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Politics and preaching: how religious elites justify addressing or avoiding political topics

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Abstract

Even amidst a decline in religious affiliation, nearly half of the U.S. population still attends religious services at least once a month, and congregations remain the single largest non-profit organizational type across the nation. Therefore, congregational influence on political attitudes and behavior is a crucial line of inquiry. We analyze interviews of 94 congregational leaders to better understand why they address or avoid political issues when preaching. Our research reveals that clergy use theological and pragmatic reasoning to determine whether they explicitly include political discourse in their sermons. Our findings are noteworthy in that clergy from a wide range of religious traditions use similar reasoning, and the same rationale can lead different clergy to adopt contrasting approaches to political content in sermons. Thus, this paper provides nuanced insight into the relationship between religion and politics and may help foster greater mutual understanding in a deeply divided political and social climate.

Keywords: clergy; congregations; polarization; politics; preaching

Introduction

Intense polarization is one of the most ominous phenomena in contemporary political life. Though not a new trend (Poole and Rosenthal, 1984; Layman *et al.*, 2006), partisanship is growing. Since 2016, for example, Democrats and Republicans both increasingly see the other in the worst light: as close-minded, dishonest, immoral, unintelligent, and lazy (Nadeem, 2022). A primary cause of increased polarization is political leaders' discriminatory and inflammatory rhetoric. The "Trump effect" describes the fanning by elites of hatred and prejudice among the mass citizenry (Newman *et al.* 2021).

Political polarization also has critical religious dimensions. Religious affiliation, for example, serves as a strong predictor of political affiliation: white evangelicals overwhelmingly support Republican candidates, including Trump in 2016 and 2020, while Christian communities of color, non-Christian religious traditions, and

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religious “nones” favor Democratic candidates (Martínez and Smith, 2016; Burge, 2020; Margolis, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2020). In addition, issues such as Christian nationalism, abortion, sexuality, racial justice, and immigration are ripe with religiopolitical tension (Brown *et al.*, 2017; Cravens, 2018; Baker *et al.*, 2020; Gorski, 2020; Liebertz and Bunch, 2021).

Moreover, religious leaders often mediate political perspectives (Smidt, 2005; Brown, 2011; Stokes *et al.*, 2018). For instance, clergy in two-thirds of U.S. congregations delivered a sermon addressing the 2020 presidential election (Quinn and Smith, 2021). In a nation with approximately 350,000 religious congregations, making up roughly one-fifth of all non-profit organizations in the United States, Americans attend religious gatherings more than any other species of association, group, or club (Saxon-Harold *et al.*, 2001; Putnam and Campbell, 2012; Fulton, 2020). Thus, the sermon is a prominent avenue through which religious leaders shape politics. However, research on clergy members and politics tends to focus on their political views and activities (Smidt, 2016; Malina and Hersh, 2021; Roso and Chaves, 2023). Few studies probe the underlying thought processes that guide their political choices. As a result, more research is needed to explore the reasoning of religious leaders when deciding whether to address political issues in their congregations.

Analyzing 94 semi-structured interviews of congregational leaders conducted by the *National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices* (NSCEP), we probe the logic utilized by congregational leaders in deciding whether to address political topics in their preaching. Our cross-religious tradition analysis reveals three noteworthy commonalities in American religion: (a) many religious leaders carefully consider whether to preach about controversial political and social issues; (b) religious elites from widely divergent religious traditions use similar reasoning to arrive at contrasting decisions about politics and preaching; and (c) the same rationale can lead some clerics to address and others to avoid controversial political issues in sermons. In other words, clergy from a wide range of religious traditions may not be as different as one might think. Many religious leaders are deeply concerned about political issues and use the same categories of reasoning, theological or pragmatic, to determine whether to preach on related topics. Finally, these findings provide hope for greater mutual understanding and less antagonism in a profoundly polarized climate.

Literature review

The influence of religious elites and their sermons

Scholars are interested in the role of religious leaders and congregations in shaping parishioners' political attitudes and activities. Clerics are religious elites who influence their congregations and the larger society in various ways (Wainscott, 2018; Munn, 2019; Pulejo, 2022). Religious leaders function as “culture bearers” and “cue-givers” whose ideology and framing activities affect parishioners' political ideology and behavior (Schoenherr, 1987; Lee, 2003; Smidt, 2003, 2005; Smith, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2017; Buckley, 2022; Guth and Smidt, 2022). Employing rational choice theory, some scholars argue that congregational leaders “equip, inform and mobilize members to engage in political action” as a competitive advantage strategy to maintain

members and resources (Djupe and Neiheisel, 2019, 123). Other research identifies various vehicles—language, emotional energy, ritual, music, and dance—by which religious leaders shape congregants’ identities and civic activity (Priest and Edwards, 2019; Corcoran, 2020). For example, researchers find that clergy “political cues” affect parishioners’ voting preferences even though their long-term influence on political behavior, such as party affiliation, is less significant (Jelen, 1992; Gilbert, 1993). On the positive side, religious leaders promote peace, environmental concern, civic engagement, and social action (Lee, 2003; De Juan and Vüllers, 2010; Buckley, 2022). On the negative side, they communicate “hidden transcript[s] of rage,” undermine democratic processes, and empower totalitarian regimes (Williams, 2014; Spenkuch and Tillmann, 2018; Burack, 2020).

