

**Public Worship and Public Engagement:
Pastoral Cues within the Context of Worship Services**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the frequency, form, breadth, and depth of political cue-giving within the context of worship services. Based on reports from pastors themselves, it examines the kinds of cue-giving activities clergy approve within the confines of Sunday morning worship as well as what the types of cue-giving they actually report doing within such services. The study is based on data collected through random surveys of clergy, primarily from clergy within two denominations, collected following each of the past three presidential elections; one denomination is linked institutionally to the evangelical Protestant tradition, the other linked institutionally to the mainline Protestant tradition. The data reveal that clergy engage in a variety of cue-giving activity, that most clergy report engaging in at least one form of such activity, that such endeavors tend to be relatively brief, and that important changes may have occurred in such activities over time. Multivariate analysis reveals that religious and political factors tend to outweigh social and contextual factors in shaping the likelihood and extent of such cue-giving activity.

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Religious houses of worship have been, and continue to be, important sites of public life within American society. Corporate worship is a public occasion, and participation in these public events and spaces provides a wide variety of opportunities for worshippers both to develop an interest in, and concern for, public life as well as to learn important civic values and skills (e.g., Verba, Scholozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Djupe and Grant 2001; Smidt et al. forthcoming). Those who gather to worship may be reminded in sermons, prayers, and other proclamations of the ethical imperatives of their religious faith in ministering to those in need; they may learn of opportunities to volunteer and serve others in their community through announcements, classes, or informal conversation with fellow worshippers; and, though the organizational life of the church, they have repeated opportunities to organize activities, make collective decisions, express their views, acknowledge the contrasting views of others, and compromise on positions. In fact, as Lichterman and Potts (2005, 2) point out: “Religious congregations may be the most widespread and egalitarian sites of civic engagement in the United States.”

However, during the course of the past several decades, a variety of cultural shifts have created some important new challenges to congregations as sites of public-spiritedness. Among such developments are the weakening of denominationalism that eroded historic emphases related to public engagement (e.g., Roof and McKinney 1987, 11-39), the growth of special-purpose religious organizations that, at least potentially, may have moved expressions of public engagement away from the life of the congregation into more specialized, and distinctive, organizational forms of collective life (e.g., Wuthnow 1988), and the new “fluid and flexible”

religious situation in which “spiritual shoppers” typically exhibit little interest in religious doctrines, ecclesial authority, or institutional loyalty—whether in terms of a group, a denomination, or a specific house of worship (Cimino and Lattin 1998; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 2005).

Over the past several decades, social scientists, Christian liturgists, and social ethicists have been raising different, though related, questions about the relationship between worship and public engagement. For social scientists, the primary question has been whether, and to what extent, clergy engage in political cue-giving activities (e.g. Stark et al. 1970; Jelen 1992; Guth et al. 1997, 162-84; Fetzer 2001), while for liturgists and social ethicists the questions have been whether worship activities serve to form a people committed to the broader public good and whether particular kinds of churches are more likely than others to form and sustain these common civic commitments (e.g., Nieman 2002; Cavanaugh, 2002; Foley 2004).

This study seeks to bridge these two different concerns by examining worship as a specific context within which parishioners may learn about and develop greater concern for matters related to public life as well as be encouraged to become more actively engaged in public life. While previous studies have examined the political actions of clergy on and off the pulpit, this effort more narrowly focuses on the reported activities of clergy solely within the context of public worship—as well as possible changing patterns in such activities over time. The study is largely descriptive in nature, examining reported cue-giving activities related to matters of public life expressed by clergy in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Specifically, it seeks to ascertain the frequency, form, and depths of political message given by clergy during worship services, but it also assesses the relative importance of different factors that may affect the likelihood of exhibiting such cue-

giving activities. In order to assess possible changes over time, data are examined from surveys of CRC and RCA clergy that were collected following each of the last three presidential elections.

Though both denominations are historically Dutch in heritage, have congregations largely located in the same geographic areas, and are relatively small in size, the CRC is associated with the National Association of Evangelicals and more closely linked to the evangelical Protestant tradition, while the RCA is tied to the National Council of Churches and more closely linked to the mainline Protestant tradition.¹ Consequently, given these characteristics of the two denominations, our analysis permits an assessment of possible differences in political cue-giving activities between clergy in the evangelical and mainline Protestant traditions, while basically controlling for the various theological, ethnic, and geographic similarities the two denominations share.

Theoretical Framework

Over the course of the past decade, renewed attention has been given again to the role of clergy in American politics (e.g., Guth et al. 1997; Crawford and Olson 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2002; Smidt 2004). According to these recent works, clergy constitute an important and influential political group within American politics, wielding a significant amount of influence, particularly within their own religious communities. Clergy are well positioned socially to influence others politically. Not only do many Americans continue to report that they attend church on some regular basis (Wilson 1989; Smidt et al. 2003), thereby coming into social contact with clergy on a relatively frequent basis, but pastors are generally respected both individually and collectively.

Secondly, clergy tend to be generally well educated and likely to “engage in more ideological thinking than those with fewer years of schooling” (Guth et al. 1997, 103). As a result, clergy are able to frame issues within broader systems of thought of their particular choosing. Such social standing and intellectual capabilities would be of minimal importance politically if clergy did not express political messages or engage in political activities. However, studies on political engagement of the clergy reveal that many pastors do engage in political cue-giving activities (as well as in other kinds of political activities), both from the pulpit and in their private lives.

In fact, a variety of studies have analyzed the nature, frequency, and ability of clergy to speak their minds to their members and the public (Smidt 2004; Crawford and Olson 2001; Olson 2000; Jelen 2001; Guth, Green, Smidt, Kellstedt, and Poloma 1997; Quinley 1974; Hadden 1969). Scholars have noted that differences in cue-giving exist among clergy based on differences in resources and opportunities (Crawford and Olson 2001; Olson 2000; Guth et al. 1997) and on theological and ideological differences (Stark et al. 1970, 1971), though such theological and ideological differences have narrowed over time (Guth et al. 1997; Smidt 2004, Chapter 23).

