restrictions on the church's activities. Moreover, the church's leadership and membership must agree that the church is the appropriate avenue for pursuing political goals. When all of these conditions are met, the church becomes politically active.

CONCLUSION

Citizens often find the cost of political participation too high (Downs 1957). Consequently, participatory rates in the United States tend to be quite low. Without a responsive electorate, however, democracy is compromised. Maintaining a democratic political system requires reducing the costs of political participation so that more voices can be heard. Scholars have consistently found that contact with civic organizations raises the likelihood that people will engage in politics. Therefore, it is

important to discern the circumstances under which organizations that are not inherently political can bridge the gap between their members and the political arena.

In what follows, I take up this task by examining how religious institutions become political organizations. Church-based political involvement is the product of an ongoing interaction of various factors. A change in any of these factors may trigger a change in the likelihood of engagement. As a result, levels of church-based political activism constantly fluctuate.