Performing both priestly and prophetic functions, substantial overlap can exist between a religious leader’s ministerial tasks, including preaching, and their political agenda (Jelen, 1994; Barnes, 2004). Additionally, sermons and other communicative acts by clergy are essential for shaping the thoughts and activities of religious adherents (Djupe, 2021). This is because communication, rather than the “Four Bs” (i.e., believing, belonging, bonding, and behaving), is “the critical antecedent to all other religion-based outcomes that social scientists study” (Calfano, 2021, 1). Thus, sermons, which are “the central feature” of most religious services (Jelen, 1992, 693), shape political attitudes in, among others, Black Protestant, Catholic, fundamentalist, and Hispanic Protestant congregations (Koch and Beckley, 2006; Oldmixon and Hudson, 2008; Brown, 2011).

In addition to being impactful, political sermon discourse is also quite common across the U.S. religious landscape. A large-scale study of Protestant congregations found that two-thirds of clergy discuss politics from the pulpit and that more than one-third of sermons contain political content (Boussalis *et al.*, 2021). Clergy from both evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations are nearly equally willing to preach a sermon on a “social/political topic” and to “take a stand on a political issue” publicly outside of the pulpit (Smidt, 2005, 304–19). In addition, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and independent Christian clergy reported similar proclivities for preaching on numerous political topics with the exceptions that “independent Christians” were much more likely to address business development and mainline Protestants were much more likely to express support for “gay rights” (Mirola, 2000). A more targeted study found that a large majority of clergy in both the evangelical Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) and the mainline Reformed Church of America (RCA) were likely to preach a sermon on a “controversial social or political topic” (Smidt and Schaap, 2009, 448).

Frameworks related to clergy and politics

Our qualitative analysis of 94 NSCEP clergy interviews suggests that theology and pragmatic concerns are the two main types of reasoning that religious leaders employ in deciding whether to address or avoid political topics in sermons. As such, the following two sections of our literature review explore specific (a) theological and (b) pragmatic factors influencing clergy members’ political speech and activity. Though we arrived at these two categories inductively, scholars of religion have

proposed similar frameworks: theological and functional, spiritual and material, sacred and profane, priestly and prophetic, and personal and professional (Hammond *et al.*, 1978; Blizzard, 1985; Barnes, 2004; Gil and Gili, 2020; Cooper and Cooper, 2021). However, prior research has not utilized these categories to explore decision-making about political discourse in preaching.

Theological reasoning and politics in sermon discourse

Several scholars have identified connections between religious leaders' theological commitments and their proclivity to address political topics in sermons. To begin with, personal theological beliefs correlate with clergy political activity within and outside the congregational setting (Glazier, 2018). More specifically, a study of nine Christian religious traditions found that clergy with more extreme theological beliefs, either conservative or liberal, were likelier to preach political sermons than moderate congregational leaders (Beatty and Walter, 1989). Research on 19 Protestant denominations concluded that three distinct social theologies drive clergy thought on whether to address political issues: communitarianism, individualism, and neopuritanism (Gray, 2008). Similarly, theologically rooted individualism fosters reticence to address political topics among evangelical and mainline Protestant clergy (Jelen, 1994).

In addition, theology, mediated through a faith community's broader religious tradition, influences religious leaders (Glazier, 2018). The connection between theological tradition and clerical political activity has been observed in Black Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, and mainline Protestant religious traditions (Guth *et al.*, 1995; Djupe and Sokhey, 2003; Green, 2003; Jelen, 2003; Kellstedt and Green, 2003; Burge and Djupe, 2014).

Pragmatic reasoning and politics in sermon discourse

A variety of pragmatic considerations influence religious leaders' approaches to political matters. Consistent with theories of religious economies and resource dependence, clergy may be more overtly political as a strategy for membership outreach and retention (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003; Djupe and Neiheisel, 2019). By contrast, resource dependence compels some clergy in financially constrained congregations to limit their political activity and preaching (Calfano, 2010; Calfano *et al.*, 2014). Concern for financial viability is not only related to donations but also to tax-exempt status for some congregations (Beyerlein and Chaves, 2020).

Efficacy in communication is another practical consideration in deliberations over what content to include in sermons. Not surprisingly, preaching is more persuasive when religious leaders intentionally identify with their congregations (Loscalzo, 1992). Likewise, congregants are more likely to remember a sermon when it aligns with their beliefs (Pargament and DeRosa, 1985). In addition, clergy credibility and authenticity are foundational to effective preaching (Gil and Gili, 2020). On a related note, a large-scale qualitative study of congregants found that sermon persuasiveness is connected to its content, clergy credibility (based on prior relationships), and the emotions evoked during the sermon (Allen and Mulligan, 2009).

Additional research shows that congregations significantly influence clergy political activity and preaching. Emerson and Smith (2001) find that what clergy believe to be right or prophetic in the political domain is constrained and shaped by their congregations. Similarly, though clergy take cues on political speech from their institutional leaders (Calfano *et al.*, 2014), many feel pressure from congregational constituencies that impacts their decisions on sermon content (Djupe and Gilbert, 2002; Calfano, 2009). Furthermore, the desire of religious leaders to be liked and to avoid conflict can diminish their willingness to preach prophetically (Tisdale, 2010; Moiso, 2020; Krull and Gilliland, 2023).