Thus, those who voluntarily assemble for worship services and listen carefully are likely to receive certain messages about what things they should pay attention to, care about, and act upon. Congregants do report hearing sermons that address a variety of civic and political issues (e.g., Welch et al. 1993; Smidt et al. forthcoming, Ch. 5)—and often these cues are not ignored (Olson and Crawford 2001; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988; 1990). This is especially true when clergy address certain issues frequently and when they address issues that are salient to their congregations and to society (Djupe and Gilbert 2001).

Finally, clergy are generally perceived to be spiritual and moral leaders—people who are more likely than many of their congregants to be aware of, and concerned by, the moral dimensions of the problems found in the world around them. This moral sensitivity can, in turn, lead to clerical political activism, whether through direct action or verbal cue-giving (Guth et al. 1997). Either mode of activism allows pastors to influence members of the congregation as well as members of the community who look up to them. Clergy may well serve as a sort of filter in receiving and interpreting political information for their congregants, thereby reflecting the classic “two-step flow of political information” (Jelen and Wilcox 1993, 266). Through their actions and verbal cues, clergy may help to shape the political agenda of their congregants. And, members of the congregation may actually give more credence to an issue position stated by their pastor than they would to an issue position heard or read in some news medium (Buddenbaum 2001). Thus, pastors not only may play a vital role in setting the political agenda of their congregants, but they may shape their congregants’ views on such issues as well.

The explicit injunctions and indirect cues given by clergy can be particularly effective when, first, legitimate warrants are provided for their positions (e.g., biblical evidence that may be accepted as authoritative), and, second, when those positions do not completely alienate congregation members from the dominant culture (Jelen 2001). Under such circumstances, these messages and cues are not usually ignored (Olson and Crawford 2001; Fetzer 2001; Penning and Smidt 2000; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990). Still, in many cases, pastors may be “preaching to the converted.” But, even under such circumstances, clergy can still influence their congregations by intensifying their attachments and reinforcing their preferences, which can in turn lead to activism (Jelen 2001).

However, when studying the capacity of clergy to act as public leaders, it is important to recognize that there are different roles and contexts within which clergy may choose to exert their influence. Sometimes clergy may seek to exert their influence outside their congregation and in roles not directly related to being a pastor. For example, a pastor may seek to influence other members of one's family, those who are part of one's network of friends, or other citizens by contributing financially to a political campaign. In all such endeavors, the fact that one is a pastor has little bearing on the likelihood of whether such efforts may succeed or fail.

At other times, clergy may seek to influence the public and foster public engagement through their role as clergy, but outside the context of their particular congregation. Here, one might envision clergy serving as members on civic boards, participating in public ceremonies, or seeking to influence the public position of denominational agencies with which they may be affiliated.

This study, however, focuses on the cue-giving endeavors of clergy within the worshipping community they lead, specifically within the worship service itself. Cue-giving in this context refers to any communication, however brief, that directs the receiver's attention to civic or political phenomena during the worship service. By focusing specifically on the worship context, we do not mean to suggest that this is the only, or even necessarily the most important, setting in which pastors have the potential to wield political influence over their parishioners. Activities such as the organization of adult study and action groups at the pastor's initiative and direction can greatly impact the opinions of parishioners on political issues. Nevertheless, while the actual church service is only one opportunity among a range of opportunities clergy possess to influence their parishioners, it is a particularly important one. Corporate worship is the central act in the church's life. It is the one public activity in which members of the congregation most

commonly gather together, and it serves as a central point of congregational life. Moreover, since the Reformation, the primary role of the Protestant clergy has been to exposit the Word of God to the people gathered for worship. Given this relative centrality of the preaching of the Word within the Protestant tradition compared to the relative centrality of the sacraments in the Roman Catholic tradition, the words and actions of Protestant clergy during worship services are likely to carry more weight within the worship service than outside that context. For this reason, our study focuses on cue-giving solely within the context of worship services.

In order to gain as full an understanding as possible about the political messages of clergy within the worship service, our study focuses on the frequency, form, and depth of the messages transmitted. First, clergy may vary in the frequency with which they may engage in civic and political cue-giving within the worship service. Some pastors may convey such cues with relative frequency, while others may not convey any cues at all.² Thus, the first major question to be addressed is the extent to which clergy report providing cues related to public engagement within the context of worship service itself.

Second, the form in which the politically relevant message is transmitted may vary. Clergy can transmit such cues and messages within different components of the worship service, and it is likely that the particular vehicle by which pastoral cues are given will affect the way that it is received by parishioners. Because they are speaking on behalf of God in the sermon or to God in their prayers, political messages given during the sermon or prayers are likely be perceived by parishioners as being more authoritative than similar cues provided during announcements (or even announcements printed in the order of worship that may distributed to those gathered to worship). However, given the historic centrality of the preaching of the Word

within the Protestant context, it is likely that, in terms of any rank order of significance, the sermon carries the most weight (followed by prayers, and then announcements).

In addition to the different facets of the worship service within which clergy may convey civic and political messages, clergy may also vary in terms of the length of time they devote to such topics within the worship service. A pastor may simply touch on a civic or political issue in passing or choose to devote an entire sermon to the matter. The length of time a pastor devotes to an issue is also likely to be directly related to the significance that such messages have for the laity. The greater the time and attention given to a particular issue, the more likely such endeavors on the part of the clergy will shape and color the thinking and response of their parishioners.

A final consideration is the extent to which such activity changes over time and the extent to which variation in clerical cue-giving activity is dependent upon the particular political context within which they may find themselves. It may be that in some election years, for example, clergy feel the need to provide cues more readily than in other election campaigns. Likewise, given national and international events (e.g., 9/11 or the war in Iraq), clergy may choose to provide more cues in some than other years. Hence, some assessment of whether there may be a waxing and waning of the provisions of such cues helps to place these activities within a broader historical context.

