
A MULTIPLE SAMPLE COMPARISON OF CHURCH INVOLVEMENT AND BLACK POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN 1980 AND 1994

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Introduction

A history of racial oppression and exclusion from public life contributed to many blacks relying upon their churches for political leadership, human services, and dignity (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Taylor, Thornton, and Chatters, 1988). While the Civil Rights Movement was highly effective in permitting blacks to move into jobs that allowed for mobility, churches continue to serve as central institutions within many black communities. Even today, black churches are often the only non-governmental institution in black communities (Gronbjerg, 1990). Religious institutions often serve as the largest organized expression of black communities, enabling them to set goals and to articulate racial group interests (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Calhoun-Brown, 1996). As such, many blacks welcome and even call for their churches to tackle pressing social ills such as crime, joblessness, and police brutality. Over three-fourths of African Americans believe that churches should be involved in social change (Gallup, 2001). Equally important, compared to other voluntary organizations, blacks view their churches as having the best chance of alleviating social problems that plague their communities (Gallup, 2001). Moreover, approximately 70% of blacks reported attending church at least once a month (Taylor et al., 1996; Chatters, Taylor, and Lincoln, 1999).

A consistent finding in the literature is that religious involvement increases political activism among black Americans (Brown, 1991; Taylor and Thornton, 1993:245-246; Brown and Wolford, 1994; Calhoun-Brown, 1996, 1998:435, 1999:205; Harris, 1999). Specifically, we contend that being involved in church organizations enables blacks to develop skills that allow them to be competent and confident political actors (Harris, 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). This study builds upon prior scholarship by examining the influence of church involvement on black political participation in two distinct periods (1980 and 1994) using two nationally representative samples of black Americans.¹ We argue that the mobilizing influence of black church activism is substantial and robust in both eras. Specifically, we contend that being involved in formal church organizations enables blacks to develop politi-

cal skills that allow them to be competent and confident political actors.

Church Activism and Civic Skill Development

While past studies have demonstrated a relationship between church attendance and voting, simply attending church may not lead blacks to participate in costly political activities that make more concrete demands upon the political system. Churches are a central social-political institution in many black communities. However, their primary purpose is to provide a space for individuals to worship and interact with other believers, not training members to be political activists. As such, congregants who simply attend worship services or Sunday school may not be more likely to participate in politics.

Because church attendance is often not related to more costly/time-consuming forms of activism, scholars argue that churches are only able to promote modes of participation (like voting) that involve minimal investments of time and resources (Reed, 1986; see Calhoun-Brown, 1996). While church attendance alone is not associated with more demanding activism, being active in formal church organizations enhances individuals' civic skills and builds their capacity and confidence to be political activists (Harris, 1994; Calhoun-Brown, 1996). Civic skills such as communication and organizational capacities are essential to political activity (Peterson, 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Planning meetings, participating in decision-making, writing letters, and making presentations are all skills that can be developed in non-political organizations, such as churches, and are transferable to the political arena. Skills employed to organize a tutoring program, a Sunday school fundraiser, or writing church auxiliary reports are also useful in organizing voter registration drives, campaign fundraisers, letter-writing campaigns to elected officials, and other political activities (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Peterson, 1992; Harris, 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Brown and Brown, 2002). The important politicizing role of church networks was made evident during the Civil Rights Movement and more recently in Jesse Jackson's bid for the presidency (Morris, 1984; Gurin, Hatchett,

¹ Our paper primarily discusses and elaborates on previous quantitative studies of religion and black political participation that utilized national surveys of African Americans. Regional or local studies of black participation are not emphasized here. In particular, Matthews and Prothro's (1966) study included a discussion of the influence of religious involvement on black participation in the south during the early 1960's. Similarly, Marx's (1967) study was primarily based on data from metropolitan and urban center samples of black respondents and does not contain measures of contacting public officials. Finally, the 1996 National Black Election Study includes some questions about religion and politics, but has not been widely utilized for analyses of religious-based activism.

and Jackson, 1989; Tate, 1994:95-103). In both instances, blacks were largely mobilized and trained to be activists by lay leaders/church activists that commanded the respect of their peers and also had experience in raising funds for church projects, organizing church committee meetings, and electing local and regional church leaders to office. In this paper, we posit that church activists are more likely to be involved in voting, campaigning, and political contacting efforts.

