

The Pentecostal Ethic and Its Alternatives: Religious Messages and Political Behavior in Africa

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** DRAFT. Not for circulation.

How do we explain religion's apparent contradictory potential to spur participation or disengagement, for mobilization or acquiescence? Particularly in contexts where engagement in politics is difficult, and citizens are frequently disempowered by inequality, corruption, and an unequal playing field, where do individuals find the courage and motivation to engage in the political arena? Conversely, in contexts where the conditions are ripe for political transition and upheaval, why do citizens sit on the sidelines, fail to make demands upon the political system, and generally abdicate their voice?

Scholarship often treats religious ideas and beliefs as epiphenomenal (Marx1975). And yet great power is attributed to the religious inspiration motivating suicide bombers, ISIS militants, or the Arab Spring protesters who rallied against coercive regimes following Friday prayers, and Civil Rights heroes who withstood police brutality in the name of justice and equality. In the midst of Egypt's revolution of 2011, CNN ran the headline "Prayer and politics: How Friday become the Middle East's day of protest."¹ In it, Professor of Political Sociology at the American University in Cairo Said Sadek suggests that Friday prayers are significant for mobilizing protest because citizens "listen to a sermon by an imam or skeikh- a wise man respected in the community for his faith as well as his eloquence or logic. The sermons often cover social issues, politics and education, as well as religious themes..." Dr. Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Doha Center in Qatar suggests that "Prayer can be a way of preparing to go to battle.... It gives the people who are praying strength." The speakers invited to speak in Tahrir Square for subsequent Fridays each had a theme, and these set the tone of the Fridays. They were gathered "because of a public issue, a public topic. That's why those Fridays were named the 'Friday of Victory,' the Friday of Purging,' the 'Friday of Justice.' It's a way of setting goals." Hamid described how despite a varied level of religiosity among the individuals who gathered to pray, the role of the prayer itself was important to many: "Liberals pray, leftists pray and Islam gives them strength too..." The article ends by suggesting that through a religious mentality, "faith and politics are not divorced."

In our lived reality, great causal weight is attributed to the ideas communicated through prayer. And yet scholarship often subsumes these topics within organizations, resources, and competition for power. This dissonance presents a puzzle for contemporary social science. Does varied religious content influence individual citizens' political participation, in terms of their

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/06/17/friday.middle.east.protests/>. See also <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/22/138599515/why-are-arab-spring-protests-held-on-friday>

orientations and beliefs about the world around them, and the appropriate manner of their own engagement in that world?

Compelling accounts of institutional embeddedness (Grzymala Busse 2015), political economy of religious competition and institutional adaptation (Gill 1998, Trejo 2009), and minority demographics and grievances (Fox) suggest important theories for why religious “groups” take particular political positions and strategies of activism, and why these positions might change over time. These theories conceptualize a religious institution as many things, such as: 1) a set of elite agents who pursue strategic advantage for the organization; and 2) the religious faithful (or “the flock”), who take up the position and strategy of the religious institution, and *act* accordingly.

Yet more attention needs to be paid to whether and how religious citizens are influenced by religious messages. How are the actions of religious citizens formed by the set of theological ideas proposed by religious messaging at any given time? Existing macro level analyses are compelling and critical for understanding religious organizations as institutions. They help us to understand why certain religious messages might be disseminated at any given place and time. But they do not translate directly into an explanation of the religious citizen’s political role, as expressed through preferences and action. Studying religious organizations without a complementary attention to the individual obscures the “assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and interests of ordinary people” (Hobsbawm 1990:10), and may lead to a reification of “groupism: the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis” (Brubaker 2004:2). The alternative is a relational approach, wherein we interrogate, rather than take for granted, *how individuals are shaped* by their associations, memberships, and exposure to certain ideas.

To link macrolevel outcomes with microlevel processes (Hirschfield 1996), we suggest going beyond religion as organizations and groups, and beginning to explore religion as cognition. At the individual level, religions are not “things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world,” which includes ways of seeing, construing, inferring, and remembering (Brubaker on ethnicity 2004: 17). Religiously oriented frames can be activated, not least by specific forms of sermon content that shape how people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world, interpret their lives, and determine their appropriate roles and actions.

