

Executive Summary of findings from the
2012 Little Rock Congregations Study

Dr. Rebecca Glazier
Principle Investigator
Department of Political Science
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
raglazier@ualr.edu
501-569-8787

The 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study was conducted under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Glazier of the Political Science Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Conducted from May 1, 2012 through November 11, 2012, the study surveyed congregation leaders from 66 religious organizations in the city limits of Little Rock, interviewed congregation leaders from 15 of those organizations, and surveyed and interviewed congregants from 5 of those congregations. A discussion of the survey methods and response rates are included in the appendix.

The study was conducted with the support of UALR's College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences faculty summer research grant, as well as a Middle Eastern Studies faculty research grant. Additional support was provided by the Department of Political Science. The study aimed to support both teaching and research at UALR. Students were actively involved in the research design and execution through independent study projects, as research assistants, and through the seminar course Political Science 4341: Religion and Electoral Politics, taught during the Fall 2012 semester.

The project was successful in both of its aims: a great breadth and depth of data on congregations and their political involvement and attitudes were collected, and students were able to actively participate in the research process. This executive report summarizes these successes and discusses potential future avenues of research.

Undergraduate Research

The 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study provided an opportunity for UALR students to gain experience in research design, data management, interviewing, and hypothesis testing. Fourteen students, including 2 graduate students, completed Political Science 4341: Religion and Electoral Politics. Students in the class helped to design the survey that was distributed to the congregations, attended services at their assigned congregation three times, distributed and collected surveys the Sunday before and the Sunday after the 2012 Presidential Election, and conducted interviews with the congregants. The students entered the data from the surveys, transcribed the interviews, and tested their own hypotheses in the data.

Three of the students enrolled in the course—Carli Steelman, Kirsten Elliott, and Shadeed Dawkins—continued to work with Dr. Glazier through independent study after the course was completed. These students presented their research at the Arkansas Political Science Association annual conference in March 2013, at the UALR university-wide undergraduate research symposium, and at the AHSS undergraduate research forum. Carli won awards at both UALR events, and Kirsten won an award at the AHSS event. Carli is currently pursuing a political science PhD at the University of New Mexico. The opportunity to conduct political science research as undergraduate students is rare; the opportunity provided by the 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study clearly benefitted the academic careers of the participating students.

Findings

Over 500 congregant surveys were completed in the course of the study, providing a wealth of data for research. The diversity of questions on the survey allows for the exploration of many research questions and the preliminary findings are promising. A few key findings are highlighted in the following sections.

Congregation Community and Political Engagement

One of the key relationships political scientists want to understand is the one between a congregation leader and his or her congregation. To what extent do congregation leaders influence the political views and/or activities of their congregants? This relationship is especially important during an election. Both congregation leaders and congregants in this study were asked about their political interest, their political activities in the prior year, their vote choice, and their confidence in their vote choice.

One of the most interesting results comes from a statistical model of confidence in vote choice. The results of this model indicate that respondents that report hearing more sermons with political content at church are actually less confident in their vote choice. Thus, instead of political pastors convincing congregants of the “right” way to vote, churches may be more politically ambiguous places.

We can explore this relationship further by examining which variables explain how politically active a congregant might be. Not surprisingly, the data show that the more people care about who wins the election, the more likely they are to be politically active. Additionally, the more comfortable they are with a close relationship between politics and religion, the more likely they are to participate. Interestingly, none of the religious variables measured are significant predictors of political activity, and neither is hearing political sermons. At least for this study population, it appears that political behaviors are more about politics than they are about religion.

Providential Religious Beliefs

Prior research conducted by Dr. Rebecca Glazier has investigated the concept of providential religious beliefs. People who hold providential beliefs believe that God has a plan and that they can help bring that plan about. Both congregation leaders and congregants were asked a series of survey questions to determine their level of providentiality. And the data reveal that strong providential believers are somewhat different than the rest of the study population. Strong providential believers, for instance, are more likely to support cooperative foreign policies, perhaps because they have a peaceful interpretation of God’s will. This finding may be different for a different study population, and so the results encourage future research.