The literature supports our contention that civic skills developed in churches provide the competency and confidence to participate in more costly forms of activism (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Brown and Brown, 2002). However, previous research strategies do not permit reliable generalizations about the influence of church activism on black political participation across time and across distinct survey samples of black Americans. Given that involvement in religious institutions affects black political participation, two additional questions arise. Does church activism stimulate political participation in different time periods? What forms of church involvement (attendance or activity in church groups) are more consistent mobilizers of black political activism? We explore these questions in the remainder of the paper.

Cross-Sectional and Panel Analyses of Black Participation

Most recent quantitative studies of religion and black political participation analyzed single, cross-sectional samples of black Americans (Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson, 1989; Dawson, Brown, and Allen, 1990; Brown, 1991; Taylor and Thornton, 1993; Brown and Wolford, 1994; Tate, 1994:95-103; Calhoun-Brown, 1996, 1998, 1999). Commonly utilized surveys included, the 1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans, the 1984 National Black Election Study, and the 1993-94 National Black Politics Study. All of these studies determined that church participation had a mobilizing impact on black political activity.

The findings from past research are briefly summarized below. Specifically, Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson (1989) demonstrated that involvement in churches had a positive influence on black activism in 1984. Dawson, Brown, and Allen (1990) showed that African Americans with a higher degree of religious guidance in their lives were more likely to vote and participate in campaigning and contacting activities. Brown (1991) also established that religiously active blacks were more likely to be voters. In addition, Taylor and Thornton (1993) found that among older black adults, church attendance was associated with a greater likelihood of both presidential and state and local voting. Brown and Wolford (1994:41) demonstrated that exposure to political information at places of worship was a strong correlate of electoral and protest-demand activism. Harris (1994) confirmed that religion among African Americans serves as an organizational and psychological resource for political action. Moreover, Tate (1994:95) found that blacks who belonged to activist churches were more

likely to vote and participate in campaign activities. Similarly, Calhoun-Brown's (1996) study found that involvement in politically active churches was a positive predictor of black political participation in 1984. Finally, Calhoun-Brown's (1998, 1999) work revealed that individuals who were heavily involved in the church were more likely to participate in voting and non-electoral activism.

Scholars have also conducted activism research using the 1984-1988 National Black Election Panel Study. Using this data, Tate (1991:1168) found that in 1984 blacks who belonged to activist churches were more likely to be aware of their state's primary or caucus and more likely to participate in the event than non-activist church members. In addition, Tate (1991:1171) demonstrated that members of politically active churches were more likely to vote in 1988. This article is one of the few recent religion and black participation studies to benefit from panel survey data on black Americans.

A Multiple Sample Approach for Participation Research

In the sociology of religion literature there have been a handful of studies on black religious behavior which utilize comparisons of multiple national samples (Levin, Taylor, and Chatters, 1994; Taylor et al., 1996; Chatters, Taylor, and Lincoln, 1999; Taylor, Mattis, and Chatters, 1999). These studies have consistently demonstrated that African American religious participation is generally high and robust across independent samples (Chatters, Taylor, and Lincoln, 1999; Taylor et al., 1996). Equally important, the research strategy of conducting similar analyses of independent surveys, at multiple time periods is beneficial for examining the reliability of religious effects across samples and improving the generalizability of findings to the larger black population (Chatters, Taylor, and Lincoln, 1999:143). Using different samples allows for empirical testing across survey designs and in distinct time periods. Insights from this research program can greatly benefit black politics scholarship.