Data

This analysis focuses on cue-giving activities during worship services reported by CRC and RCA clergy. Clergy from these two denominations were selected for several reasons. First, the data were available to the authors, as following each of the past five presidential elections,

we have engaged in surveying “parish” clergy within both denominations—inquiring about their theological views, the congregations they serve, their political attitudes and behavior, and their socio-demographic characteristics.³ Second, given that the focus of this analysis is primarily on current patterns, we sought to use the most recent data; while we have access to data gathered from clergy of other Protestant denominations, such data are more dated in nature.⁴ And, finally, while clergy from these two denominations are examined largely because of the noted pragmatic and temporal considerations, CRC and RCA clergy tend to be fairly representative of Protestant clergy more generally, as clergy from these two denominations fall in the middle of the theological spectrum exhibited by evangelical and mainline Protestant clergy.⁵

Only those clergy who preach from the pulpit with some regularity were included in the samples drawn. In addition, given that these studies focused on the role of clergy within American politics, those clergy who served churches outside the USA (basically those who served Canadian congregations) were removed from the sample. Finally, because of the small size of both denominations, and depending on the year of the survey, either two-thirds or all pastors within the two denominations who met the specified criteria were sent the survey.⁶

Given that we were interested in the political attitudes and behavior of clergy, conducting these surveys shortly after the conclusion of a presidential election campaign is an ideal time for assessing such matters—but it is also an excellent time in which to assess the extent to which clergy may engage in providing political cues (whether within or outside the context of worship services). Presidential elections are “high stimulus” elections attracting considerable media attention and campaign advertising, and they are deemed to be highly important election contests. If clergy are to engage in political cue-giving, the likelihood of their doing so is probably the greatest during the course of these contests.

Because of some important differences across the surveys over time, only those surveys conducted following the past three presidential elections will be examined here.⁷ In each of these three surveys, “parish” clergy were mailed questionnaires shortly after the turn of the year following the last presidential election. In February of 1997, a sample of 500 clergy were randomly selected from each denomination, with 261 and 259 usable returned surveys from the CRC and RCA clergy respectively (for an identical 52 percent response rate). In mid-January of 2001, 681 surveys were mailed to CRC pastors and 683 to RCA pastors, with 399 usable returned surveys from CRC clergy (59 percent response rate) and 372 completed surveys returned from RCA clergy (55 percent response rate). Finally, in mid-February 2005, 495 surveys were mailed to CRC pastors and 540 to RCA pastors with 284 usable returned surveys from CRC clergy (57 percent response rate) and 268 usable returned surveys from RCA clergy (49 percent response rate). An examination of the returned surveys do not suggest any bias in terms of demographic factors known to characterize clergy of the two denominations on an aggregate basis.

Data Analysis

We begin our analysis by first assessing whether or not clergy believe that they are able to influence the political views of members of their congregation. The focus then shifts to the particular political cue-giving activities that clergy deem appropriate within the worship service context, and then we examine what specific cue-giving activities clergy report having done over the course of the past presidential election. The final portion of our analysis focuses on

determinants of the relative level of pastoral cue-giving activities and whether or not such determinants vary by election contests.

Potential of Clergy to Shape Congregants Political Views

Over the past three presidential election surveys, clergy of both denominations were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “Pastors have a great potential to influence the political beliefs of their congregations.” The responses of CRC and RCA clergy over time are presented in Table 1. Several patterns emerge from the data. First, a majority of clergy consistently agreed, regardless of year examined, that clergy did have a great potential to influence the political thinking of their congregants. The lowest level of agreement was reported by RCA clergy in 1997, when 53 percent of clergy of that denomination indicated that they agreed with the statement.

(Table 1 about here)

Secondly, denominational differences in clergy assessments are rather small in size, regardless of the year analyzed. The largest difference in level of agreement between clergy of the two denominations was evident in 1997, when there was a 5 percent difference between CRC and RCA clergy (58 percent and 53 percent agreement, respectively). Clearly, pastors of the two denominations have rather similar assessments related to the potential of clergy to influence the political views of their congregants.

Finally, it appears that that there is a growing recognition among the clergy surveyed that pastors do indeed have such potential to influence members of their congregations, as the percentage of clergy agreeing with the statement increased between the 1997 and the 2005 surveys. This is particularly evident among RCA clergy, as the percentage of agreement

monotonically increased from 53 percent agreement in 1997 to 65 percent agreement in 2005.

Thus, the data would suggest that most (almost two-thirds) of CRC and RCA clergy today agree that pastors have the capacity to shape the political views of members of their congregations.

Clerical Approval of Political Cue-Giving in Worship Services

Of course, the fact that clergy may believe they possess such a capacity does not reveal whether they think they should engage in activities that may serve to influence the political perspectives of their parishioners. Consequently, clergy of the two denominations were asked whether or not they approved of various activities in which clergy might engage—both on and off the pulpit, though the analysis here focuses solely on activities on the pulpit. We begin with responses from the 2005 CRC and RCA clergy survey in which clergy were asked to respond whether they approved of clergy engaging in five specific worship activities: (1) urging the congregation to register and vote, (2) taking a stand on some moral issue while preaching, (3) taking a stand on some political issue while preaching, (4) delivering a whole sermon on some controversial social or political issue, and (5) endorsing a candidate from the pulpit.

As can be seen from Table 2, clergy vary considerably in their expressed level of approval for such actions. Not surprisingly, those actions that clergy most approve tend to carry the least amount of risk, while the activities garnering the least approval generally exhibit much greater risk—whether in terms of creating divisions within the congregation or violating existing laws. Potentially divisive and/or illegal actions are hardly ever approved by pastors, while actions that are far less controversial are much more likely to generate approval. Thus, some actions are viewed as appropriate by virtually all the clergy surveyed, while other actions are overwhelmingly deemed to be inappropriate. For example, nearly all clergy in 2005 reported

that they approved of clergy urging their congregation to register and vote in elections (94 percent of CRC clergy and 93 percent of RCA clergy), while nearly all clergy, regardless of their denomination, failed to express any approval of clergy endorsing candidates from the pulpit (3 percent of CRC clergy and 2 percent of RCA clergy).