In summary, scholarly literature provides ample evidence that religious leaders and their sermons influence American political life. Research also shows various theological and pragmatic factors that shape clergy approaches to politics and preaching. However, the existing literature has yet to explicate how clergy reason about their political speech (or activity). Why religious leaders, across a broad range of religious traditions, decide to address or avoid political issues from the pulpit is an under-explored and consequential question.

Data and methods

To examine the decision-making of congregational leaders on whether to address political topics in sermons, our study analyzes data from the NSCEP (Fulton and King, 2018). This nationally representative study of religious congregations began with a survey of key informants in congregations. Key informants, typically congregational leaders, completed an online survey of questions about their congregation's characteristics, activities, and economic practices. Respondents from 1,227 congregations completed the survey with a response rate of 40%.

Subsequently, NSCEP interviewed 94 of the key informants from a cross-section of congregations based on congregational size, congregational age, tenure of the leader, religious tradition, racial background of the congregation, region, and community setting (rural, suburban, or urban). Table 1 shows that interviewees came from 14 Catholic, 29 evangelical Protestant, 32 mainline Protestant, 7 Black Protestant, 3 Jewish, and 9 "other" religious congregations. Among Protestant religious traditions, interviewees represent 28 denominations, of which 5 are Black, 15 are Evangelical, and 8 are Mainline. Religious traditions represented among our interviewees from the RELTRAD category of "other" include Buddhist, Muslim, Orthodox, Sikh, and Unitarian Universalist (UU) (Steenland *et al.*, 2000). In addition, interviewees hail from 20 states and all regions of the United States. Finally, Table 1 shows that the sample of interviewees spans a wide range in the congregational metrics of size and revenue.

A team of NSCEP researchers audio-recorded and transcribed each of the 94 key informant interviews. Within the semi-structured interviews, clergy answered specific questions about preaching on political issues and increasing political polarization in society. While the authors of this paper examined the transcripts along both inductive and deductive lines, the codes or themes herein are primarily the product of inductive analysis. The crucial step in the inductive analysis of qualitative interviews is careful reading of raw interview transcripts until evaluators have a detailed understanding of

Table 1. Clergy interviewees

| Interviewees | Black Prot. | Catholic | Evangelical | Jewish | Mainline | Other |
|----------------------|-------------|----------|-------------|--------|----------|-------|
| Total (94) | 7 | 14 | 29 | 3 | 32 | 9 |
| Region: | | | | | | |
| Midwest (30) | 2 | 6 | 12 | 0 | 7 | 3 |
| Northeast (18) | 1 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 1 |
| Southeast (28) | 4 | 0 | 9 | 2 | 10 | 3 |
| West (18) | 0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 9 | 2 |
| Gender of clergy: | | | | | | |
| Female (18) | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 12 | 1 |
| Male (76) | 6 | 13 | 26 | 3 | 20 | 8 |
| Congregation size: | | | | | | |
| N/A (8) | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 1–49 (7) | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| 50–99 (4) | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 100–249 (19) | 1 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| 250–999 (42) | 2 | 8 | 11 | 1 | 17 | 3 |
| 1,000+ (14) | 0 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 1 |
| Revenue size: | | | | | | |
| N/A (9) | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| \$0–\$99,000 (6) | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| \$100 K–\$249 K (8) | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| \$250 K–\$499 K (22) | 1 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| \$500 K–\$999 K (16) | 1 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 8 | 0 |
| \$1,000,000+(33) | 0 | 6 | 12 | 1 | 12 | 2 |

the themes and ideas articulated by the interviewees (Thomas, 2006). Therefore, we read 80 of the 94 interview transcripts (or 85%) before finalizing the codebook on preaching and politics. This method increases our confidence that the findings described below are faithful to the voice of the U.S. religious leaders interviewed.

Findings

Using the transcripts of NSCEP's 94 clergy interviews, this study analyzes whether religious leaders primarily draw on theological or pragmatic reasoning when considering addressing or avoiding political topics in their sermons. We find that either category of reasoning can support clergy decisions in both directions. Table 2 illustrates this point in a two-by-two framework. Though qualitative analysis does not aim at probabilities or statistically significant causal relationships, quadrants one,

Table 2. Clergy reasoning for addressing or avoiding political issues in sermons

| | Address political issues | Avoid political issues |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Theological reasoning | <i>Quadrant 1:</i> | <i>Quadrant 2:</i> |
| | Theology | Theology |
| | Religious tradition | Pastoral care |
| Pragmatic reasoning | | Desire for unity |
| | <i>Quadrant 3:</i> | <i>Quadrant 4:</i> |
| | Resource independence | Resource dependence |
| | Structural freedom | Interpersonal relationships |
| | | Effective communication |

two, and four are more developed among the NSCEP interviews than quadrant two. In addition, each quadrant of reasoning contains several sub-categories that more precisely describe the logic expressed by religious leaders in their decision-making about political sermon content.

Quadrant 1: theological reasoning to address political topics in sermons

The upper-left quadrant of *Table 2* corresponds with clergy motivated by *theology* to address political issues. This a priori commitment compels congregational leaders to speak up on political topics. Clergy members articulate theological rationale at the personal (i.e., an individual theological belief) and institutional (i.e., theological commitments of a religious denomination or tradition) levels. The potential negative impact of political discourse on donations, clergy reputation, or congregational conflict does not override more profound theological convictions for these individuals.