Few quantitative studies of religion and black political life make explicit comparison of religious and political behaviors in different time periods using multiple samples of African Americans. A review of major political science, sociology, and religious studies in journals, books, and edited volumes from 1980 to the present revealed that approximately twelve quantitative religion and black political activism studies using national samples of African Americans were published.² Of these works, 10 utilized a single survey, one analyzed panel data, and only one study (Harris, 1999) employed more than one national survey of black Americans.

Harris (1999) is exceptional in examining black political behavior in 1966 and 1979-1980. Specifically, the author utilized two national samples of black Americans – the 1966 Harris-Newsweek Race Relations Survey and the 1979-1980 Na-

tional Survey of Black Americans. Analyses of the 1966 data demonstrated a strong connection between black religious involvement and various forms of political activism. The author's empirical evidence included summary statistics and regression analyses of the 1966 Harris-Newsweek survey (Harris, 1999:53-64). In addition, Harris (1999:83-84) employed causal models of the 1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans. The author found that the psychological dynamics of religion foster political and social activism (Harris, 1999:84). This study extends Harris' work by comparing findings from similar regression model analyses of data from both the 1979-1980 NSBA and the more recent 1993-1994 NBPS.

The literature on church involvement and black political activism suggests that blacks who are active in the committee lives of their churches are more likely to participate in more demanding forms of political behavior (Harris, 1994; Calhoun-Brown, 1996). However, more evidence that describes the effect of church involvement in distinct time periods and across representative samples of black Americans is required. To better understand the relationship between church-based civic skills and political involvement, we make two hypotheses:

H₁. In both 1980 and in 1994, we expect church attendance and church activism to be positively associated with voting.

H₂. In both 1980 and in 1994, we expect church activism to be positively associated with campaign activism and contacting public officials.

Data and Measures

Data. Data for the analyses are drawn from the 1979-80 National Survey on Black Americans (NSBA) and the 1993-94 National Black Politics Study (NBPS).³ The NSBA is a national probability household survey of 2,107 black Americans, 18 years of age and older, conducted in 1979 and 1980. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by all black interviewers. The overall response rate was 67%. The NSBA is

² This review included the most frequently cited quantitative articles on religion and black political participation that appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *National Political Science Review*, *American Politics Research* (formerly *American Politics Quarterly*), *Political Research Quarterly*, *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research*, and *Sociology of Religion*. The studies are cited on pages 4-7 in the sections that describe past research strategies.

³ In the analyses that follow, we refer to these data as the 1980 and 1994 samples.

fairly representative of the 1980 census reports for black Americans. The survey asked a wide range of questions related to group identity, religious involvement, and political behavior. The NSBA was the first national household probability sample of blacks living in the continental United States (for a detailed description see, Jackson, 1991; Jackson and Gurin, 1999). The data are available through the University of Michigan's Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research archive.

The 1993-1994 National Black Politics Study (NBPS) is a nationally representative survey of 1206 African Americans explicitly designed to examine the political ideology, beliefs, and political behavior of the African American population. The NBPS employed a multiple frame, random-digit probability sample. The first frame was composed of a national random-digit dial sample using an equal probability of selection methodology. The second frame was randomly selected from a list of households located in census blocks with 50 percent or more black households. The response rate was 65 percent. Calhoun-Brown (1999:208) observed, "Comparisons with U.S. census reports indicated the data were representative of important demographic variables of the black population. However, NBPS respondents are better educated and more female than 1997 census reports." The NBPS contains an extensive battery of questions related to religion and black political behavior. In fact, the NBPS is one of the best data sources available for examining the multidimensionality of religious influences on black politics. The NBPS data are also available at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research archive.

Dependent Variables: Political Activism. All of the political activism variables, voting, campaign activism, and political contact are measured as dichotomous variables. Respondents were coded as a one if they reported being active and as a zero if they did not. The voting measure in the 1979-80 NSBA and the 1993-94 NBPS asked respondents if they voted in the last presidential election. In the 1979-80 NSBA, the campaign activism measure asked if respondents have ever worked for a political party or campaigned for a political candidate. In the 1993-94 NBPS, campaign activism was measured slightly different. The item asked respondents if they have ever handed out campaign material or placed campaign material on cars. In the 1979-80 NSBA, the political contact measure asked if respondents have ever called or written a public official about a concern or problem. In the 1993-94 NBPS, the contact question asked if respondents have ever contacted a public official or agency.