We are compelled to look at the individual in part because citizens’ reactions to religious content and directives cannot be taken for granted. Citizens interpret and make meaning from religious content in complex forms, in ways both intended and unintended by religious elites. Individual behavior does not always follow directly from elite cues, and religious mobilization can be catalyzed by certain content, but taken by individuals in unexpected directions. For example, in Senegal, the Islamic *marabouts* have served as an important religious broker, providing support for the incumbent regime, distributing (and receiving) patronage, and mobilizing the flock to vote by issuing a *ndigal*, or a religiously infused instruction on vote choice (Villalon 2006). Senegal’s democratic alternation was preceded by a severe decline in the flock’s willingness to follow the *ndigal* (Schaffer 2000). Citizens were influenced by religious messages to pay attention to the political realm, and use their power at the voting booth, but they exercised their own autonomy in vote choice. This shift was led not by collective action or elite construction,

but by a gradual attitudinal shift among the voting public about their role as devout citizens. This capacity to resist the *marabout* as a political broker originated within the religious messages themselves, in the Sufi philosophy of sanctification of work as a spiritual endeavor, a Sufism of action which requires “that the essential reality of spirituality be covered by the veil of commitment in and for the world,” faithfully oriented toward solidarity and social justice (Diagne 2009). In this example, the religious elite and the organization’s institutional embeddedness within the state suggested a type of political quietism and status quo voting behavior. Instead, citizens absorbed the religious doctrine of Sufi spiritual development as “not in contemplation but in the action of transforming the world by transforming oneself” (Diagne 2009). This spiritual foundation of individual responsibility and transformational capacity created a disjuncture between elite/institutional interests and the citizen’s capacity to act and political understanding of their religiously-informed role in the world. By exploring the impact of religious content on citizens’ political behavior, we complement an institutional focus to explain the role of ideas on the agency and interests of the individual.²

This attention to the individual is critical to understand the channels of influence of religious ideas and directives. Through what mechanisms are religious ideas powerfully shaping citizen’s political behavior? First, we demonstrate that religious messages matter because of how they shape individual *mentalities*. Engagement in the political world is daunting and disheartening for many average citizens, and many of us feel that we lack the capacity to bring real change, even to domains we may care deeply about. What religious content can do is to dramatically shape individuals’ perceptions about their own capacity to engage meaningfully, and thus either stimulate or depress political participation.

Second, we focus on the causal mechanisms that connect *particular* religious content to the individual mindset. It is not simply reference to ‘God’ or ‘religion’ that makes individuals act in a certain way - more or less prosocial, more or less participatory, and so on (Djupe and Calfano 2013; Shariff 2007). We identify the relationship between *types* of messages that share a specific set of criteria, and their nuanced impact on citizens’ political behavior. With this empirical strategy, important similarities in emphasis across world religions can be assessed for their causal impact on the individual. For example, we identify the ‘Pentecostal Ethic’ in sub-Saharan Africa as defined by an emphasis on individualism and agential empowerment. Yet this emphasis is shared by other denominations and sects across the world, such as the Salafists in West Africa (Ostebo 2015). This content-specific approach allows us to identify the specific components of sermons that have the potential to shape individuals’ political preferences and behavior, and avoid grouping together a set of heterogeneous beliefs and practices within a single conceptual type (Hurd 2015).

We focus on political participation as a key outcome of interest because of the enduring empirical puzzle it presents to political scientists as a whole (Aldrich 1993), and to contemporary

² As in the Senegalese example, where the religious institution is delivering content (through sermons, etc) that informs citizens’ world views in ways that create dissonance with the state-society structures in place, such as religious institutional accommodation of the regime, this friction can be a source of gradual institutional change, wherein religious authorities are pushed to reform the institution from the top, in response to their flock.

media and policy analysts, who root radicalized political activism in religious theology. Schlozman, Verba and Brady (1994) suggest that voting and other forms of participation reflect a concern for civic involvement, that political *interest* shapes citizens' behavior. But where does this political interest come from? When do citizens perceive their own capacity and desire to engage in the political domain? And when do citizens perceive themselves as demobilized or uninterested in the political world around them? We argue that frequent exposure to *particular* religious messaging can inspire or depress political participation, and shape citizens' views of their own efficacy in the world.

