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ATTENDANCE AT RELIGIOUS MEETINGS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

Data collected in a general population survey from a random sample of individuals in two rural communities in Texas were used to examine the association between religious involvement and civic participation empirically. Support was found for the hypothesis that attendance at religious meetings is positively associated with community involvement. Results of the analysis of covariance also suggest that certain sociodemographic factors are significant predictors of community involvement. Possible implications of these findings for community developers, public leaders, Cooperative Extension Service personnel, and other practitioners are addressed. Recommendations for involving religious institutions in community development initiatives are also advanced.

Introduction

Churches and other religious institutions have been, and continue to be, an integral ingredient in American community life (Finke and Stark 1992; Ploch 1990; Putnam 2000). In an early nineteenth-century college textbook on the topic of citizenship, Taylor and Brown (1926: 67) commented on the ways in which the various churches in Western civilization establish and support educational organizations, charitable agencies, and other social groups to “further the efficiency of community life.” Roughly eight decades later, the wide-ranging support of social, educational, and charitable activities by Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish denominations remains similarly robust.¹

Sociologists and pollsters alike spend a considerable amount of time and energy investigating Americans’ religious attitudes and behaviors. Much is known today

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¹See Putnam (2000) for an overview of the differences between denominations and the shifts within the broad family of Protestant congregations as to civic participation.

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about the types of people who attend worship services, the reasons why individuals do or do not attend church or synagogue, and the frequency of attendance at religious meetings (Newport 2007).

As reported in a recent study, attendance at religious services in the United States continues to be higher than in any other nation at a comparable level of development (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Several sociologists, however, have questioned whether Americans are as churchgoing as they say they are (Chaves and Cavendish 1994; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993). The central claim to their arguments was that social surveys and public opinion polls greatly exaggerate actual church attendance in the United States. Such an assertion did not go unnoticed or unchallenged, as evidenced by the symposium on the reporting of church attendance in America published in the *American Sociological Review* (Caplow 1998; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1998; Hout and Greeley 1998; Smith 1998; Woodberry 1998).

Regardless if the numbers on church attendance are actual or inflated, the available aggregate data reveal a declining pattern of attendance at religious services in the United States (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Putnam 2000). Acknowledging this trend, and recognizing the positive associations documented between religious involvement and forms of civic engagement such as philanthropy, organizational membership, and voluntarism (Greeley 1997; Lazerwitz 1962; Putnam 2000; Wilson and Janoski 1995; Wilson and Musick 1997), scholars have begun to speculate on the potential impacts to our nation's social well-being that might accompany a decline in religious participation (c.f., Putnam 2000).

The present research is a further examination of religious involvement and civic participation. Despite the consistent findings that religious engagement is an especially strong predictor of participation variables such as organizational membership and voluntarism, few studies have been conducted on the effects of attendance at religious meetings on measures considered indicative of community-level action. Card-carrying membership in an organization may or may not reflect actual participation in community affairs. Voluntarism, which can occur in church-related groups or secular organizations, may or may not culminate in involvement at the community level.

Our purpose with this paper is very specific. Here, using cross-sectional data collected in two rural communities in west Texas, we reexamine the hypothesis that attendance at religious meetings is positively associated with civic engagement. In doing so, we incorporate community-level participation measures into our study,

thus adding to the current sociological literature on religious involvement and locality-oriented action.

Data

The data used for this paper were collected in a general population survey from a random sample of individuals in two west Texas communities—Sanderson (in Terrell County) and Stanton (in Martin County).² In May 2001 interviews were conducted with eight key informants in each study site to help identify timely and salient local economic, social, and environmental issues. The data gathered in the key informant interviews assisted in the development of a household questionnaire that asked specific questions about local issues and inquired into a variety of topics, including community attachment, community satisfaction, and community involvement.

