
Introduction

The service at Red Memorial¹ progresses like most Sunday services in Black churches. Classic hymns are sung, and the members appear relaxed but focused. The choir loft is full; the congregants are spread throughout the front half of the church and have a joyful attitude. They clap and sway to the music during the choir's and clergy's procession into the service. Rev. Red, the pastor of the church, keeps the members upbeat by having them sing a Caribbean hymn that she learned while on vacation. Along with this spiritually uplifting service, however, Rev. Red wants to deliver a serious message. After the morning announcements, she stands in the pulpit and greets the congregation as she does each week, yet this week her message is different. She does not focus on meetings or other issues related to the operation of the church. Instead, she reminds her congregation that Tuesday is Election Day and makes sure that they understand the importance of voting. She does not allow the fact that this is an off-year election to diminish the need for her congregation to vote. She states,

Often African Americans in particular do not vote on the off-presidential election. We tend to vote only for presidential elections. So as a result, the persons who make the decisions and the laws that directly impact us, we seldom vote for.

She further notes the city's various problems and how citizens need to make sure that roads and water services are maintained at high quality.

Reverend Red is relatively new to this church, so she treads lightly. While she does not tell her congregation for whom to vote, she does offer hints:

You better vote right and [for who] is going to do the greater blessing for all of the people and particularly for your own issues. . . . If we have a Republican president and a Republican-controlled Senate and a Republican House, and a Republican-controlled Michigan . . .

As she says this, however, a member of the congregation yells out, “Vote Democrat!” Rev. Red responds,

It’s not just about economics, it’s about war. It’s about localization, school, criminal policy, and part of what makes this country halfway decent is the fact that we have checks and balances. And I would feel the same way if it was all Democrats. . . . I don’t want . . . one party to have total control of all of the decisions that are made in this country.

To assist her congregants in making the “right” decisions, she informs them that a voter information guide developed by the denomination’s local ministerial alliance is available. The list details the candidates whom the members of the ministerial alliance have determined to be the proper people for the positions they are seeking, based either on face-to-face meetings or research.

Regardless of the issues or candidates, Pastor Red once again stresses the importance of voting. She asks how many congregants are registered and how many plan to vote. To leave the discussion of political participation on a high note, she tries to mobilize her congregation by way of an African American church ritual, call and response:

REV. RED: *Everybody . . .*

CONGREGATION: *Vote*

REV. RED: *And vote right.*

CONGREGATION: *Vote right.*

As a parting reminder, one page of the church’s Sunday bulletin contains only a single word, “VOTE.”

On this Sunday, Red Memorial made strong attempts to mobilize its members and inform them about political issues. The church has become a haven for political activity, with a political identity adopted and embraced by both the members and the pastor. As a result, Red Memorial is a politicized church. It not only informs its members of political events but also works to mobilize them so that they can use that information.

Parallel discussions about the upcoming election occurred in other churches throughout the United States. In addition to addressing members' spiritual needs, religious institutions often facilitate congregants' participation in the political arena. The Black church in particular has a historical legacy of political activity, especially during high points of racial conflict in the United States. However, church-based political activism is not a given. Not all churches or even all Black churches are politically active. What, then, determines whether a church will answer the call to engage in politics? This book answers that question.

Documenting and analyzing church-based political activism is nothing new. Historians, sociologists, and political scientists have long been fascinated with the idea of politically active religious institutions. This research shows that religious institutions play a vital role in American civic life (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In general, churches aid in fostering skills that can be used in the political arena (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wald 1997). Within political science, scholars (Brown and Brown 2003; Brown and Wolford 1994; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Guth et al. 1998; Harris 1999; McClerking and McDaniel 2005; Tate 1993; Wilcox 1990b) identify a special class of churches known as political churches. In addition to building basic civic skills, political churches actively engage their members in the political process by mobilizing them for political action and providing information about issues and candidates.