Independent Variables: Church Involvement Variables. In both 1979-80 NSBA and 1993-94 NBPS, the church attendance measure asked respondents how often they attend church. Zero indicates that the respondent did not attend church at all and four indicates that they attend services at least once a week. In the 1979-80 NSBA, the church activism measure asks respondents how many church organizations they are involved in. In the 1993-94 NBPS, respondents were queried about serving on a

church committee, given time to a special project, or helped organize a meeting in the past year. Church activists were coded as one and non-involved individuals were coded as zero. While these questions are slightly different, they are the most comparable measures available that operationalize individuals' participation in church-based civic skill building activity such as committee and church organizational life.

Control Variables. Age, gender, education, and family income were utilized as control variables because previous work has shown that individuals who are older, more educated, and affluent, are more likely to be active in electoral politics (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Prior studies also indicate that men are more likely than women to engage in protest activism (Gurr, 1970).

Age was measured as a continuous variable ranging from 17-101 in the 1979-80 NSBA and 18-88 in the 1993-94 NBPS. In addition, a dummy variable for gender was coded one for men, zero for women. The 1979-80 NSBA education item asked if respondents had up to eleven years of education (coded 1), if they were high school graduates (coded 2), had some college education (coded 3), or if they were college graduates (coded 4). However, in the 1993-94 NBPS, education was measured as a continuous variable that indicated the total years of education respondents had attained ranging from 0-26.

In both surveys, family income was measured as an interval variable. In the 1979-80 NSBA, the income intervals ranged from zero dollars per year (coded 1) to \$30,000 and up per year (coded 17). The NBPS annual income intervals ranged from up to \$10,000 (coded 1) to \$75,000 and greater (coded 9).

Analyses

We begin the analyses by examining summary statistics for the data. Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and percentages for respondents' demographics, church involvement, and political activism characteristics. The proportion of men and women and the mean age of these two samples are similar. However, we witness differences in respondents' reported levels of education, income, church attendance, and political activism in the 1979-80 and 1993-94 samples.

The data show an increase in respondents' reported level of education and income between 1979-80 and 1993-94. Approximately three times as many respondents in the 1993-94 sample (30%) compared to the 1979-80 sample (9%) report being college educated. As expected, respondents in 1993-94 reported their family income as higher than their 1979-80 counterparts.

In 1993-94, blacks also reported being more politically active and religious than in

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics from Two Nationally Representative Samples of African Americans

	1979-80 NSBA			1993-94 NBPS		
	Percent	Mean	Std. Dev.	Percent	Mean	Std. Dev.
Demographic Control Variables (all respondents)						
Male	37.8			35.2		
Age		43.2	17.7		42.8	15.7
High School Graduate	31.2			56.2		
College Graduate	8.8			30.2		
Family Income		~\$8-\$10,000			~\$20-\$30,000	
Church Involvement Variables (attenders only)						
Church Attendance						
Never	10.0			2.8		
Once or Twice a Year	19.4			10.7		
Once or Twice a Month	30.6			35.1		
At Least Once a Week	40.0			51.4		
Church Activism		1.2	1.6	54.8		
<i>(0-22 organizations for 1979)⁴</i>						
<i>(% active in 1993)⁵</i>						
Political Activism Variables (all respondents)						
Vote ⁶		45.5		80.0		
Campaign Activism	14.1			22.8		
Political Contact	19.9			34.7		

⁴ In 1979, church activism is measured as the total number of church organizations in which individuals are involved.

⁵ In 1993, church activism is measured as the percent that are active in church projects, committees, and organizations.