(Table 2 about here)

While an overwhelming majority of clergy approve of certain activities and disapprove other such activities, clergy are more divided on whether other activities are appropriate in the worship context. There is, for example, a relatively high level of approval among clergy for taking a stand while preaching on moral issues, with 95 percent of CRC and 87 percent of RCA clergy expressing their approval for such activities. On the other hand, clergy are more divided in their approval for doing so with regard to political issues, as only about one-half of the clergy (55 percent of CRC and 47 percent of RCA clergy) indicated that they approved taking a stand on some political issue from the pulpit. Still, most CRC and RCA clergy (nearly three-quarters within both denominations) indicated that they approved preaching a whole sermon that addressed some controversial social or political issue.

Thus, pastors are more likely to approve of clergy preaching a sermon on some civic or political issue than they are to approve of clergy taking a stand on an issue from the pulpit. Such a drop-off in level of approval may reflect several factors. For some pastors, it may simply reflect the fact that choosing to address controversial social and political issues by means of devoting a whole sermon to the matter need not entail taking a particular position in relationship to such issues. On the other hand, the fact that clergy are more supportive of pastors addressing political issues than taking a stand on such issues may reflect a recognition of the moral complexity of many political issues and that, while they may want their parishioners to be

involved in and educated about the political process or political issues, they may nevertheless contend that their role as pastor does not necessarily place them in a position to make political decisions on behalf of their parishioners.

Clergy also clearly make a distinction between activities conducted on the pulpit from those conducted off the pulpit, as they see the need to act more cautiously and more ambiguously when speaking from the pulpit than when voicing their individual opinions in the public realm. For example, more than eight out of ten CRC and RCA clergy approve of clergy taking a public stand on some political issue when not done from the pulpit, 84 percent and 81 percent respectively (data not shown), but as noted earlier only about half do so when such a stance is expressed from the pulpit.

Even when considering actions off the pulpit, clergy still differentiate between various types of public stands. While clergy generally approve of clergy taking positions on political issues when off the pulpit (more than 80 percent do so), they are less likely to approve of clergy publicly supporting candidates—as only about half of the clergy approve publicly supporting candidates off the pulpit (data not shown).

Reports of Political Cue-Giving in Worships Services

However, in seeking to ascertain the extent to which political learning may transpire during a worship service, one must shift from norms regarding what clergy view as appropriate within the worship service to determining what clergy actually do within such services. After all, parishioners are influenced by the behavior of their clergy, not by the norms that clergy hold in relationships to such behavior.

Certainly, one would anticipate that clergy would most likely engage in those activities of which they approve and refrain from those activities of which they disapprove. However, approval of activity does not reveal whether or not one chooses to engage in such activity. Consequently, in order to determine the frequency with which clergy engage in political cue-giving within the worship service, the pastors were asked to report whether or not they had done a number of specific activities related to politics within the worship service. They were able to respond in three possible ways: by saying that they had done the specified activity during the past presidential election year, by indicating that they had not engaged in that activity during the previous year though they had done so sometime during their career, or by revealing that they had never engaged in such an activity.

Forms of Cue-Giving. Clergy do use the pulpit as a means to address social and political issues, though clergy vary in terms of the forms they employ to provide such cues. Table 3 presents seven forms of possible cue-giving: praying publicly about a political issue, urging one's congregation to register and vote, praying publicly for political candidates, touching on some political issue in a sermon, taking a stand from the pulpit on some political issue, preaching a whole sermon on some social or political issue, and endorsing a candidate from the pulpit.

The forms in which pastors choose to address political issues within the context of the worship service are diverse. In fact, as can be seen from Table 3, clergy of both denominations report having done most, though not necessarily all, such cue-giving activities during the course of the 2004 presidential election year. Based on their own reports, clergy more frequently address political matters through prayer than through the sermon itself. Almost all clergy report that they have prayed publicly about some political issue during the past year (95 percent of CRC and 87 percent of RCA clergy)—in fact, clergy are more likely to report that they have prayed

publicly about a political issue than report that they have urged their congregants to register and vote, as 85 percent of CRC and 78 percent of RCA clergy report having urged their parishioners to do so. And, clergy are more likely to pray about a political issue than pray for political candidates, with the latter most likely consisting of praying for the health and safety of such candidates or for their seeking of spiritual direction and discernment.

Still, political issues are also discussed within sermons as well. Two-thirds of clergy from both denominations report having touched on some political issue in a sermon over the course of the presidential election year. Touching on these political issues, however, does not necessarily entail taking a position in relationship to such issues, as only about two of five clergy report having taken a stand on some issue from the pulpit itself (with 44 percent of CRC and 38 percent of RCA doing so). And, only a quarter of the clergy of both denominations report that they had preached a whole sermon on some civic or political issue over the course of the past year.

(Table 3 about here)

Overall, therefore, actions that require less time are more likely to be employed than those that require more. Hence, clergy are more likely to report that they have made an announcement encouraging members of their congregation to register and vote or to have prayed about an issue than they are to report that they have preached a whole sermon on some civic or political issue. Nevertheless, time is not the only factor shaping such cue-giving actions, as it does not necessarily entail more time to take a position on an issue than pray about an issue and, yet, there are substantial differences between the reported levels of praying about an issue and position-taking activities. Thus, considerations related to appropriateness and potential divisiveness within the congregation are also likely to shape such cue-giving activities.

Frequency of Cue-Giving. Some actions are widely reported as being performed by clergy (e.g., praying about a political issues or urging congregants to vote in upcoming elections), while other activities (e.g., endorsing a particular candidate from the pulpit) are rarely engaged in at all. However, even when one removes the two most common forms of political cue-giving activities (i.e., praying about an issue and urging congregants to register and vote)⁸ and limits the analysis to just four specific cue-giving activities—namely, praying publicly for political candidates, touching on a civic or political issue in a sermon, taking a stand from the pulpit on some political issues, and preaching a whole sermon that addresses some political issue—it becomes clear that almost all clergy still report some kind of cue-giving activity within the 2004 presidential election year. As shown at the bottom of Table 3, about nine in ten pastors (92 percent of the CRC and 87 percent of the RCA clergy) report having engaged from the pulpit in at least one of these four activities during 2004 (this increases to 98 and 94 percent for CRC and RCA clergy, respectively, when praying publicly about an issue is added to the mix—data not shown). Thus, the number of clergy who engage in political cue-giving is quite extensive among the pastors surveyed, as the overwhelming majority indicated that they were at least minimally involved in addressing political issues from the pulpit in 2004.