Following a modified total design method (Dillman 1978), questionnaire data were gathered using mail survey techniques. During the spring of 2002, the survey questionnaire was mailed to a randomly selected sample of 498 households in Stanton and to all 423 residential addresses on file at the United States Post Office in Sanderson.³ To obtain a representative sample of individuals within households, a response from the adult with the most recent birthday was requested. The survey instrument was a self-completion booklet; it contained 38 questions and required approximately 40 minutes to complete. After the initial survey mailout, a postcard reminder, and two follow-up survey mailings, 428 completed questionnaires were returned from both sites (a 46% response rate).

²See Theodori (2004a) for a detailed description of the study-site selection process.

³In January of 2002, an informational letter was first mailed to a randomly selected sample of 500 households in Stanton and to the 423 residential addresses in Sanderson. The informational letter, which was printed in English on one side and Spanish on the other side, informed residents that their household was randomly selected for participation in an upcoming community study. Moreover, the letter indicated that although participation in the study would be entirely voluntary, completion and return of the questionnaire would automatically enter their household into a drawing for \$200.00. Included with the letter was a prepaid addressed postcard. Residents were instructed to return the postcard if they preferred to receive a copy of the questionnaire printed in Spanish. Instructions on the postcard were printed in both English and Spanish. One household in Stanton and one in Sanderson asked for and received a copy of the questionnaire in Spanish.

Eleven of the 500 initial informational letters were returned as undeliverable from the Stanton site. Those eleven households were replaced with randomly selected new addresses. Two of the eleven were returned as undeliverable; they were not replaced. Hence, the sample size was 498 in Stanton.

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Measurement

Involvement in Community

Involvement in community was the dependent variable of interest. Respondents were asked whether they had ever (a) attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in their community; (b) worked with others in their community to try to solve community problems; and, (c) participated in any type of community improvement activity. Response categories included (0) no and (1) yes. Because of the high correlation among the three items, a principal-axis factor analysis was used to explore a reduced dimension for measuring involvement in community-level affairs. One factor emerged from the analysis, explained approximately 54% of the variance among these items, and had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77 (results not shown). Hence, a composite community involvement score was calculated by summing the responses for the three items. Scores ranged from 0 to 3.

Frequency of Attendance at Religious Meetings

The independent variable of primary interest in this study was frequency of attendance at religious meetings.⁴ A survey questionnaire item asked respondents to indicate how often they attended religious meetings. Response categories included: (1) more than once a week, (2) once a week, (3) a few times a month, (4) once a month, (5) a few times a year, and (6) never. Based upon the small number of cases in categories three and four, respondents who indicated that they attended religious meetings either "a few times a month" or "once a month" were combined into one group termed "monthly." In this paper, the categories describing individuals' attendance at religious meetings are called "more than once a week," "once a week," "monthly," "a few times a year," and "never."⁵ The percentages of respondents who indicated that they attend religious meetings more than once a week, once a week, monthly, a few times a year, and never were 24 (n = 83), 26 (n = 90), 16 (n = 55), 19 (n = 69), and 15 (n = 51), respectively.⁶

⁴According to local contacts, there are six Protestant churches and one Catholic church in Sanderson. Stanton has five Protestant churches and one Catholic church.

⁵The frequency of religious attendance variable does not address the issues of "membership in religious organizations" or "religious affiliation." Neither membership in religious organizations nor religious affiliation was asked on the survey questionnaire and, therefore, cannot be determined.

⁶When compared with the General Social Survey data from the 1996-2006 decade, our sample data indicate higher levels of religious involvement. The percentage of respondents in the GSS who reported attending religious meetings "more than once a week" ranged between 7.1 in 2000 and 8.6

Control Variables

Sociodemographic Factors

Four sociodemographic factors—education, marital status, race, and length of residence in the community—were included as control variables. Length of residence was measured in years. Education was coded as follows: (1) less than high school; (2) high school equivalent; (3) some college; (4) college degree; and (5) training beyond college. Race (1 = white; 0 = other) and marital status (1 = married; 0 = other) were each dummy-coded. These variables are statistically significant factors in predicting participation at the community level (Cary 1970; Haeberle 1987; Hougland, Kim, and Christenson 1979; Theodori 2004b; Tomeh 1974).