⁶ The high level of voting reported may be indicative of social desirability effects as well as the disproportionate amount of educated and affluent blacks included in this sample compared to the 1990 census data. Telephone surveys tend to select individuals of upper incomes with stable addresses.

Table 2. Effect of Church Resources on Voting: Logit Analyses (Demographic Variables are Controlled)

	1979-80 NSBA		1993-94 NBPS	
	I	II	I	II
Church Attendance	.307**	.156	.186	-.069
Church Activism	_____	.174**	_____	.626**
Log Likelihood	-1179.784	-978.587	-399.634	-379.889
N=	1,890	1,700	945	919

*p<.05, **p<.01 (two-tailed tests)

1979-80. Blacks were substantially more likely to report voting (80% in 1993-94 compared to 46% in 1979-80), campaigning (23% in 1993-94 – 14% in 1979-80), and contacting public officials (35% in 1993-94 – 20% in 1979-80) in 1993-94 than in 1979-80. Among church attendees, involvement statistics show relatively high levels of religious participation in both samples. However, blacks in 1993-94 attended church slightly more often than they did in 1979-80. Approximately 70% of the 1979-80 NSBA respondents reported attending worship services at least once or twice a month. However, approximately 86% of respondents reported doing so in 1993-94. Church activism among attendees was also investigated. On average, African American attendees were involved in 1.2 church organizations in 1979-80. In addition, analyses of the dummy church group activity variable indicated that about 55% of the 1993-94 NBPS attendees reported they had been involved in church activism tasks.

To further examine the effects of church involvement on political activism among black church attenders in 1980 and 1994, we employed logit regression models. Subject to data limitations, we utilized a similar model specification to test our hypotheses across both time periods and samples.

Effect of Church Involvement on Voting. Table 2 displays the relationship between church involvement and black voting participation in 1980 and 1994. The first model of the 1980 sample indicates that frequent church attendance is associated with a greater likelihood of voting. In the second model, once church activism is considered, attendance is no longer associated with voting behavior. Only church activity increases attendees' propensity to vote.

Table 3. Effect of Church Resources on Campaign Activism: Logit Analyses (Demographic Variables are Controlled)

	1979-80 NSBA		1993-94 NBPS	
	I	II	I	II
Church Attendance	-.009	-.032	.419**	.155
Church Activism	_____	.067	_____	.805**
Log Likelihood	-740.613	-663.795	-487.536	-469.733
N=	1,190	1,701	943	917

*p<.05, **p<.01 (two-tailed tests)

We witness a slightly different relationship between church involvement and voting in the 1994 sample. In 1994, the first model indicates that church attendance is not related to voting. Only church activism, included in the second model, is positively related to voting participation.

In both 1980 and 1994, the data suggests that church activism is a critical resource that increases blacks' proclivity to vote. Simply attending church on Sunday or during the week may not place blacks in social situations that influence their willingness to vote. Rather, if church involvement is to increase blacks' propensity to vote, they must be active in the organizational life of their churches. In particular, blacks who are active committee participants tend to develop important communication and organizational skills that have spill-over effects on voting behavior. However, there is a distinction between church involvement and voting in 1980 and 1994. In 1980, church attendance is initially associated with black voting behavior; however, the variable loses significance when church activism measures were added to the model. In addition, the 1994 analyses show that church attendance was not related to voting behavior in either model specification.

Effect of Church Involvement on Campaign Activism. Table 3 displays the relationship between church involvement and campaign activism. The first model of the 1980 sample indicates that church attendance is not related to campaign activism. Similarly, in the second model, both church attendance and church activism were unrelated to campaign activity.

In 1994, the first model indicates that frequent church attendance increases cam-

paing participation. However, in the second model, once church activism is considered, attendance is not related to campaign activism. Only church activists were more likely to participate in campaigns.

The 1980 data supports prior work which suggested that church involvement does not provide enough social capital resources or civic skills for blacks to participate in more costly forms of activism, such as campaigning (Calhoun-Brown, 1996). However, the 1994 data suggests that involvement in formal church organizations does provide important civic skill building opportunities that may increase blacks' competency and efficacy in participating in political campaigns.