Depth of Cue-Giving. While about one-quarter of clergy in both denominations report having devoted a whole sermon to a discussion of some issue, the majority of clergy report addressing political matters largely in passing within their sermons. Clergy may touch on, but not fully address, the political issues they raise, as two-thirds of the clergy report that they have touched on a civic or political issue in a sermon. And less than half indicate that they actually took a stand on such issues.

This pattern is not a surprising one. Many clergy are likely hesitant to address political matters from the pulpit at all, so when they do address such issues it is logical that most of the time they do not address them in any great depth. Pastors seek to avoid saying things in the worship service that could potentially anger their congregations because they do not want to lose church members—or their jobs. On the other hand, clergy also seek to remain faithful to the dual witnesses of the Bible and the Holy Spirit, while trying to ensure that they do not needlessly incite anger among their parishioners. In some instances they must recognize that there can be legitimate disagreement on an issue among sincere Christians, but in other instances, when clergy see that some public issue demands a particular response from the Christian community, the very nature of their calling requires them to make a prophetic pronouncement that will likely anger some of their parishioners.

Comparison with Other Protestant Clergy

Of course, one major question that might be raised with regard to the analysis thus far is the extent to which these cue-giving activities reported by CRC and RCA clergy are representative of clergy more generally. While there are no comparative clergy data readily available for the 2004 presidential election year, it is possible to draw on data⁹ gathered from clergy across a wide variety of evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations following the 2000 presidential election and compare such data to that gathered from CRC and RCA clergy following that same election.

While CRC and RCA clergy share the same Reformed theological tradition, their different denominational structures are intertwined within different institutional networks (with the former linked to the National Association of Evangelicals and the latter to the National

Council of Churches). And, mainline Protestant clergy have historically been more likely to report giving political cues to their parishioners than evangelical Protestant clergy (Hadden 1969; Stark et al. 1971; Quinley 1974), though such differences are not as great today as previously (e.g., Guth et al. 1997; Smidt 2004, Chapter 23).

CRC and RCA clergy are compared to clergy from other denominations in Table 4, and the data reveal that CRC and RCA clergy are somewhat more active in providing political cues during worship services than are clergy from other evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations. In addition, it also apparent that any differences between CRC and RCA clergy in political message transmissions from the pulpit are not nearly as prominent as differences between CRC clergy and their fellow evangelical Protestant clergy¹⁰ or differences between RCA clergy and their fellow mainline Protestant clergy,¹¹ as CRC and RCA clergy were more likely than other clergy within either the evangelical or mainline Protestant traditions to have participated in at least one of the four politically relevant activities from the pulpit during the course of the 2000 presidential election year. CRC and RCA clergy were also somewhat more likely than other clergy to report that they have performed all four activities within the past year, though such differences are considerably smaller than differences with regard to no activities.

(Table 4 about here)

Consequently, the data patterns evident in Table 4 are noteworthy for several reasons. First, despite their location in different religious traditions, no major differences are evident between the CRC and RCA clergy in reported levels of cue-giving activity. Reformed theology emphasizes engagement with, and transformation of, the world. Since both the CRC and RCA hold this theology in common, their similar theological perspectives likely serve as a partial explanation for the higher levels of pulpit political activity. At least in this instance, then,

sharing the same theological family (i.e., the Reformed theological heritage) is stronger than location within a specific religious tradition in terms of shaping the level of political cues reported during the worship service context.

Secondly, it is also noteworthy that the relative differences between the other evangelical Protestant clergy and the other mainline Protestant clergy are rather small. Mainline Protestant clergy are slightly more likely than evangelical Protestant clergy to report some kind of cue-giving act during the past year (58 percent versus 51 percent, respectively), but evangelical Protestant clergy are more likely than mainline Protestant clergy to report three or more cue-giving acts (21 percent versus 15 percent, respectively). Thus, evangelical Protestant clergy are somewhat less likely than mainline Protestant clergy to engage in cue-giving activity, but when they do pass that threshold of engagement, evangelical Protestant clergy tend to be somewhat more likely than mainline Protestant clergy to engage in a wider array of such cue-giving endeavors.

Changing Practices of Political Cue-Giving within Worship Services

One final issue that needs to be addressed is the extent to which patterns evident among CRC and RCA clergy in 2004 are typical or unique in nature. To what extent do reports of cue-giving during worship services wax and wane in light of particular election campaigns or the changing composition of clergy over time? In order to address this matter, we examine reports of CRC and RCA clergy gathered following each of the past three presidential elections.

Clerical practices have changed over time, and, as can be seen from Table 5, in a rather surprising fashion. Despite the fact that media coverage of the 2004 presidential election tended to suggest a growing involvement of clergy in election activity, clergy from the CRC and RCA

reported that they were more engaged in transmitting politically relevant messages during the course of 1996 presidential election year than they were in either 2000 or 2004. Thus, overall there has been a net decrease in clerical engagement in the various activities from 1996 to 2004.¹²

It is true that clergy were more active in addressing political matters within the worship service in 2004 than they were in 2000, even though their level of activity in 2004 still did not match the levels previously reported for 1996. Perhaps some of this increase between 2000 and 2004 reflects less a return to cue-giving during the course of the 2004 election campaign and more statements and prayers related to the ongoing war in Iraq, particularly prayers for peace in the region and the safety of American soldiers (including those from the congregation who may be serving in the armed forces). Unfortunately, however, given the structure of the questions asked, it is not possible to differentiate whether the cues provided by the clergy over the course of the past year related to matters of the election specifically or political matters more generally.

