



Democratic Talk in Church: Religion and Political Socialization in the Context of Urban Inequality

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Summary. — In new and developing democracies, levels of education are often low and many citizens lack experience with democratic processes. How do citizens in such political systems learn about elections and develop participatory orientations? Civil society organizations can promote political socialization, yet often fail to reach those lowest in resources. This article proposes that churches constitute an often overlooked instance of civil society, one that is highly inclusive and provides frequent opportunities for interaction. Such socialization can be especially important in low-income and low-education neighborhoods, where access to media and political information through everyday social networks is more limited. A case study of a municipal election campaign in a single Brazilian city reveals that exposure to political information in church is common, especially in evangelical churches and in low-education neighborhoods. Even more frequent than partisan discussion is promotion of non-partisan civic norms encouraging citizens to cast informed votes based on non-clientelistic criteria. Those exposed to civic and partisan messages know significantly more about the local campaign and are more likely to turn out. Messages encouraging a “conscientious vote” boost knowledge most strongly in low-education neighborhoods, helping to equalize political information across the urban environment. This suggests that development professionals take churches seriously as sites of civic education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Four decades since the beginning of the third wave of democratization, transfer of executive power through elections and constitutional procedures may have become, in Linz and Stepan’s famous phrase, the “only game in town” in many Latin American polities (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Still, links between elites and citizens remain unconsolidated. Weyland pointed to this phenomenon in Brazil when he noted the “growing sustainability” of its “low quality democracy” (Weyland, 2005, p. 90). Clientelism remains common, party and ideological identification low and transient, and support for democracy among the masses weak and volatile (Almeida, 2007; González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, Meléndez, Osorio, & Nickerson, 2012; Veiga, 2007). While militaries that formerly dominated executive offices in the region appear comfortable in their barracks, development of robust democracies requires an ongoing process in which citizens forge deeper and more programmatic linkages with their political systems.

Scholars argue that the institutions of civil society are critical not only for democratic transitions but also for the development of higher quality democracies (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Through participation in organized groups, citizens discover the interests and values of their neighbors, learn the participatory and community-oriented attitudes and behaviors necessary in a democracy, address community problems, and develop the social capital that enables further political action. During elections, civil society groups can channel information and mobilize participation. However, many civil society organizations become less democratic and inclusive as they become more organized and politically effective (Gugerty & Kremer, 2008; Lavalle, Acharya, & Houtzager, 2005). And participation in organized groups may be on the decline in many places in the world (Norris, 2002; Putnam, 1995).

Churches offer an important and often overlooked instance of civil society, one that is highly inclusive and provides frequent opportunities for interaction. Studies of churches and democratic politics have tended to emphasize their impacts on vote choice and ideology. However, churches can also affect non-partisan political orientations by advocating general democratic norms such as the importance of participation and of an informed vote choice. This form of political socialization is especially important for educationally disadvantaged citizens and those living in low-education neighborhoods, who may lack access to school-based civic education. In secular and formally democratic states, this advocacy simultaneously legitimizes the state and churches’ own social positions, while contributing to ongoing improvement in the quality of democracy.

This paper begins by developing a theory of churches and democratic socialization in the context of inequality. The empirical analysis develops a case study of a municipal election in one Brazilian city. It begins by examining the political messages diffused in Catholic and evangelical churches.¹ The most common types of political messages are not related to partisan politics, but rather promote civic norms related to turnout and casting an informed vote. While evangelicals are more likely to receive such messages than Catholics, multivariate analysis indicates this is primarily related to differences in frequency of church attendance, rather than other denomina-

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tional differences. Using matching to address threats to inference, the analysis then demonstrates that such messages affect political learning and participation. Exposure to *both* messages promoting civic norms and partisan discussions of politics in church are associated with higher levels of knowledge about the election and higher turnout. Moreover, receiving civic messages is most strongly associated with political knowledge among citizens with low levels of education and living in low-education neighborhoods.

2. DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIZATION IN CHURCHES

In the first major empirical case study of a democratic polity in the modern era, Tocqueville noted the “great political consequences that flowed from” the high levels of religiosity in the United States in the early 19th century. Churches, Tocqueville argued, sustained democracy. Contemporary social science has picked up this theme. In their seminal study on political participation and equality in the U.S., Verba, Scholzman, and Brady argued that “in many ways, . . . churches function in a manner similar to voluntary associations” as sources of political socialization—so much so that they “partially compensate for” other weak civic institutions and “play a role in bringing into politics those who might not otherwise be involved” (1995, p. 385).