Of particular interest for this study is the influence of providential beliefs in an election year. It is not difficult to imagine a religious person believing that God had a preference for one candidate over the other and then campaigning to help get that candidate elected. Might we see this in the data? Interestingly enough, there is no correlation between providential beliefs and the questions we asked congregation members about their political behaviors. The story for the congregation leaders, on the other hand, was a bit more complicated.

Congregation Leaders and Providential Beliefs

The congregation leaders were given a slightly longer survey and so were assessed on a few additional measures of political and community engagement. For instance, congregation leaders were asked how actively involved they were politically, their frequency of participation in 16 specific political activities, and the election year political activities their congregation was engaged in. There is no correlation between providential religious beliefs and the first two measures, but there is a strong positive

correlation between the number of election year political activities a congregation leader reports and his or her personal providential beliefs. A statistical model confirms this relationship, showing that providential congregation leaders engage in more election year political activities. We are unable to determine from this data whether the relationship is between elections and providential beliefs in general or whether the religious character of the 2012 election in particular brought out the providential motivations of congregation leaders. This is another potential avenue for future research.

What Can We Learn from Little Rock?

Political scientists often hope that their research findings will generalize to explain phenomena beyond their study population. Even though the 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study was only conducted with a few, non-representative churches in the city limits of Little Rock, it still provides valuable insight for researchers.

Perhaps the greatest value is provided in the rare combination of breadth of survey data and depth of interview data. The interviews provide deeper insight in to what was driving the survey responses and help us understand potential causal mechanisms. The study thus provides a seed for future research—hinting at hypotheses that can be more systematically evaluated with a larger population. Thus, although the study sample is not representative of the country as a whole, or even of Little Rock as a whole, the processes and patterns we observe within these congregations may provide insights that drive future research.

Additionally, Little Rock is important in and of itself as a city where religion and politics have historically been intertwined. In 1959, Ernest Campbell and Thomas Pettigrew published a famous study of the moral and political crisis in Little Rock surrounding the desegregation issue. In line with the findings of that study, the 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study found that pastors who have political views that are different from the national leadership of their denomination are less politically active. Without the support of national leadership, local congregation leaders are simply less likely to risk political involvement.

Conclusions

The 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study was only possible because of the generosity of the local congregations in Little Rock. The congregation leaders opened up their churches to the student researchers, and the congregants took the time to complete the surveys and interviews. Without their cooperation, the depth and breadth of data we ultimately collected would have been impossible to access and the immense learning experience provided to the students would have been out of their reach. Hopefully, the success of this study will make future research in Little Rock and beyond possible.

Methodological Appendix

There were three main research stages in the 2012 Little Rock Congregation Study: the congregation leader surveys, the congregation leader interviews, and the congregation survey and interviews.

The congregation leader surveys were distributed via mail to a total viable sample of 409 churches. A total of 66 surveys were returned completed, for a return rate of 16.14%.

A representative sample of 15 religious organizations was selected for congregation leader interviews. These interviews were conducted between May 1 and July 12.

From the 15 interviewed congregation leaders, 5 were selected for participation in the congregation portion of the study. The 5 selected were chosen to represent the four main denominational groupings in Little Rock: mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant. A congregation from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was also chosen, because of the prominence of candidate Mitt Romney's Mormon faith. For comparison's sake one atheist affiliated group was also selected for participation in this stage.

Each congregation was surveyed the Sunday before and the Sunday after the 2012 Presidential Election. There were a total of 968 pre-surveys distributed and 274 returned, for a response rate of 28.3%. There were a total of 703 post-surveys distributed and 233 returned, for a response rate of 33.1%. The overall response rate was 30.3%. There were also 32 interviews conducted with congregation members.