For example, when asked about avoiding controversial topics for financial reasons, an independent Baptist pastor responded, “No. I mean, we pretty much hit things head-on here. There’s been sometimes that...In fact, I’ve lost some big givers because I was not compromising.” When asked if anything had changed due to the 2016 election cycle, he responded, “No. Again, this is, for me, this is always going to be the final authority. Our culture will change, issues may change, but this doesn’t change. My desire is to just stand faithful and firm with what God’s said to be true.” A rabbi succinctly commented that avoiding controversial political topics “does not comport with Jewish values.” A United Methodist Church (UMC) pastor responded, “I was taught in my divinity life that I don’t give my opinion. People [don’t] come to hear my opinion. They come here to hear the gospel.” While that may sound like a justification to avoid controversial subjects, he went on to say, “I talk about racism a lot because it’s a reality. I talk about immigration a lot because it’s a reality. Talk about educational inequity in this city because it’s a reality. I talk about political favoritism in this city because it’s reality.” God’s truth, Jewish values, and the gospel motivate these religious leaders to address political topics in their sermons.

Moreover, clergy from both progressive and conservative religious traditions expressed theological reasons to justify their willingness to discuss controversial

political issues in sermons. A UU pastor remarked that he preached quite a lot on racism, exclusion, and white supremacy because scripture speaks to those issues and “these are our values.” A congregational leader from the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) stated that he preaches frequently on social and political issues: “We’ll never tell you here how to vote, but I would remind you that your faith should always inform your politics. Your politics should not inform your faith.” A Black Protestant pastor, when asked if he had ever avoided controversial topics for financial reasons, stated unequivocally, “No.... As far as difficult topics, I don’t think we have that option. If you ever make a decision on the sermon based on finances, then you’re working for the wrong person.”

Several theologically and politically conservative clerics expressed similar reasoning for addressing contentious political topics. The pastor of an evangelical non-denominational congregation argued that such issues were not necessarily “biblically divisive.” Pointing to immigration as an example, he rejected the notion that care for immigrants is political. In answering his own question, “How are we going to care for people who are undocumented?” he responded that the clarity of scripture does not allow him to avoid the issue despite a fear of decreased congregational giving. The one caveat or situation in which this interviewee avoids political topics is if the congregational leadership does not “have the expertise to speak to [an] issue.” Another evangelical clergy member spoke of a “theological mandate” and the importance of being “faithful to God’s word.” As such, she directly addresses items such as “socio-economic oppression,...justice, and economic justice” in sermons. This pastor pointed to the historical lack of preaching on such topics in the region as contributing to the deep poverty in their highly religious city. She also noted that political preaching had resulted in the loss of numerous major donors to the congregation.

In addition to the commentary on theology described above, numerous religious leaders articulated the influence of theology mediated through *religious tradition*. This phenomenon is most noticeable in the subset of Black Protestant interviewees. Given the importance of race in issues of religion and politics, we include a separate subsection entitled Race and Place below, which also discusses religious tradition.

Religious leaders, across a relatively broad theological spectrum, see faith, scripture, God’s truth, religious values, and religious tradition as reasons to address urgent political and social matters. Theology, far from suggesting an other-worldly avoidance of terrestrial concerns, compels clergy in quadrant one to engage political issues explicitly in their preaching.

Quadrant 2: religious reasoning to avoid political topics in sermons

The upper-right quadrant of our framework, theological reasoning to avoid political issues, consists of three categories: theology, pastoral care, and a desire for unity. In terms of *theological* reasoning proper, clergy discussed the priority of religion over politics. A pastor from a PCUSA congregation commented on congregational expectations related to then-President Trump: “I’ve got people on my right flank, but I’ve got people on my left flank who want me to call out the president every week. And I have to say, I would like to speak more about Jesus than our present president.” He

continued by noting that while there are “lots of things in our world that are important to talk about,” he aspires to talk “more about the Gospel than about those things and keep those in proportion.” A minister at an evangelical congregation described his theologically motivated avoidance of politics in preaching as follows: “Nope. I don’t address political issues. I address moral issues. I don’t address party issues... So I’ve always taught we are citizens of heaven first, and my moral obligations and passions need to reflect that. So, your political party, we’re not the whipping boy of the Republican, we’re not to be Republican or Democrat. Christ first. That’s our decision grid [for] that.” Speaking to a theological rationale of faith over politics, another evangelical clergy member asked, “Are you American first and then a Christian? Or a Christian first, then American? Because it’s important.” Similarly, an ELCA pastor stated that their sanctuary does not have an American flag because “it’s not America in there,” and “the Kingdom of God is bigger than any country.” Another relatively apolitical approach comes from a New Thought interviewee. Describing his congregation as bipartisan, the religious leader stated, “so I avoid talking about one side or another, but I talk about the issue as being important and that people have to get involved... We say, ‘You have infinite wisdom within you. The presence of God is within you. You can decide. It’s your responsibility to decide and then to take action.’”