In sum, this research agenda attempts to cover new ground in the contemporary study of religion and politics by identifying content variation and systematically testing the effects of such variation on political participation. While the very premise of nuanced variation of religious ideas as being *critical* to capitalist development and democracy harkens back to a hallowed history in the social sciences (Weber 1998), this has not been systematically tested and demonstrated in a way that can be further expanded across varied sets of religious ideas. We employ a set of methodological tools to tease out the causal connection between *varied but nuanced distinctions* in religious content to understand the effects on the individual. These variations are not constrained by an artificial religious denominational boundary, but rather are based on empirical observation of message characteristics that have causal influence on individual mindsets. In aggregate, individuals' world views shape the politics of the day, pushing up against institutional arrangements and distributions of power. We seek to unpack these often invisible forces, to explain the puzzle of differential *capacity and interest* among religious citizens for political participation.

II. Connecting Content to Participation

At the St. Philip's Anglican Church in Nairobi, a Sunday sermon in 2016 drew inspiration from the Olympic Games. The message was not one about victory but rather one about dealing with defeat: "Remember, in your race to life, there is a time to be defeated," the priest reminded congregants. "God has given us different races. Yet, among the goals, among the races, there is one that is Number 1: to reach Heaven." The priest openly acknowledged the difficulties of current economic and political conditions in Nairobi. He recognized that many of the congregants were probably suffering. But he encouraged them to remain focused not on earthly obstacles but instead on eternal salvation.

During that same week in 2016, the Pentecostal House of Grace in Nairobi held a sermon boot camp to declare God's word. The pastor asked the worshippers to repeat: "I have been empowered to prosper and never to fail; I am blessed everywhere I go, and in everything that I do. The works of my hands are blessed; *I will stand out and succeed in everything that I do. I will be the head and never the tail*" (emphasis added). The message, indeed the repeated mantra, was one of earthly victory and success – of the power of the individual, through faith, to overcome every day struggles, to surmount suffering. There was no room for the concept of defeat: "We will not fail!" the attendees were encouraged to affirm.

The two messages were delivered by Christian congregations in Nairobi during the same liturgical week. Each acknowledged the struggles – economic, political, social, medical – that ordinary Nairobians face every day in their material lives. And yet their prescriptions for confronting these struggles were strikingly different. One, delivered in the Anglican congregation, sought to persuade listeners to think beyond this life. The priest encouraged them to cope with suffering by striving for rewards in heaven rather than on earth. The other message, delivered in a Pentecostal church, offered a prescription focused on earthly success. The pastor encouraged listeners to confront suffering by having faith in their own earthly victory.

The two services were also quite different in the extent to which they stressed, or did not, the social ties among congregants. In the Pentecostal service, attendees sat alone for the most part, far apart from one another. The phrases the pastor asked them to repeat were largely about “I,” about personal relationships with God and about personal success. The message was individualistic. The experience was moving, but it was also solitary. By contrast, the Anglican service encouraged congregants to greet one another, to welcome new members. The priest reminded people not to compete with their neighbors, that “the moment you compete with your neighbor, you have lost the race.” The discussion was not devoid of references to the individual, but it was more communal, less focused on personal striving and success.

These themes of individualism versus collectivism, and capacity for agency versus acceptance create the possibility for four ideal types of religious messaging: individual agency; collective agency; individual acceptance; and collective acceptance. We find that the empirical regularities of messaging in Nairobi, Kenya, strongly associate collectivism with acceptance (in mainline Christian churches, both Anglican and Catholic), or individualism with agency (in Pentecostal sermons) (McClendon and Riedl 2014). Ethnographic observations and survey data in other countries across sub-Saharan Africa suggest that these combinations are the modal patterns, with significant variation in the extent to which sermons affirm adherents’ positive self-image (Marshall 2009; Trinitopoli 2006; Freston 2001; Gifford 2004; Gifford 1998; Comaroff 2012). Therefore, these are the two possibilities that we focus on in order to assess the political effects of real world ideas. We also focus on the variation between religious messages that explicitly affirm an individual's capabilities and potential for achievement on the one hand and religious messages that do not because we expect these particular dimensions might draw people into or away from political participation (Harris 1994).