(Table 5 about here)

The one cue-giving activity that does appear to be increasing steadily relates to clergy praying publicly about political matters. Across the three surveys between 1997 and 2005, there is a monotonic increase in the percentage of clergy who report having prayed publicly for political candidates in the previous year. The 1997 survey did not ask a question about praying publicly about a political issue, but the 2001 and the 2005 contained such a question, with the 2005 survey revealing a substantial increase (23 percent) over the 2001 survey in pastors reporting that had prayed from the pulpit about some political issue (data not shown). Thus, whereas CRC and RCA clergy appear to be somewhat less likely today than a decade ago to

address social and political issues within the sermon, they are far more likely to do so within the context of the pastoral prayer within the worship service.

It is unclear whether such changes in the forms of cue-giving activity among Reformed clergy reflect changes more broadly among other Protestant clergy. However, it may be that this increase in providing political cues within the context of the pastoral prayer among Reformed clergy, coupled with declines in other forms of such cue-giving activity over time, reflects the fact there may be less risk in giving cues within the pastoral prayer than within the sermon. This may be true for several reasons. First, because of the centrality of the preaching of the Word within the Protestant worship context, providing political cues within the context of the sermon runs a greater risk of charges of having “taken the Lord’s name in vain.” Second, it is also likely to be less risky because Christians are commanded to pray for those in authority over them (e.g., praying for their health, safety, and for their acting wisely and justly). And, finally, to the extent that such increases in cue-giving activity relate to praying matters such as peace in Iraq and for the safety of American soldiers, such cue-giving activities are hardly controversial or high risk-taking endeavors.

Factors Shaping Cue-Giving in Worship

Given that clergy vary in their reports of engaging in political cue-giving within worship services, the question arises as to what factors serve to shape the likelihood of pastors engaging or refraining from such activities. In order to ascertain what variables are the most strongly related to such endeavors, a multiple regression analysis was conducted for each of the surveys conducted after the past three presidential elections. The dependent variable was the index of political cue-giving within the worship service. Scores on the dependent variables ranged from 0

to 4, with higher scores representing both a higher level of cue-giving as well as a wider range of such activities.

A number of possible factors could serve to influence the decisions made by clergy whether to present political messages within worship services. Broadly speaking, these factors might be grouped under the headings of personal, contextual, religious, and political factors.

First, a variety of personal characteristics could potentially influence the civic and political messages of clergy within a worship service. The former might well include factors such as age, race, gender, marital status, and educational attainment, as well as such factors as the number of years in the ministry. But, given that CRC and RCA clergy are virtually all seminary-trained and are overwhelmingly white, married, and males, such particular personal factors exhibit little variation among our respondents and, as a result, can hardly contribute to variation in the likelihood of providing political cues within the worship service.

However, there are several personal characteristics on which CRC and RCA clergy do vary that may well shape differences cue-giving activity. First, differences in age among the clergy constitute one personal demographic factor that reveals some variation, with such age differences possibly reflecting either possible variation in socialization experiences by different generations of Americans or possible variation in theological education that may result from having been trained by different seminary professors across different periods of time. Consequently, the age of the clergy surveyed is included as a potential explanatory variable in the multivariate analysis.

A second personal factor is the number of years in the ministry that the clergy member has attained. Of course, age and years in the ministry are related, but there are increasing numbers of seminarians who begin their seminary education later in life after pursuing another

vocation earlier. One might anticipate, for example, that clergy who have served longer years in the ministry may feel a greater sense of security, and thereby greater latitude in what they may choose to do from the pulpit. Consequently, one might hypothesize that clergy who have served in the ministry a greater length of time will be more likely to engage in cue-giving activities than those who have served a shorter length of time.

A number of contextual variables might also serve to shape the extent to which clergy provide civic and public cues within the worship service. These factors may include the length of time a pastor has served in his/her present congregation as well as the extent to which the particular political orientation of that congregation deviates from the pastor's political perspective. One might anticipate that clergy who have served longer in their current congregation would be more prone to engage in cue-giving activity than those who have only recently begun their ministry within their new congregation. Likewise, because of the potential risk involved in political cue-giving activity from the pulpit, one might anticipate that clergy are more likely to engage in cue-giving activity when they perceive their congregation to more closely reflect their political stance than when the congregation is perceived to hold significantly different political views than the pastor.

In addition to such personal and contextual factors, there are a number of religious factors that might color the extent to which a pastor engages in political cue-giving within the worship context. First, much of the early scholarly work on this issue sought to assess the extent to which theological orthodoxy shaped the likelihood of doing so. Early findings generally revealed that those clergy holding more liberal theological perspectives (low orthodoxy) tended to be more highly engaged politically than those who were more orthodox theologically (e.g., Johnson 1967; Hadden 1969). More recent studies, however, have revealed that differences in the level of

political engagement among those holding different positions related to theological orthodoxy has narrowed considerably (Guth et al. 1997; Smidt 2004, Ch. 23). No longer is orthodoxy a significant predictor of the level of political involvement among clergy, as it has become a better indicator of the nature of clerical involvement rather than its frequency (Guth et al. 1997). Thus, both orthodox and liberal pastors tend to engage in political activity, though their goals in doing so are usually different.

While orthodoxy is one possible, and likely partial, determinant of the political involvement of clergy within the worship service, a second religious variable that is likely to influence the political messages and activities of clergy is the extent which pastors believe in the social witness of the church, particularly the extent to which they may believe that their denomination should be more or less involved in social and political issues. Hence, such a variable is included in the analysis.¹³ A third religious variable that might serve to shape clergy engagement in political cue-giving activity is whether or not one believes that “Pastors have a great potential to influence the political beliefs of their congregations,” with those who more strongly believe that they possess such influence being more likely than those who less strongly believe so to engage in such activity. The final religious variable included in the analysis is denominational affiliation—namely, whether one is a pastor in the CRC or the RCA denomination.

Finally, two political variables are included in the multiple regression analyses. The first is the pastor’s reported personal interest in politics (measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “very interested” to “not at all interested”), with the hypothesis being that those pastors who are more interested in politics are more likely than those less interested to report cue-giving activities. Finally, the regression analysis shown in Table 6 also includes a variable reflecting

the ideological orientation of the pastor, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative,” assessing whether more politically conservative clergy have become increasingly politicized over the past several presidential elections.