Community Attachment

Community attachment, which has been shown to affect involvement in community affairs positively (Theodori 2004b), was also included as a control factor. In this paper, the concept of community attachment was assessed with both a multiple-item scale and a single measure of attachment. Respondents were asked to respond to the following eleven statements: (a) overall, I am very attached to this community; (b) I feel like I belong in this community; (c) the friendships and associations that I have with other people in this community mean a lot to me; (d) if the people in this community were planning something, I'd think of it as something WE were doing rather than THEY were doing; (e) if I needed advice about something, I could go to someone in this community; (f) I think I agree with most people in this community about what is important in life; (g) given the opportunity, I would move out of this community; (h) I feel loyal to the people in this community; (i) I plan to remain a resident of this community for a number of years; (j) I like to think of myself as similar to the people who live in this community; and (k) the future success of this community is very important to me. Response categories included (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) disagree, and (4) strongly disagree. After reverse coding of items "a" through "f" and items "h" through "k," a composite community attachment score was calculated by averaging the responses for the individual items. High scores reflected high levels of community attachment; low scores indicated low levels. A principal-axis factor analysis with oblique rotation revealed that these measures of community

in 2004. Those who reported attending "every week" ranged between 16.6% in 2002 to 18.7% in 2006, while those who stated that they "never" attend religious services ranged from 15.5% in 1996 to 22.7% in 2006.

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attachment were unidimensional and explained 55 percent of the variance (results not shown). Cronbach’s alpha for this attachment scale was 0.93.

A single-item measure asked “How interested are you in knowing what goes on in your community?” For purposes of this paper, responses were dichotomized as 0 (very disinterested, somewhat disinterested, neither interested nor disinterested, and somewhat interested) and 1 (very interested).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used in the Analysis^a

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Involvement in community.....	1.92	1.18	0	3
Frequency of religious attendance.....	2.76	1.39	1	5
Sociodemographic factors				
Education.....	2.85	1.24	1	5
Marital status (1 = married).....	0.69 ^b	0.46	0	1
Race (1 = white).....	0.73 ^b	0.44	0	1
Length.....	29.91	22.38	0.50	91
Community attachment				
Multi-item attachment scale.....	3.07	0.65	1	4
Interest in community (1 = very interested).....	0.59 ^b	0.49	0	1
Community of residence				
Community (1 = Stanton)	0.52 ^b	0.50	0	1

^a A listwise deletion reduced the sample to 348 cases.

^b Indicates the proportion of responses coded as 1.

Community of Residence

Community of residence was also included as a control variable to examine whether differences existed between the two sites, which manifested opposite patterns of recent population growth and decline, with respect to levels of community action. The measure was dummy-coded to indicate in which site the respondent lived (1 = Stanton; 0 = Sanderson).

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses.

Analysis

The association between frequency of attendance at religious meetings and community involvement was assessed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedures.⁷ As shown in Table 2, statistical support was found for the proposition

⁷The seven control variables were included in the analysis as covariates.

that frequency of attendance at religious meetings is associated with community involvement (F-ratio = 3.27; df = 4, 336; $p \leq 0.05$).

Table 2. ANCOVA Results of Frequency of Religious Attendance and Control Variables on Community Involvement.