We propose that differences in religious content matter significantly in shaping individual feelings of capability and self-worth and thus in affecting political participation. In particular, emotionally positive and self-affirming messages could indirectly stimulate political participation by producing a sense of *internal political efficacy* (Gallego and Oberski 2012); Judge et al. 2002; Abramson 1983; Clarke and Acock 1989). Internal efficacy suggests that citizens have the courage to enter otherwise intimidating arenas and when they believe in their own abilities and self-worth. These psychological aspects of religion create cognitive or emotional resources for political mobilization (Harris 1994), which are enhanced by frequent exposure to religious instances of self-affirmation. can boost individuals' sense of internal political efficacy. In contrast, the lack of such emphasis might more often result in abstention.

Research in social and political psychology argues that self-affirmation can encourage pro-active behavior, even in areas unrelated to the source of self-affirmation (Hall et al. 2013). When the self is affirmed with praise for particular capabilities, or with reminders that one has potential for achievement, the need to maintain a positive self-image is met and so people can respond less tentatively and defensively to situations that might otherwise seem new, intimidating or threaten them with failure (Hall et al. 2013). Affirming messages can thus increase openness to new and unrelated areas of action (Correll et al. 2004), can mitigate negative stereotypes that inhibit performance (Hall 2012), and can generally lower avoidance of intimidating situations and activities (Cohen et al. 2006).

Interaction with the government and participation in political activism are intimidating activities for many people, especially in contexts where trust in political institutions is low (Chhibber 2014). These kinds of activities are thus likely to be influenced by individuals' exposure to self-affirming messages. Indeed, self-affirmation manipulations, though unrelated to politics, have been shown to increase individuals' willingness to seek out government services (Hall 2012). The theory of self-affirmation does not require that the intimidating situations and activities themselves are altered in any way. The boost in pro-active behavior instead stems simply from the need for a positive self-image having been met (McQueen and Klein 2006). In other words, exposure to positive, self-affirming messages might boost political engagement not by altering government responsiveness or the strategic environment "external efficacy" but rather by giving individuals psychological strength "internal efficacy" (Niemi et al. 1991) making them feel less threatened by potential failure or futility in the political arena.

Self-affirming messages need not be religious to have this effect---indeed, to our knowledge, research on self-affirmation has thus far examined only secular forms of self-affirmation messages---but religious references might serve to augment the messages' influence on political participation. For listeners who believe in the divine, hearing references to God or to other religious authorities might serve to heighten the legitimacy and thus the power of the message.³ Religious self-affirmation messages convey to listeners that it is not just ordinary capabilities, but *God-given* potential they possess.

In contrast, messages---whether religious or secular---that do not engage in explicit affirmation of the individual and her potential are likely to be relatively less successful in boosting participation in politics. Such messages might invoke a caring God, but they are less likely to activate the sense of a capable self that would boost internal political efficacy and encourage individuals to participate in intimidating arenas. Individuals might be soothed by these messages (Frazier 1974; Powdermaker 1939). But the lack of explicit focus on the competence and potential of the individual is less likely to boost political action.

A common form of non-empowering content is the religious message that stresses acceptance, patience, endurance, and focusing on eternal salvation. These messages present coping mechanisms that discourage citizen political activism or critical analysis of the problems of the day. While soothing the citizen and providing a sense of strength to endure, the collectivist

³ See Djupe and Calfano 2013 and Djupe and Gilbert 2009 for discussions of scholarly debates about this point.

acceptance messages maintain a broader sense of disempowerment among citizens, reinforcing the rational actor paradox of engagement in the challenging, uncertain political domain.

While the individualism and empowerment messages can powerfully shape the psychological perspective of citizens by stimulating attitudes of capability and hope, we can expect that the *duration of such effects is limited*. Particularly for citizens in disempowering contexts, the ability to maintain an empowered state of mind is a challenge, and the human condition requires constant reinforcement. This is why religious practice requires frequent affirmation, in the form of prayer and sermons. Positive and capacious sentiments are particularly difficult mindsets to sustain, and so require frequent stimulation. Therefore, we expect drop-off in the effect of religiously inspired mindsets throughout the week, declining as the distance from the sermon increases. Directly after an empowering sermon, we expect individuals to be most affected by the content, whereas after nearly a week, we expect that life's daily challenges will begin to wear away at the positive belief in individual capacity and agency that was stimulated in the group sermon. The social, in-person, group experience of listening to and participating in a church service is likely to have a greater stimulus effect than individual prayer.