(Table 6 about here)

Table 6 reveals that the dominant influences on political cue-giving within worship services do vary, but exhibit some important common features as well. Overall, when examining the various factors that may shape the range of political activities reported by clergy within worship services, religious and political factors outweigh personal and contextual factors in shaping the range of such activities.

The variable exhibiting the strongest influence on the dependent variable is one’s personal interest in politics. In each of the three surveys, the pastors’ reported level of interest in politics proved to be the variable that fostered the greatest likelihood that clergy will report political cue-giving across a range of activities, once the effects of all the other variables are taken into consideration. And, while conservative political ideology generally moved clergy to exhibit broader venues of political cue-giving, the variable only attained statistical significance in the 1997 survey—and only at a .01 level of significance.

On the other hand, each of the religious factors examined also proved to be statistically significant as independent variables shaping cue-giving activities, though only one such variable—namely, one’s views related to whether their denomination should exhibit greater involvement in addressing social and political issues—was consistently significant across all three surveys. In fact, in each of the three surveys examined, it ranked second in importance, with its coefficient approaching, but never quite attaining, the magnitude of the beta coefficient for the variable tapping the political interest of the pastor. Those pastors who exhibited greater

theological orthodoxy were also more likely to report a range of cue-giving activities, even when controlling for political ideology, but only in the 2001 survey did the magnitude of the beta coefficient attain statistical significance. Similarly, in each of the surveys, RCA pastors were consistently more likely than CRC clergy to engage in these cue-giving activities, but only in the 2001 survey did these denominational differences attain statistical significance. And, those clergy who believe that pastors have a “great potential to influence the political beliefs of their congregations” were more likely to engage in a range of cue-giving activities, but only in the 2005 survey did it attain statistical significance.

Age is positively and significantly related to reports of political cue-giving activities during the 1996 presidential year, as older clergy reported more cue-giving endeavors than younger clergy. However, in subsequent presidential election years, younger clergy were more likely to do so than older clergy, though such differences never attained statistical significance. Years in the ministry had a very weak and inconsistent relationship with cue-giving activities, as did years in the congregation, though clergy with fewer years in their congregation were, somewhat surprisingly, significantly more likely (at the .05 level) than those with more years in their congregation to engage in cue-giving activity during the 1996 presidential campaign. Finally, assessments of the relative difference between one’s own political positions and those of one’s congregation did not have any noticeable effect on the likelihood to engage in cue-giving activity—though, to the extent that it did, it was those clergy who perceived their congregation to hold more conservative views than they possessed who were more likely to engage in such cue-giving activity.

Conclusions

This study has sought to examine the frequency, form, breadth, and depth of political cue-giving activity by clergy within the context of the worship service, as well as those factors that serve to shape such activity. The analysis was largely limited to reports of clergy from two different, but related, denominations, with one denomination being located within the institutional nexus of evangelical Protestantism and the other within that of mainline Protestantism.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, it is clear that most clergy report that they engage in some type of cue-giving activity over the course of the campaign year itself. It is true that Reformed clergy may be somewhat more prone to engage in such endeavors than other clergy, but a majority of the other evangelical and mainline clergy surveyed in 2001 reported having engaged in such worship service cue-giving activities as well.

Second, while a range of different cue-giving activities are reported, clergy appear to be moving such cue-giving endeavors from the sermon to the pastoral prayer. The most frequently reported cue-giving activity is now praying about social and political issues. Clergy also report touching on issues within the sermon with some regularity, but generally such activity is done without necessarily taking a particular stance with regard to that issue.

Third, clergy do not necessarily spend a great deal of time in providing such cues; most cues are relatively brief in nature. This is not too surprising in that parishioners do not usually gather together for worship for purposes of political instruction. Still, on the other hand, a sizable number of clergy (about one-quarter) report that they have devoted a whole sermon to some political issue.

Fourth, despite media coverage that suggested unusually high levels of clerical involvement in the 2004 presidential election campaign, it appears that, overall, there was actually lower levels of clergy cue-giving activity in the 2004 presidential election year than in 1996. And, while Reformed clergy report giving more cues during 2004 than during 2000, it is unclear whether this change reflected increased cue-giving during the course of the two election campaigns or whether it simply reflected increased references related to matters of peace in the Middle East and the safety of soldiers more generally.

Different factors shape the likelihood of clergy engaging in cue-giving activity. Overall, religious and political factors tend to outweigh personal and contextual factors in shaping the range of such activities. But, the most significant, and consistent, factors shaping such activities were the clergy's level of interest in politics and the desire to have their denomination become more involved in social and political issues.

Finally, this study begins to clarify the extent to which clergy may use their leadership in worship services as a vehicle by which possibly to promote their political preferences. Many clergy do engage in some form of cue-giving during the course of a presidential campaign year, but to the extent that they do so, such cues tend to be very few in number, brief in their length, and rather diffuse in nature (either touching on an issue in a sermon or within a pastoral prayer). While congregations may be important "political communities" (Wald et al. 1988), it is highly unlikely that parishioners march in political "lock-step" with their pastors simply on the basis of political cues that clergy may provide. Congregations are significant voluntary associations for both civic and political life, but their political significance likely stems more from its particular theological heritage and the social interaction of its parishioners than from any political cues offered by the pastor during the course of the worship service.