A second theological reason contributing to the avoidance of political subjects in preaching is the prioritization of *pastoral care*. For instance, a UMC pastor who approves of LGBTQ marriage identified his concern for those who disagree with him, stating, “So I do think there are times at which you have to craft your message around, okay, who is this excluding? Who is this pushing away? Who is this pushing out?” He described the motivation as pastoral care, explaining the “need to be able to stay in relationship with you because something may come up with your family and something may come up with your health or something may come up in your life, and I still need to be able to be your pastor.” A Black Protestant leader expressed a similar motivation to justify why he would not preach about race and immigration for several weeks after a sermon he delivered opposing the “send her back” chants referring to U.S. Representative Ihan Omar (D-MN) at a political rally. The pastor explained his logic, saying, “I care about, love a lot of folks that are empty-nester white folks that are really struggling with this right now, and it was just hard for them. So I think ... I’m not trying to justify it, but I think it comes sort of pastorally, the people I care about, not trying to run them off too quick.” Regarding one of the most divisive political and social issues for many religious adherents, abortion, a Catholic priest stated unequivocally: “No, I don’t talk about abortion.... I have a guess that probably at least a quarter of the women in the congregation have probably had an abortion. They don’t need to be told that they’re going to hell. They have their own guilt with that, whatever reason, the one they chose. I know it’s not something that they chose because it was fun. It’s not a fun sin.” Despite theological opposition to abortion, labeling it a “sin,” this priest avoids the topic in sermons out of pastoral concern for the emotional welfare of parishioners.

A final reason in the quadrant of theological rationale to avoid or minimize political sermon discourse is the *desire for unity*. This justification is close to that of the pastoral concern just discussed. Yet the discourse of some interviewees was distinct

enough for us to categorize it separately. For example, a Congregational pastor remarked, “No. I wouldn’t talk about a controversial subject if it became political, which would ... It wouldn’t be so much about giving. That would not be my concern. It would be my concern that people felt like they were isolated from the fellowship.” A clergy from an ELCA congregation explained why unity is crucial for them: “Here, I think we have people who would identify themselves as very liberal and others who identified themselves [as] conservative evangelicals. It is a spectrum. I think people do see the value in being church-ed together and in being in relationship with each other.” A Cooperative Baptist Fellowship pastor, who described his congregation as “a very big tent church,” said that “we’ve chosen to avoid controversial subjects before” to “protect the harmony and the unity of the church.” In these cases, clergy did not articulate the desire for unity as a pragmatic concern to maintain size and resources but rather as a commitment to religious community and shared relationships.¹

As with the first quadrant, clergy in quadrant two express primarily theological reasoning for their decision-making regarding preaching on political topics. They are more motivated by scripture, doctrine, and religious values than by practical concern for matters such as donations and personal reputation. Yet these religious leaders reach the opposite conclusion of their first-quadrant colleagues about what a theological approach requires of them in the pulpit: they avoid controversial political topics in favor of the primacy of theological commitments, pastoral care, or unity.

Quadrant 3: pragmatic reasoning to address political topics in sermons

The second half of the two-by-two framework identifies pragmatic reasons for addressing or avoiding controversial political and social issues in sermons. For the lower left-hand quadrant, pragmatic reasons to address political topics, we posit two main motivations: resource independence and structural freedom.

The former, *resource independence*, contrasts directly with the fourth quadrant’s resource dependence (see below). Resource independence refers to the phenomenon, cited by several religious leaders, in which the strong financial position of their congregation fosters freedom to preach on controversial political and social issues. For example, an evangelical pastor talked about his lack of fear of congregants who would threaten to withhold donations because of sermon content: “They’re barking up the wrong tree with me. I’m like, ‘Go ahead. Take your money somewhere else.’... But I am in a blessed position where if they do take their money away, I’m not all of a sudden penniless. So, I have the freedom to do that.” Similarly, a PCUSA pastor remarked about their decision to affirm gay marriage, saying, “Our single biggest giver left over our decision to do gay marriage... Luckily we’re big enough we can absorb it.”

On an adjacent note, a rabbi observed that some congregants give specifically because of their explicit commitment to social justice, including as expressed in sermons. This motivation is slightly different from the prior two clergy mentioned immediately above. Rather than a robust financial position fostering freedom to preach on whatever issues a religious leader wills, this is a case of financial gains due to preaching on controversial political topics. Yet we include it here because it is a pragmatic and resource-based motive that promotes political sermon discourse.

A final version of resource independence comes from an ELCA pastor whose policy is not to know the financial contributions of individual congregants. He felt that purposefully ignoring individual donor data engenders freedom not to “worry about [giving] and its implications” for preaching.

Liberty to address political topics in sermons can also derive from institutional structures—what Emerson and Smith (2001) call *structural freedom*. One Congregationalist pastor described “the Congregational religion as based on freedom.” Within a denominational structure that is often more associational than hierarchical, the pastor stated, “I own the pulpit” and can say just about anything short of “weird conspiracy theories.” Though Roman Catholic polity contrasts sharply with Congregationalism, several priests also commented on the freedom within their ecclesiastical structure. One interviewee said, “Catholic priests have more of a freedom, because their congregation doesn’t hire and fire us. This gives us a great freedom.” Likewise, another Catholic priest said, “Yes, we can say prophetic things because they’re not our bosses. They [the congregation] don’t hire and fire us.”

Some clergy feel free to preach on political issues because of a solid financial position or institutional structure. Although theological motivations may also exist, religious leaders in the third quadrant explained their rationale for addressing controversial political issues from the pulpit primarily in pragmatic terms.