In order to explore the effects of religious content on the political mindset and behaviors of citizens, we employ a multimethod framework using observational data of Afrobarometer and Pew Surveys across sub-Saharan Africa (Section III), experimental data from our laboratory sessions in Nairobi (Section IV), and focus group analysis of citizens prior to and after participating in their own church sermons in Nairobi (Section V). This triangulation helps us to address the external validity of citizens' lived experience as well as focus in on the direct effect of exposure to a religious message on political behavior by assigning people randomly in the lab to hear different messages to which they might plausibly be exposed in the real world, without having them decide whether to attend church and which ones to attend. We employ this multimethod design because of the challenges of inherent in observing the effect of ideas.

III. Observational data

When people are exposed to individualistic and empowering messages, are they more likely to participate in politics and take action to hold politicians accountable? In contrast, when people are exposed to communal and coping messages focused on endurance, do they demonstrate a lesser sense of political efficacy and engagement? If we are able to observe such a relationship between religious content exposure and political behavior through citizens' lived and self-reported experiences, we expect that the effect of such religious content would be particularly powerful directly after worship services. It might dissipate with time throughout the week, given the need to consistently reaffirm such mindsets.

In the larger project, we examine data from two observational surveys: (1) the 2011-2013 round (Round 5) of the Afrobarometer, which was conducted in 30 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and (2) the 2008-2009 Pew Survey of 10 Sub-Saharan African countries, entitled "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa." Both surveys measure whether or not respondents self-identified as Pentecostal or as a member of another Christian denomination, information that is crucial for assessing whether there are differences in patterns of political participation depending on the type of religious message to which citizens have been

exposed. In this paper, we focus on results from the Afrobarometer survey, because that wave included measures of a sense of political efficacy and reported political participation. Elsewhere in the project, we examine differences in attitudes toward social spending and political accountability from the Pew survey.

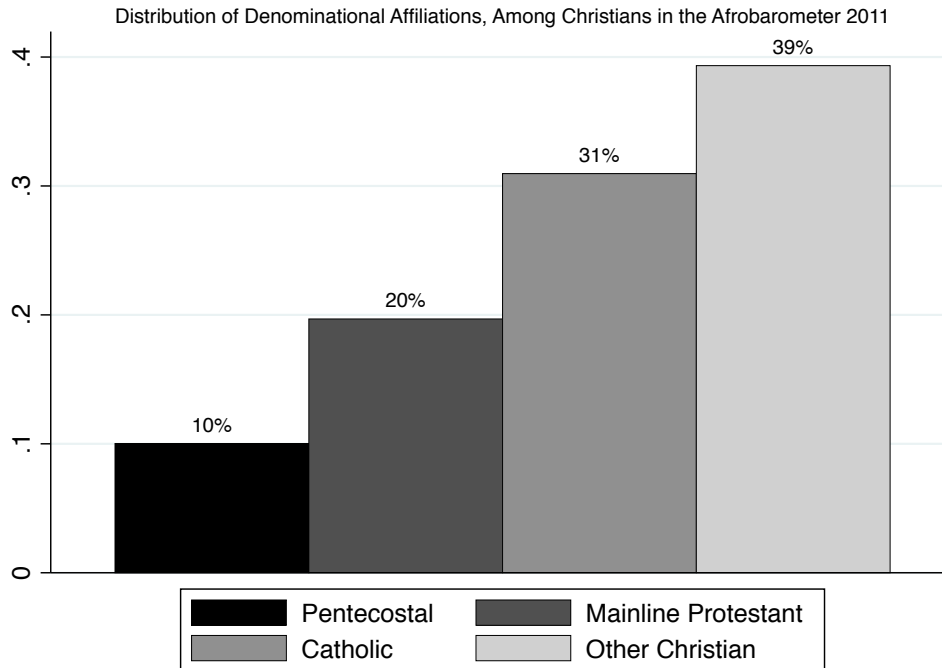
We were able to obtain information on the dates on which each respondent was interviewed the Afrobarometer, which we could recode as the day of the week on which the respondent was interviewed. This information tells us whether any given respondent was interviewed on or just after Sunday worship services, or whether the respondent was interviewed later in the week.⁴ Unlike in the laboratory experiment we discuss later, we cannot manipulate or even isolate the messages to which people are exposed in the survey data, and we cannot randomly assign the days of the week on which people are interviewed. But we can examine whether the difference in political attitudes and behavior between Pentecostals and Catholics shows up more after Sunday services than at other times during the week.