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the concept of religious traditions generally and an evaluation of members of these two traditions specifically, see Smidt (2007).
2. Of course, it can be argued that even the lack of providing specific political cues of any kind during the worship context constitutes a specific kind of civic/ political cue-giving—a cue that suggests to the worship community the relative unimportance or irrelevance of such considerations.
3. Our involvement with surveying CRC and RCA clergy began following the 1988 presidential election, and data from this initial survey were reported in Guth et al. 1997. In 1993, however, only clergy from the CRC were surveyed. Subsequently, clergy from both the CRC and RCA have been surveyed following each presidential election. Given that the investigators are political scientists, our focus has been on the political attitudes and behavior of clergy, as well as on their theological beliefs, religious practices, and congregational contexts.
4. The CRC and RCA clergy data collected in 2001 were part of a larger Cooperative Clergy Study Project in which clergy from more than 15 different denominations, along with Roman Catholic priests, were surveyed using the same questionnaire. Some of these data will be used for comparative purposes later in the analysis.
5. This can be ascertained rather directly from Table 3.1 in Guth et al. 1997. More recent evidence can be ascertained more indirectly by comparing the second table in each of the various chapters found in Smidt (2004).
6. In the summer of 1989, 558 surveys were sent to CRC clergy and 580 surveys to RCA clergy, with 368 usable surveys returned from CRC pastors (66 percent response rate) and 378 from RCA pastors (65 percent response rate). In May 1993, surveys were mailed to 650 parish ministers serving congregations in the US and Canada, with 480 usable responses received (74 percent response rate).
7. Data collected in 1989 and 1993 are not analyzed here because of particular problems of comparability for some of the specific questions analyzed here. In the surveys of 1997, 2001, and 2005, clergy were asked to respond in one of three different ways to the question of whether they had engaged in specific cue-giving activity during worship; they could indicate that they had done the specified activity during the past presidential election year, that they had not engaged in that activity during the previous year though they had done so sometime during their career, or that they had never engaged in such an activity. In the 1989 survey, they were asked only whether or not they had ever done such activity, and in the 1993 survey only CRC clergy were surveyed and clergy were not asked all such questions specifically.
8. The deletion of these two items stems from the fact that these two items were not asked across all three elections surveys within the CRC and RCA clergy surveys. The

subsequent analysis focuses on change over time, employing common items across all three surveys. Hence, for purposes of comparability, only the four items are analyzed here.

9. These data were collected as part of the Cooperative Clergy Study Project organized by The Henry Institute at Calvin College. For more information about this study and the various scholars and denominations involved, see Smidt (2004).
10. This evangelical Protestant clergy category contains the responses of clergy from the following denominations: Assemblies of God; Churches of Christ; Evangelical Free; Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod; Nazarenes; Presbyterian Church in America; and, the Southern Baptist Convention. Response from each denomination were weighted the same so as not to have one denomination with larger numbers of clergy skew the specific results. For more information about the various denominations involved, see Smidt (2004).
11. This mainline Protestant clergy category contains the responses of clergy from the following denominations: American Baptist; Disciples of Christ; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.; and, the United Methodist Church. Response from each denomination were weighted the same so as not to have one denomination with larger numbers of clergy skew the specific results. For more information about the various denominations involved, see Smidt (2004).
12. Still, even in 2000, the year in which there was the least amount of reported clergy activity, nearly three-quarters of all CRC and RCA clergy reported some form of political cue-giving during worship services in the past year.
13. This variable reflects responses given that range from 1 (more involved) to 7 (less involved) to the following question: “Do you think your denomination needs to be more or less involved in social and political issues?”

Table 1

Percent of Clergy Who Hold that Clergy Can Shape Congregants Political Beliefs

Percent Agreeing: "Pastors have a great potential to influence the political beliefs of their congregation"	CRC	RCA
1997	58%	53%
2001	57%	56%
2005	62%	65%

Table 2

Percent of Clergy Approving Civic and Political Activities within Worship Context:
2005 Survey

	CRC	RCA
Urge congregation to register and vote	94%	93%
While preaching, take a stand on some moral issue	95%	87%
Deliver a sermon on a controversial social or political topic	74%	70%
While preaching, take a stand on some political issues	55%	47%
Endorse a candidate from the pulpit	3%	2%

Table 3

Relative Frequency of Clergy Reporting Civic and Political Activities within Worship Context:
2005 Survey

	CRC	RCA
Prayed publicly about some political issue	95%	87%
Prayed publicly for political candidates	71%	57%
Touched on a civic or political issue in a sermon	66%	67%
Took a stand from the pulpit on some issue	44%	38%
Preached whole sermon on some civic or political issue	25%	24%
Endorsed a candidate from the pulpit	0%	1%

Reported having done at least one of the following four activities within a worship service over the past year: publicly prayed for candidates, touched on an issue, took a stand from the pulpit, preached a whole sermon	92%	87%

Table 4

Index of Political Activity during Worship Services by Religious Affiliation:
2001 Surveys

Index Of Political Activity	CRC	Other Evan	RCA	Other Mainline
During the 2000 Presidential Election Year				
No reported action	30%	49%	27%	42%
One act	25	17	25	23
Two acts	23	13	25	19
Three acts	13	14	13	11
All four acts	<u>9</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>4</u>
Total (N)	100% (1000)	100% (7973)	100% (1000)	99% (5001)

Index is based on the following four items: preached whole sermon, touched on issue, took stand from pulpit, prayed for candidates

Table 5
Reported Civic and Political Activities during Worship over Time

	1997	Year 2001	2005
Sermon			
Preached sermon on some civic or political issue			
CRC	28%	16%	25%
RCA	25%	18%	24%
Touched on an issue in a sermon			
CRC	78%	51%	66%
RCA	76%	61%	67%
Took a stand from pulpit on some issue			
CRC	53%	25%	44%
RCA	44%	27%	38%
Prayer			
Prayed publicly for political candidates			
CRC	48%	54%	71%
RCA	43%	51%	57%

Reported some form of activity during worship			
CRC	86%	70%	92%
RCA	84%	73%	87%

Four acts: preached whole sermon, touched on issue, took stand from pulpit, prayed for candidates

Table 6
 Determinants of Political Activities during Worship over Time

	Year		
	1997	2001	2005
Social and Contextual Factors			
Age	.13**	-.07	-.02
Years in Ministry	.01	-.01	.00
Years in Congregation	-.10*	.00	.01
Congregational Orientation	-.02	-.05	.00
Religious Factors			
Theological Orthodoxy	.05	.12**	.10
Denominational Involvement	.19***	.15***	.18***
Potential of Ministers	.03	.04	.13**
Denominational Affiliation	.04	.11**	.01
Political Factors			
Ideological Orientation	.14**	.05	.08
Interest in Politics	.21***	.18***	.24***
R squared	.11	.09	.13

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