Quadrant 4: pragmatic reasoning to avoid political topics in sermons

The fourth and final quadrant of our proposed framework includes pragmatic reasons that justify the avoidance of political discourse in religious sermons. Specifically, clergy members invoke resource dependence, interpersonal relationships, and effective communication to ground their decisions on sermon content. The first of these, *resource dependence*, shows up as the opposite of resource independence in the pragmatic and political quadrant (quadrant three). In the case of resource dependence, numerous religious leaders expressed their concern that preaching on controversial political issues could drive away donors and weaken the financial position of the congregation. For instance, a clergy member of a Unity congregation talked about a “financial crisis” due to several Republican congregants, who were major donors, leaving for political reasons. A UMC minister noted, “I probably would not preach on a controversial topic during a stewardship campaign,” while another UMC pastor said that not having a “private endowment...probably does give me an excuse” to avoid difficult topics. Similarly, an evangelical pastor reflected, “Maybe I haven’t pushed as hard as I want” on some issues, including race, for fear of the impact on giving.

On a related note, several religious leaders discussed congregational tax-exempt status as a factor in deciding about political discourse in sermons. One interviewee commented, for example, “The state is always watching to make sure we’re still tax-exempt.” Another religious leader from a UU congregation broached the same subject, observing, “Within the confines of the IRS rules, we go pretty far.”

Professional self-preservation can also be indicative of a motivation connected to resource dependence. After a highly political sermon by his senior pastor, one junior pastor said, “Wow. I hope I have a job at the end of the day because I’m the discretionary person here.” Another cleric talked about a parishioner seeking to have him

fired due to sermons about building bridges, which the unhappy parishioner perceived as taking sides on the politically fraught immigration issue. A third religious leader stated, “I have a strong aversion to saying things which will get me fired.”

Several clergy members also expressed their lack of preaching on controversial political topics for reasons related to *interpersonal relationships*. A UMC pastor stated, “I don’t enjoy conflict, and so I don’t naturally go to those things.” Another respondent described his predecessor’s avoidance of difficult issues: “It wasn’t about money. It was emotional blackmail, not financial. It was emotional. We will stop loving you.”

Finally, *effective communication* is the pragmatic rationale for avoiding, or at least tempering, controversial sermon content for some clergy. A PCUSA pastor explained his decision-making, saying, “I try to balance my own convictions and my idea of the need to be heard.” Similarly, a Lutheran pastor said she attempts to hold her convictions “loosely enough that people can still listen to what I have to say.” A UMC pastor said, “I am much more careful, I suppose, on how I express things so someone doesn’t just hit the door, and then they’re just gone,” and then “there’s no opportunity to engage.”

Many congregational leaders expressed concerns about the practical impact of political discourse in sermons. Due primarily to resource dependence, interpersonal relationships, and concern for effective communication, clergy in quadrant four avoid or minimize political content in sermons.

Reasoning from multiple quadrants

In their interviews, numerous congregational leaders invoked reasons from multiple quadrants of our proposed framework. A theological and political approach (quadrant one) was sometimes tempered by a pragmatic and apolitical impulse (quadrant four). For example, one rabbi quoted above said, “I have a strong aversion to saying things which will get me fired,” but also stated, “I have a strong aversion to saying things that I don’t believe.” Alongside his principled theological reasoning was a clear example of resource dependence. Likewise, an ELCA pastor quoted above as saying, “I do try and hold [political opinions] loosely enough that people can still listen to what I have to say,” also said, “I don’t avoid difficult discussions about things.” These two statements appeal to the pragmatic consideration of effective communication in the context of a predisposition toward addressing politically divisive topics on principle.

Another quadrant pairing is the use of theological and pragmatic reasoning to avoid preaching on political topics—a combination of quadrants two and four. An Assemblies of God pastor justified avoiding political sermon discourse, saying, “It will affect the bottom line. But more importantly to me is, it affects people’s hearts.” Similarly, an Episcopal priest summarized his approach: “I feel like if I were courageous, I would just say what I think Jesus is saying without any filters. But I know that will anger some people, and I don’t want them to leave. And I also feel like maybe it’s not just the money, but it’s more just like we need to be a community where we can have our differences. And if people leave, then that’s not good for anybody.” This justification for avoiding politics appeals to the desire for unity (quadrant two) and the pragmatic rationale of resource dependence (quadrant four).

Cross-cutting themes: race and place

Perhaps no issue is more consequential for politics and religion in the United States than race, and its influence extends to questions of preaching. To take a prominent case, many Black Protestant clergy from the “African American Prophetic Tradition” are inclined to address difficult political issues directly and explicitly from the pulpit (Barnes, 2004, 2012; Johnson, 2010, 2016, 2018).² Consistent with this literature, all the U.S.-born Black Protestant NSCEP interviewees, though politically and theologically diverse, reported discussing politics in sermons. Moreover, several of these clergy members described their *religious tradition* as promoting political preaching. One pastor said, “So I speak to that on a regular basis. The Black church has more freedom to do stuff like that, because the Black church has always been a church of liberation. We’ve always been about, go down Moses, tell old Pharaoh to set my people free. You know?” Other Black Protestant interviewees discussed a historical hermeneutical approach and congregational expectations that promote preaching on political and social issues.

These clerics invoked theological more than pragmatic reasoning to explain their motives. An interviewee said, for instance, “From a Biblical point, I state my point of view and I think church members will respect that.” Another pastor explained his preaching about immigration by quoting Jesus: “Come to me all you who are weary, and I will give you rest.” Additionally, an interviewee framed his criticisms from the pulpit of President Trump’s rhetoric with the scriptural account of Moses dishonoring God when he struck a rock multiple times in the wilderness (Numbers 20:10–13).