The survey data's reliance on recall and self-reporting is particularly useful in assessing changes in individual mindsets. Standard questions about internal political efficacy demonstrate this type: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on." Other types of survey ask respondents to recall whether they have done things in the past year (as per questions about political participation). Whether a respondent actually participated politically in the last year is not likely to have changed between a Sunday afternoon and a Wednesday interview, however whether a respondent recalls that she has been active over the last year to "join others in your community to request action from government" or "contacted a politician or political party official" may substantially vary according to how she imagines her own actions and significance in the greater political environment. Similarly, an individual's capacity to "understand politics and government" has not actually changed between days of the week, but the respondent's self-reported assessment of his own capability may be significantly impacted by his mindset at that moment, which may in turn have been shaped by the religious worldviews to which he has recently been exposed.

In the Afrobarometer survey, there is variation in self-reported denominational affiliation. Of the 44,398 Sub-Saharan African respondents in Round 5 of the Afrobarometer, 7% report being Pentecostal, 14% Mainline Protestant, 21% Catholic and 27% "other Christian." Among Christians alone, 10% said they identify as Pentecostal, 20% Mainline Protestant, 31% Catholic and 39% "Other Christian." Figure 1 summarizes this variation in denominational affiliation.

Figure 1

⁴ In the Afrobarometer survey, 25% of respondents were interviewed on either Sunday or Monday. In the Pew Survey, 26% of respondents were interviewed on either Sunday or Monday. The modal day for being interviewed was Thursday.



We are able to examine several outcome measures related to self-efficacy and political participation. On self-efficacy, the Afrobarometer survey asks a standard question about internal political efficacy: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with that statement. The question is a standard measure of internal political efficacy from the American Politics literature (Niemi et al. 1991, Morrell 2005). In the domain of political participation, the Afrobarometer includes questions about how often within the last year respondents have contacted various political actors (local councilors, MPs, local government officials, local party officials) as well as whether they have or would participate in other forms of political actions, such as joining with others to raise an issue.

In the analyses of the survey data that follow, we control for the individual-level attributes (education, sex, income, access to communications technology) that differentiate Pentecostals from other Christians, as well as for the individual-level attributes (age, urban/rural, religiosity) that correlate with when respondents were interviewed during the week. However, we do not claim that the patterns we discuss here are causal. Instead, we are looking for patterns that we can further test in the laboratory and in focus groups. To the extent that we find consistent patterns across these various methods, we have greater confidence that the influence of religious messages on political behavior is both causal and likely to many places within Sub-Saharan Africa.

Unless otherwise noted, the following results are from linear regressions (using dummy variables for both the dependent and independent variables) that include country fixed effects and only Christian respondents. In other words, these are analyses of the correlates of *within* country differences in political attitudes and reported behaviors among Christians.

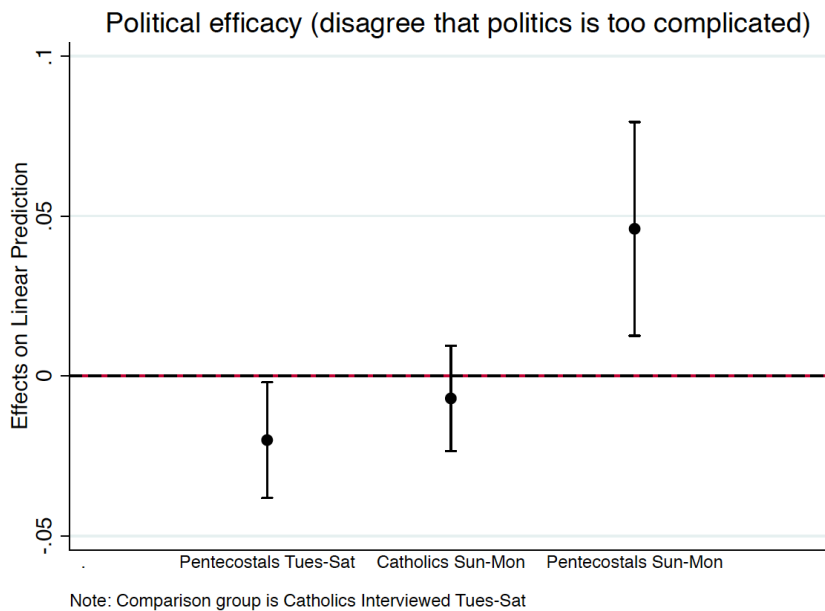
All results presented below are from linear regressions that control for binary variables indicating some secondary education, mobile phone ownership, above average income, urban residence, female, whether the respondent ever uses a computer, and whether the respondent is