Variables	F-ratio	Partial η^2
Frequency of religious attendance.	3.27 *	.04
<i>Control variables</i>		
Education.	18.50 ***	.05
Marital status (1 = married).	7.46 **	.02
Race (1 = white).	5.53 *	.02
Length of residence.	10.92 **	.03
Multi-item attachment scale.	4.97 *	.02
Interest in community (1 = very interested).	16.30 ***	.05
Community of residence (1 = Stanton).	3.45	.01
Model F-statistic (df = 12, 305).	11.44 ***	
R ²	0.27	

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Adjusting for the control variables, the findings revealed a “linear-type pattern” between frequency of attendance at religious meetings and community involvement (Table 3). Persons who attend religious meetings more than once a week had the highest mean community involvement participation score (2.18), followed closely by those individuals who attend religious meetings at least once a week (2.03). Respondents who attend religious meetings monthly had a mean community involvement participation score of 1.90, while those who attend such meetings a few times a year averaged 1.79. Persons who never attend religious meetings had the lowest mean community involvement participation score (1.53). A Bonferroni post-hoc test revealed that respondents who attend religious meetings more than once a week were significantly more likely than persons who never attend religious meetings to exhibit higher levels of community involvement.

Control Variables

Of the control variables, community of residence failed to reach statistical significance. Conversely, education (F-ratio = 18.50; $p \leq 0.001$), marital status (F-ratio = 7.46; $p \leq 0.01$), race (F-ratio = 5.53; $p \leq 0.05$), length of residence (F-ratio = 10.92; $p \leq 0.01$), the multi-item community attachment measure (F-ratio = 4.97; $p \leq 0.05$), and interest in community (F-ratio = 16.30; $p \leq 0.001$) were significant

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Table 3. Actual and Adjusted Mean Community Involvement Scores^a

	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Frequency of religious attendance	mean	mean ^b
More than once a week	2.33	2.18 ¹
Once a week	2.08	2.03
Monthly	1.91	1.90
A few times a year	1.72	1.79
Never	1.27	1.53 ¹

^a Covariates were evaluated at the following values: education = 2.85; marital status = 0.69; race = 0.73; length of residence = 29.91; multi-item attachment scale = 3.07; interest in community = 0.59; and, community of residence = 0.52.

^b Mean values with matching superscript numbers indicate significant difference at $p \leq 0.05$.

predictors of community involvement. An examination of the parameter estimates in the full model, which explained approximately 27 percent of the total variance, revealed that higher educated, married, white, long-term residents with higher levels of community attachment were more likely than their counterparts to engage in community involvement, net of frequency of religious attendance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide support for the hypothesis that increased attendance at religious meetings is positively associated with increased levels of community involvement. Furthermore, the results reaffirm that net of religious participation, certain sociodemographic factors are important predictors of community involvement. The multivariate analysis shows that higher educated, married, white, long time residents with stronger attachments are more likely than their counterparts to exhibit greater levels of community involvement. Moreover, as evidenced by the partial η^2 (see Table 2), the findings also suggest that religious participation is a relatively strong predictor of community involvement (when compared with the sociodemographic measures in the model).

Based upon the results of this study, several recommendations can be made for community developers and others who are interested in the practice of community development. First, community developers, public leaders, Cooperative Extension Service personnel, and other practitioners should ensure that the formal and informal leaders in the faith-based sector are aware of all proposed community improvement projects and local activities. These religious leaders should then be encouraged to pass along the information to their congregations. Distributing

promotional information to the business office at the church or synagogue would allow the staff to post materials on bulletin boards, in newsletters, etc.

A second recommendation pertains to broadening the base of community involvement. While higher educated, married, white, longtime residents who have strong attachments to their community and regularly attend religious meetings should continue to be recruited and involved in community development activities, orderly efforts are needed to reach out and encourage lower educated, single, nonwhite, newer residents who have lesser attachments and do not regularly attend religious meetings to act collectively and address local issues and problems.

Lastly, community development practitioners, local leaders, and especially Cooperative Extension Service personnel might collaborate with religious institutions to conduct and promote community development educational programs (Prins and Ewert 2002). With their historical ties (Nelson 1969; Ploch 1990) and organizational commonalities (Youmans 1980), it seems only natural that Cooperative Extension and the faith-based sector could partner to build stronger communities.

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