But while the extant research notes the importance and impact of political churches, scholars have neglected to examine why churches choose to become politically active. After all, the primary goal of churches is not to facilitate political activity. In the past, church-based political activism has been treated as a constant, static state—either churches are politically active, or they are not. However, church-based political activism is better understood as a process than a condition. A failure to recognize this distinction has led to disagreement over just how effective churches are at pursuing political goals. Specifically, debate exists about whether churches serve as political opiates or as political as well as religious institutions.

Visualizing this debate requires looking no further than the controversy surrounding the Black church. Black churches have been viewed as the most politically involved of all religious institutions (Harris 1999; Harris-Lacewell 2004). While the civil rights movement arguably represented the pinnacle of Black churches' political engagement, these

churches have served as the crux of Black political activity since their conception. Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner used churches to plan their slave revolts (Harding 1969). During Reconstruction, Black churches served as centers for the political training of newly freed men and women (Raboteau 2001). As Blacks moved from the rural South to urban areas in the North during the Great Migration, Black churches became the hub for the political careers of individuals including New York congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Even in contemporary politics, African American presidential candidates such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton have used church networks to mobilize supporters (Walton and Smith 2006).

Despite the Black church's historic political legacy, it has fallen silent during some critical times in Black political history. For example, many observers note that Christianity was first introduced to slaves as a means to keep Blacks docile and disinterested in disturbing the status quo. Others note that many free northern Blacks also remained out of the abolition debate. Even during the height of church-based political activism, the civil rights movement, only a minority of the churches were actively involved. For example, no more than 10 percent of ministers actively supported the Birmingham boycott (Charles Payne 1995). Furthermore, McAdam (1982) shows that while Black church organizations were active in the movement, their level of activity paled in comparison to that of student organizations.

Consequently, scholars argue that the Black church has not lived up to its potential with respect to helping Blacks achieve equality within American society. According to W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the major champions of the Black church, its structure and achievements demonstrated "the ability of the civilized Negro to govern himself" (2000, 22). Yet Du Bois also criticizes the church for spending too much time focusing on otherworldly issues instead of addressing social problems (1990, 2003). Gunnar Myrdal concludes that the Black church was out of touch and "remained conservative and accommodating" as others in the Black community were protesting their condition in life (1962, 876). Much like Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier (1974) notes the central role of the Black church in the development and advancement of Blacks, but he also believes that the Black church failed to advance Black social growth. In Frazier's view, the Black church "cast a shadow" over Black intellectual life and was responsible for "backwardness" on the part of Blacks (1974, 90). Frazier argues that the authoritarian nature of the Black church, with one

man in charge, prevented its members from furthering their interests. Finally, Adolph L. Reed Jr. (1986) argues that the belief that the Black church has fostered Black political participation is a “myth,” agreeing with Frazier that the church’s antidemocratic nature prevented it from serving as an effective institution for politically mobilizing individuals.

How can these two realities of the Black church coincide? The process by which churches become politically active is quite dynamic, and heterogeneity exists both within and across churches. Not only does the number of churches that engage in politics vary, but so too does the level of political activity within a single church over time. As a result, scholars can reach vastly different conclusions depending on when and where they observe these institutions.

Therefore, determining why a church becomes politically active requires looking at the context in which the church exists. Specifically, a church becomes politically active when four conditions are met: the pastor is interested in involving his or her church in politics; the members are receptive to the idea of having a politically active church; the church itself is not restricted from having a presence in political matters; and the current political climate both necessitates and allows political action. Failure to negotiate agreement among all of these factors inhibits a church’s ability to enter into the political arena and sustain political activism. Furthermore, because none of these four factors remains stable over time, the level of political activism of churches remains in constant flux.

Current attempts to understand why Black churches have or have not engaged in politics center primarily on clergy, with scholars such as Frazier and Reed asserting that church members have little say. Although pastors have considerable power in directing their churches, members play an important role in determining whether a church becomes politically engaged. The pastor is a necessary part of church-based engagement but is not alone sufficient. Du Bois, for example, argues that a pastor is subject to church members’ wishes, describing the pastor as a “mayor” or “chief magistrate” who rules according to the “dictates of a not over-intelligent town council” (2000, 21). Similarly, Myrdal concludes that the church has been accommodating not because of a mandate from pastors but because the people preferred that it stay that way. Thus, understanding why churches choose to become politically active requires attention to members’ attitudes and interests.