below 40 years of age. These control variables account for the principal observable differences between individuals who self-identify as Pentecostal, rather than as a member of another Christian denomination, as well as for the observable differences between people who were interviewed earlier rather than later in the week.

Political efficacy and participation

Pentecostals interviewed Sunday-Monday were more likely to disagree that politics is too complicated than Pentecostals interviewed Tuesday-Saturday and than Catholics interviewed Tuesday-Saturday (Figure 2). These patterns are consistent with Pentecostal Sunday services' priming political efficacy.

Figure 2



Pentecostals interviewed early in the week (Sunday-Monday) are also more likely to say they have contacted a government actor than Pentecostals interviewed later in the week and more likely than Catholics interviewed later in the week (Figure 3). The same pattern holds for the question about whether they have or would ever “join with others to raise an issue” (Figure 4). Notably, *overall*, Pentecostals are *less* likely than Catholics to say they have or would participate in politics in these ways. However, on Sunday and Monday (just after worship services) Pentecostals exhibit a boost in participation, whereas Catholics do not.

Figure 3: Contact Party and Government Officials

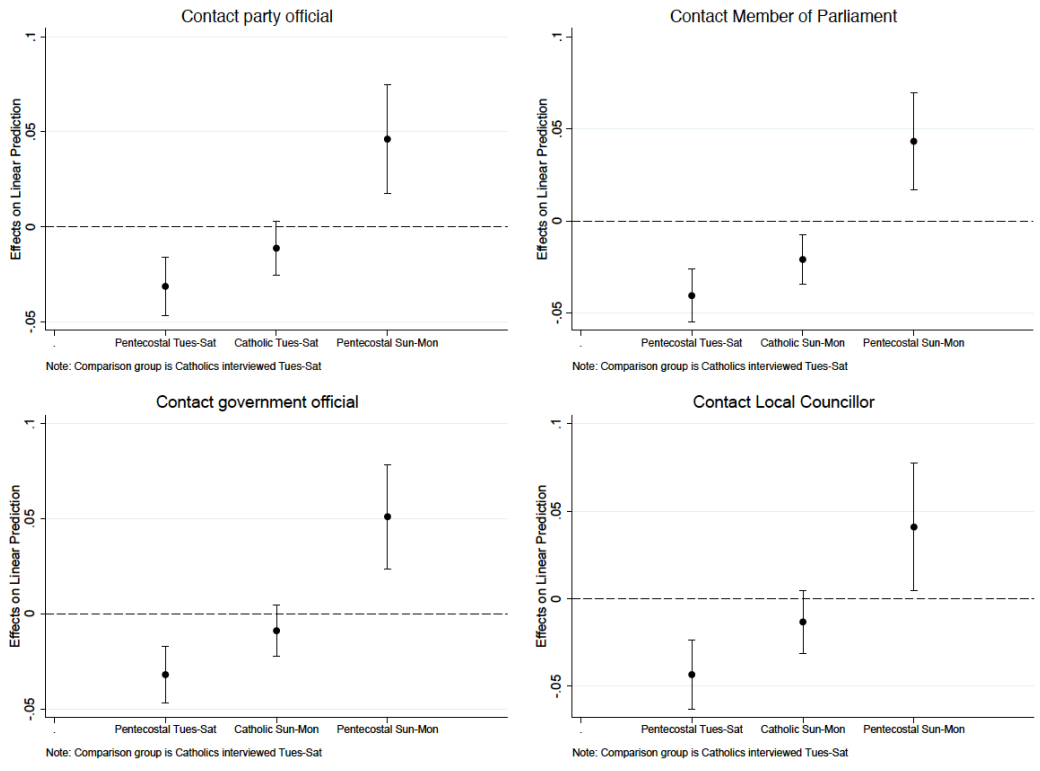
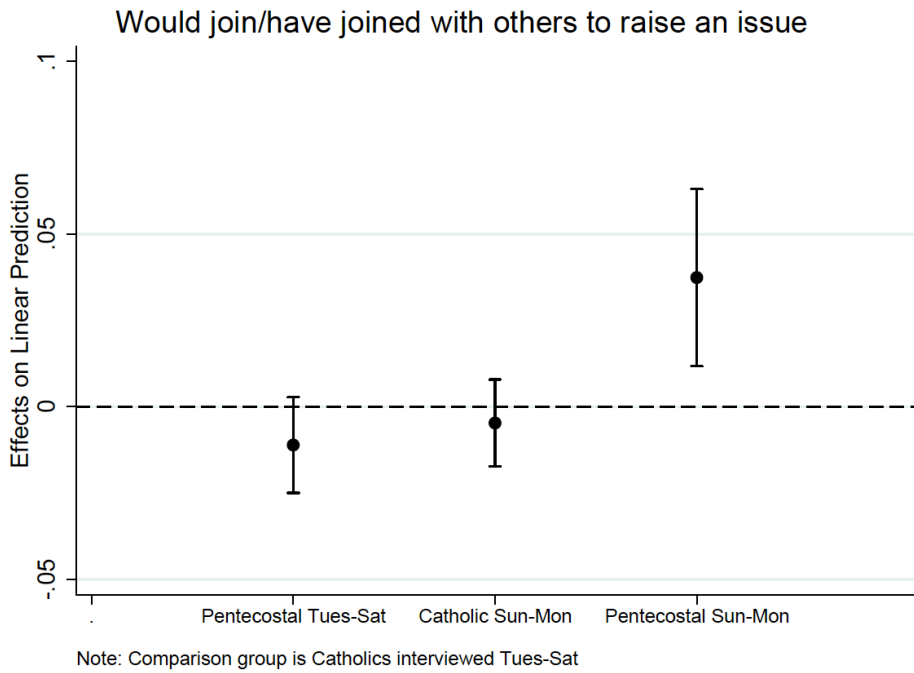