At the same time, several Black Protestant interviewees expressed various reasons to temper political preaching. The pastor who quoted Jesus in favor of welcoming immigrants said, after that sermon, “I’m probably not going to mention anything racially for another couple of weeks or so, just to be blunt.” As mentioned above (see “Quadrant 2: religious reasoning to avoid political topics in sermons”), he roots this restraint in pastoral care. Another Black Protestant religious leader, who seemed cautious about discussing political topics in sermons, stated, “My conviction is that the people that come before me, they want to hear from God.” This individual also does not permit political candidates to preach on Sunday mornings—Democrats and Republicans are welcome to hold rallies at the church at other times. In addition, the pastor who compared Trump’s rhetoric to Moses dishonoring God when he struck the rock in the wilderness commented, “I am always mindful that Christ corrects in love.” This pastor self-describes as non-partisan—a self-description he shares with the prior interviewee, who also justifies moderating political speech with theological reasoning.

Place or location also influences religion and politics (Chalfant and Heller, 1991; Weakliem and Biggert, 1999; Ferguson and Tamburello, 2015; Dougherty and Mulder, 2020). This relationship shows up in the NSCEP interviews in numerous ways. First, clergy from several urban congregations cited problems such as violence and gentrification as influencing how they minister and preach. One interviewee, for instance, addresses gangs and guns in sermons because three members of his congregation had recently been killed by gun violence.

A second way geography impacts decision-making about sermon discourse is through regional history and characteristics. For example, an Assemblies of God pastor who talked about the “Trump factor” and the conservative culture of the U.S. South, where he serves, remarked, “I think the preacher can be conservative publicly” in this region. By contrast, An American Baptist cleric lamented the ideological homogeneity in MA, where conservatives are “marginalized.” In addition, an Episcopal priest spoke of the “more conservative” political views in their rural corner of the otherwise “quite liberal” RI.

Thus, race and location are noteworthy cross-cutting factors influencing clergy approaches to politics and preaching—the intersection of race, place, politics, and preaching would be a productive area for future study. The role of race among NSCEP interviewees is most clearly visible among the Black Protestant religious leaders, which is also evidence of the impact of religious tradition. This subset of interviewees, including the less partisan clerics, stands out for the propensity to discuss politics from the pulpit and the use of theological reasoning to justify such sermon discourse.

Religious elites share a concern for partisanship and polarization

Our research also finds shared concern among religious leaders across a broad political and theological spectrum for growing polarization and partisanship. This finding resonates with the increased “political mobilization” of religious adherents over the last several decades (Fulton, 2016; Beyerlein and Chaves, 2020). While the NSCEP Interviewees’ reports of increasing polarization in congregations are discouraging, the fact that many religious leaders view polarization and partisanship as problematic supports the central contention of our paper: clergy across the U.S. religious scene have meaningful commonalities in the religiopolitical domain. So, for instance, a Lutheran pastor lamented, “As we’ve gotten more divided...I think it’s just become more and more taboo to even talk politics.” A PCUSA clergy stated, “That election [2016] and right after that has done more damage to the fabric of our community than any of the stuff around [gay] marriage.” A UMC religious leader spoke wistfully of the era of Bill Clinton versus George H. W. Bush: “That was 1992 when you could actually joke with someone who disagreed with you and still love each other.”

Numerous interviewees reported heightened partisanship and over-sensitivity of congregants in support, primarily, of Republican positions or politically conservative ideas. A congregational leader offered this synopsis of hyper-sensitivity and increasing rancor: “The way that I’ve seen it is the things that I talked about pre-Trump that Jesus said about kindness and humility and loving your neighbor and responding to the poor ... Prior to Trump’s election, when I talked about those things and said, ‘Jesus said those things,’ people said, ‘Yes. Jesus said those things.’ I talk about those very same things now as the teachings of Jesus, and I’m told, ‘You are being political in your sermons. I don’t come to church to hear a bunch of politics.’” Similarly, after an evangelical pastor condemned the “send her back” chants directed toward Ilhan Omar mentioned above, he was surprised that some congregants wondered, “Why are you getting so political?” Likewise, when a Jewish clergy member preached from the Ten Commandments that “adultery is bad,” some in the audience viewed the message as “political” and as “an attack on the president [Trump].”

In addition, when discussing increasing congregational politicization, a Catholic and an evangelical congregational leader identified “nationalism” as a significant contemporary problem. The former paired nationalism with racism, and the latter described it as the belief that the United States is “in line with the will of God.” A United Church of Christ clergy also talked about the U.S. flag, formerly in their sanctuary, as a “symbol” of “Christian nationalism.”

That said, numerous religious leaders felt pressure from both ends of the political spectrum. As discussed above, a PCUSA pastor observed, “I’ve got people on my right flank, but I’ve also got people on my left flank.” When asked about receiving political pressure and expectations from the congregation, an evangelical clergy member simply stated, “From both sides.” Another evangelical pastor said that their congregation has “an equal number of Democrats and Republicans.” As such, this pastor attempts to achieve balance in sermons on controversial topics, stating: “Usually when I talk about a controversial [issue], I’m going to try to spread the unhappiness across the board. For example, I may preach on how Jesus really loves fetuses and undocumented migrants and get everybody mad equally. Or maybe not as mad to say, ‘Well, at least they did the other side too.’ That way, I’m trying to be fair, trying to be as non-partisan.” These clergy are attuned to the risks of political sermon discourse deriving from both conservative and progressive constituencies within an increasingly divided society.