Church-based political socialization is not limited to religious communities in the United States. Across the developing world, scholars of politics and international development find that religious communities have supported democratization and development in favor of the poor (Bauwens & Lemaître, 2014; Bruneau, 1980; Kyamusugulwa & Hilhorst, 2015; Mersland, D’Espallier, & Supphellen, 2013; Noland, 2005; Potter, Amaral, & Woodberry, 2014; Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011; Wydick, Karp Hayes, & Hilliker Kempf, 2011). In a 1980 special edition of this journal devoted to the interaction between religion and development, Wilber and Jameson noted that the participation of religious institutions can improve the outcomes of development projects, “[s]ince . . . contact between people and their religious institutions is generally quite dispersed throughout the entire society” (1980, p. 476). Intriguingly, though, one recent study finds that social capital built in church can also *harm* development outcomes by inhibiting local, interpersonal mechanisms for accountability (van Bastelaer & Leathers, 2006). A recent review article argues forcefully that understanding the role of churches in democracy and development requires taking into account the “heterogeneous, dynamic, and contested nature of religion” (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011).

In democracies, churches can convey two types of political messages. First, congregants and clergy can talk about political contests, including electoral campaigns and policy issues (Djupe & Gilbert, 2006, 2009). Sometimes discussion is fairly neutral; for instance, church leaders might inform members about who candidates in a campaign are. More often, individuals’ candidate and policy preferences shape the conversation, though congregants can also disagree with each other. Second, churches can engage in “democratic talk,” influencing civic norms about citizens’ roles and the political system. For instance, clergy or congregants might discuss democracy and participation, or they might advocate tolerance and respect for civil disagreement (Djupe, 2015; Djupe & Calfano, 2012; Neiheisel, Djupe, & Sokhey, 2009). Congregations can also reinforce national identity and patriotism, in ways ranging from flying the national flag to explicit discussion of national

and patriotic ideas. Crucially, the views churches promote in this second bundle tend to be ones shared by large majorities of citizens and elites.

There are many channels through which citizens learn such norms and attitudes in democracies. Perhaps the most obvious is public education (Ehman, 1980; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2002). In middle- and low-income democracies, however, access to education remains uneven. Various groups try to fill this gap. Across the developing world, NGOs and grassroots civic groups run programs teaching civic norms and basic facts about the political system (Bratton, Alderfer, Bowser, & Temba, 1999; Finkel, Sabatini, & Bevis, 2000; Finkel & Smith, 2011). States also get involved. For instance, participatory policymaking forums in Brazil and other developing countries have been seen as another tool for creating democrats (Abers, 2000; Moehler, 2008; Wampler & Avritzer, 2004).

This paper argues that congregants and clergy also voluntarily take on civic education roles. Why would they do so? One answer relates to ideology and theology. As citizens themselves, church members and leaders are often highly civically engaged. They may not see clear boundaries between political commitment to democracy and theological commitment to their understanding of divine will for human affairs. Within the Roman Catholic Church, guidance from the Church hierarchy might encourage this role, as the Church came to advocate democracy in the developing world in the 1960s and 1970s (Levine, 2012; Toft *et al.*, 2011).

Group interests could also induce church leaders to adopt neutral, pro-democracy roles. In secular, religiously competitive states—that is, states that are legally neutral with respect to religion and where multiple religious groups vie for members—religious leaders will be attracted to non-controversial public stances. Aligning the church with consensual views can help attract and keep people in the pews. It can also help maintain the goodwill of state actors who might affect church growth. Even in highly secular states, congregations interact with states in diverse ways, particularly at the local level: from obtaining contracts for social service provision, to seeking planning approval for new construction projects (Gaskill, 2002; Lavallo *et al.*, 2005). Friendly allies can smooth many of these processes.

Both clergy and congregants initiate democratic talk. Churches constitute a major site of community outside the spheres of home and work; sometimes politics pops up naturally in conversation. Church members also deliberately recruit each other into civic activities (Djupe & Gilbert, 2006; Patterson, 2005b; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Finally, political theology holding that churches should provide guidance on earthly activities can also encourage clergy to provide political guidance within church walls (Toft *et al.*, 2011).

Democratic talk in church may be especially influential. Social contact is frequent, and members share a social identity. People who have been persuaded can in turn become opinion leaders, more rapidly converting the entire group (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988). Further, political discussion in church is embedded within a broader set of moral and scriptural teachings that contextualize messages and make them salient. Messages from clergy may be particularly influential due to respect for clergy as ethical authorities (Bean, 2014; Condra, Isaqzadeh, & Linardi, 2017; Djupe & Calfano, 2014).

Church-based political socialization strongly impacts lower education citizens and ones in lower education neighborhoods. Not only are low-education citizens less likely to have received school-based civic education, but they have lower access to

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