In addition, I offer a theoretical framework for understanding

church-based political activism that accounts for the role of other factors, such as the organization and the environment. Even while criticizing the Black church, both Myrdal and Du Bois note that organizational structure and the sociopolitical environment worked to suppress church action. Myrdal points to the many churches with low resources that became indebted to White patrons to survive. Consequently, these churches hesitated to criticize racial injustices. Moreover, Du Bois (1990) compares the more radical northern Black church to the accommodating church of the South, noting that northern Blacks were granted more political freedoms than those in the South. Du Bois argues that for southern Blacks to prosper, they had to remain silent about wrongdoing. Any attempts to address these improprieties would engender retribution. Thus, regardless of the wishes of pastors and members, church-based political activism is subject to organizational constraints and the environment in which it exists.

At most, the various accounts of church-based political activism focus on one or two of these factors but do not examine how all four simultaneously shape a church's decision to become politically active. By taking a more holistic approach, I provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of church-based political activism. I begin this task in chapter 1 by explaining why religious institutions have been and remain a critical feature of American democratic politics. I then revisit the central question guiding this study: How are political churches created and maintained? Drawing on political science, psychology, and sociology, I contend that the level of political activity undertaken by a church is a function of its pastor, members, organization, and environment. Further, I explain why the Black church provides an excellent test of this theory.

Chapter 2 qualitatively assesses the extent to which this argument holds. Using data collected from several churches in Detroit, Michigan, and Austin, Texas, I document the ebb and flow of political activity of contemporary Black churches as they adjust to the changing environments in which they exist. I demonstrate that each of these four factors represents a salient piece in the progression of church activism. Pastors may serve as the catalyst for church action, but they are limited by their members' support. In addition, both pastors' willingness to call for action and congregational support are shaped by the constraints of the organization and the environment's need for action.

Having established a broad picture of the process through which a church becomes politicized, I use chapters 3–6 to demonstrate that in ad-

dition to contributing to the political activity of a church, the four components of church-based political activism are mutually reinforcing. Chapter 3 places the political engagement of the Black church within a historical context by documenting how the institution responded to slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the civil rights movement, and other significant periods in U.S. history. Chapter 3 illustrates how the geographic and sociopolitical environment influenced pastors' and members' negotiations of the proper role of churches in politics. In this chapter, I show that the Black church was most active during times when political activity was necessary but other avenues for political action were few. In contrast, lulls in political activity occurred in areas in which either Blacks were prospering or the cost of political engagement was prohibitively high as a consequence of rampant oppression and violence.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus from the environment to the organization, examining how factors such as resources, culture, and process guide church-based political activism. Using survey data from several sources, this chapter demonstrates that variables including membership size, geographic location, the pastor's educational level, and whether the church adopts an Afrocentric point of view significantly predict the social and political engagement of churches.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the two key actors, clergy and members. Chapter 5 evaluates which types of pastors are most likely to see the political identity of the church as salient. Using quantitative and qualitative data, I find that pastors are more willing to engage in church-based political activism when they (1) have an interest in politics and (2) have congregations that permit their churches to be used as vehicles for political activity. Again drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, chapter 6 examines members' attitudes, demonstrating that support for church-based political action is conditioned primarily on whether congregants believe that their religious needs are being met. Since the church is above all a religious institution, any activity seen as prohibiting the church from achieving its principal goal is not sanctioned. In addition, congregants are receptive to political activity by their churches when they have an interest in politics and perceive a lack of sociopolitical justice in their environment. Theology, denomination, and geographic location are also important determinants of congregants' receptivity.

Chapter 7 summarizes the previous chapters' findings and their implications and discusses areas for future research. I speculate about how the Black church is likely to react to issues that have not yet reached the

Black agenda. In addition, I contemplate how mobilization attempts from outside organizations such as the Republican Party are likely to affect the political activism of the Black church. Finally, I discuss how this project's theoretical framework can be used to explain the political engagement of other religious institutions and other nonexplicitly political organizations.