Alongside the polarization of congregants, a small number of religious elites expressed stridently partisan views. One respondent said that Ted Cruz and the KKK are “not much different,” even while also describing the religious leader’s predecessor as “rabidly anti-Republican.” A Catholic priest, interestingly, characterized opposition to *Roe v. Wade* as the position of a “fanatic.” In addition, several congregational leaders expressed their disdain for President Trump. For example, two mainline Protestant clergy stated that they “hate” Trump, while an evangelical pastor described the former president as “one of the most immoral people in human history.” While our interviewees fall on both sides of the political aisle, most of the clergy partisanship in the interviews favored Democratic positions or politically progressive ideas.

The relative mismatch between leaders and congregations on polarization and partisanship—less extreme political attitudes of clergy—described by a wide variety of NSCEP interviewees is consistent with literature on religion and politics (Hadden, 1969; Djupe and Gilbert, 2003). For instance, scholars found that protestant clergy of both major political parties were less likely to vote for Trump in 2016 than laity in their denomination with the same political affiliation (Guth and Smidt, 2022). Another study of a large set of Protestant clergy concludes, “Clearly, pastors are not mirror images of their congregations in terms of political leanings” (Malina and Hersh, 2021, 720). However, a recent study finds a more complex picture regarding alignment between clergy and laity: Black Protestant and majority-white evangelical leaders are likelier to align politically with their congregants than are their colleagues in other religious traditions. NSCEP interview analysis is inconclusive on the alignment between clergy and laity on political positions and party affiliation. However, our findings address a slightly different question about clergy-laity alignment: are congregants, on average, more politically extreme than their leaders? The

preliminary answer from NSCEP interviewees is yes. Clergy are deeply concerned about increasing polarization among their congregations across the U.S. religious landscape, including among Black Protestant and white evangelical congregations. On a positive note, this shared sentiment suggests that religious leaders, on average, may be a key resource for restraining extreme polarization and partisanship.

Discussion and conclusion

Taking a step back, our research identifies three significant patterns of clergy reasoning regarding preaching and politics across U.S. religious traditions. In the first place, clerics carefully consider whether to preach on political issues. Many interviewees detailed the thought processes and factors influencing their decisions on this question. Moreover, clergy frequently expressed urgent concern for both (a) the impact of political sermon discourse on the life of their congregation; and (b) the weight on society of many pressing political and social issues.

The second central observation from our research is that diverse religious leaders use similar reasoning to arrive at opposing decisions on whether to address controversial political issues in sermons—our two-by-two framework illuminates this point. These commonalities in underlying thought patterns are less noticeable in studies identifying and aggregating religious leaders' political positions and behaviors. The latter research, which is necessary and valuable, is well suited to identify differences across religious traditions. Yet too little research examines the logic and thought processes that produce these political positions and behaviors. Our study shows that exploration of this nature contributes to a fuller and more nuanced picture. Similarity across religious traditions is an essential element of the religious landscape in the United States.

Moreover, in the current atmosphere of immense ideological division, too many commenters reduce contrasting attitudes and behaviors to a simplistic schema that contrasts the good and right with the bad and wrong. While this distinction is undoubtedly true with certain issues, NSCEP interviewees complicate the picture by frequently employing similar or identical reasoning to reach opposite approaches to politics and preaching.

A third fundamental characteristic of clergy reasoning visible in the interviews is that theology is a significant factor in deliberations over political matters. While economic and social considerations are also important, religious leaders express and often prioritize theological elements in their decision-making about political content in sermons. Research on religion frequently foregrounds economic, sociological, and political explanations at the expense of theological factors. Thus, the corpus of NSCEP interviews cautions against undervaluing theological reasoning in the study of religion and politics.

Methodologically, our research illustrates the utility of qualitative analysis at the juncture of religion and politics. Quantitative research measuring clergy and religious adherents' political commitments and actions yields valuable insight. Qualitative research into the motivations, reasoning, and thought processes contributing to these commitments and actions generates a fuller understanding of the forces at work. Semi-structured interviews combined with inductive and deductive analysis

can unearth sub-terranean processes and mechanisms that are less visible through other methods.

In conclusion, our paper moves the analysis of religion and politics beyond the individual voter to religious congregations and their leaders. We also add to the analysis of congregational leaders' political positions and actions by probing the thought processes by which they arise. This innovative research combination has implications for political science, religious studies, sociology, and philanthropic studies. Furthermore, because religious organizations are the largest non-profit subsector in the United States, as measured by organizational numbers and annual charitable giving, our findings are highly relevant to society at large. Finally, by mapping the reasoning used by clergy in deciding whether to address controversial political and social issues in sermons, our research suggests much-needed pathways for greater understanding amid deep and fervent ideological, political, and social division.

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Notes

1. Additionally, in the discussion of polarization and partisanship below, we quote several congregational leaders who expressed their longing for greater unity. Yet because those comments did not describe deliberation over sermon content, we do not include them here.
2. Numerous interviewees from evangelical, Jewish, Mainline, and other religious traditions also discussed various racial dynamics related to their ministry and preaching—a number of those comments are included in other subsections of the paper. However, we did not discern clear patterns among other constituencies on this topic, so we focused on the patterns visible among Black Protestant interviewees.

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