Effect of Church Involvement on Political Contact. Table 4 displays the relationship between church involvement and contacting public officials. The first model of the 1980 sample indicates that church attendance is not related to political contact. Only church activism, shown in the second model, is positively related to political contacting.

The 1994 sample displays a slightly different relationship between church involvement and political contact. In 1994, the first model indicates that frequent church attendance is associated with a greater likelihood of contacting public officials. However, once church group activity is included in the second model, church attendance is no longer related to political contact. Only church activists were more likely to contact public officials.

In both 1980 and 1994, the data suggests that involvement in formal church organi-

Table 4. Effect of Church Resources on Contacting Public Officials: Logit Analyses (Demographic Variables are Controlled)

	1979-80 NSBA		1993-94 NBPS	
	I	II	I	II
Church Attendance	-.051	-.068	.373**	.061
Church Activism	_____	.114**	_____	.644**
Log Likelihood	-876.070	-772.842	-555.979	-542.057
N=	1,185	1,696	944	918

*p<.05, **p<.01 (two-tailed tests)

zations provides blacks with civic skills that enable them to write, call, or speak with public officials about their concerns. However, in these years an important distinction in the relationship between church involvement and political contact exists. In 1980, simply attending church is not enough to increase blacks' willingness to contact public officials. Only individuals who are active in the organizational and committee life of their churches are likely to contact officials. In 1994, the results initially suggested that attendance alone had a positive effect on contacting behavior. However, once church activism (a positive predictor of contacting) is considered, attendance is no longer a significant predictor of contacting public officials. Unlike the 1980 data, the 1994 data suggests that church activism mediates the effect of attendance on contacting.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, this study demonstrated that church activism was a consistently positive determinant of black political participation in both 1980 and 1994. Furthermore, the mobilizing effects of church group involvement were persistent across a variety of measures of political participation. These findings are supportive of previous research regarding the positive spill-over effects of church activism on electoral and non-electoral participation (Peterson, 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

It is important to note that church attendance alone was not a consistent stimulus of black political activism in 1980 and 1994. More importantly, the influence of church attendance was unstable, ranging from positive and significant to negative and insignificant depending on the model specification and dependent variable examined. Church attendance only increased black activism in one-fourth of the regression models. Simply attending church had a less consistent politicizing effect on black participation. When measures of attendance and church activism were both considered in regression models, church activism was a more consistent positive predictor of black activism. Specifically, church group activity increased black participation in 5 of the 6 models analyzed.

These findings suggest that church activism may be a more reliable predictor of various forms of political activism among black church attenders (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; see Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Dubois, 1996). Our findings revealed that in two different years during the post-Civil Rights era, black churches continue to serve as important institutions where African Americans can enhance political competencies. By being involved in church committees, youth programs, missionary societies, and other church activities, blacks have been able to enhance their organizational and leadership skills.

The civic skills that lay church activists develop make them prime candidates to initiate and/or participate in voting efforts, campaigning, and contact public offi-

cials about their concerns. This was largely the case during the Civil Right era where lay leaders were used to recruit and help train others in movement strategies (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984). During the black power era, church activists were used to help raise funds for and recruit other members to participate in mayoral campaigns of black mayors such as Coleman Young of Detroit, Harold Washington of Chicago, Carl Stokes of Cleveland and others (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Rich, 1989; Thompson, 2001). A similar strategy was employed in Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidency bid. And, as our data suggests, blacks continue to use skills learned in church organizations to influence the political process.

While this paper contributes to the religion and black political participation literature, our study does not employ a true longitudinal design. Finding comparable survey items in multiple black samples required that we analyze data from 1980 and 1994. Reliable, nationally representative time series data (from 1980-1994) on black Americans containing the necessary religion and political participation items are scarce. Future research should extend the current time frame backward before 1980 and forward from 1994. The dynamic and evolving political influence of black church involvement warrant additional considerations across a significant time period.

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