Figure 4



Summary of the observational data

We find that these differences are not merely expressive: Pentecostals interviewed Sunday-Monday do not exhibit differences in the way they report their own economic situations, or talk about how good their day was, or report whether they've ever gone hungry, compared to Pentecostals interviewed Tuesday-Saturday.

The patterns in the survey data show that Pentecostals exhibit a significant boost in internal political efficacy, recall of political participation and willingness to participate *just after* Sunday worship services, compared both to Catholics and to Pentecostals interviewed later in the week. These patterns are consistent with the argument that exposure to Pentecostal messages increases political participation through self-affirmation. (Having been exposed to the idea that is the individual that must (and can) make a difference through thought and action, individuals are willing to learn about and take action in intimidating arenas, including in politics.) These patterns are also consistent with the idea that the effect of Pentecostal messages on behavior is limited in duration.

Overall, these patterns offer consistent support for the idea that Pentecostals in sub-Saharan Africa are responding to individualistic empowering sermon with a short-term boost in a politically participatory mindset. The short duration suggests that maintaining and empowered mentality is challenged by the quotidian reality of average citizens, and requires frequent reinforcement. This survey data also points to the importance of nuanced content variation within a global religion category such as Christianity. Broad tents such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism contain many variants within, with distinct characteristics and implications for political activism. But we cannot claim that the survey results demonstrate a *causal* impact of religious messages on political participation. For one, the Afrobarometer does not ask respondents whether they attended church that week, nor can we observe the exact sermon content to which they were exposed, if they did attend. For another, there are likely many observable and *unobservable* differences between those who identify as Pentecostal and those who identify as Catholic, as well as between those who are interviewed early in the week and those who are interviewed later. While we controlled for as many observable attributes as possible, we cannot be sure that the patterns were not driven by unobservable differences. To assess the impact of sermon content isolated from the selection into Pentecostal churches, we use a lab experiment across a heterogeneous population of Christian citizens.⁵

IV. A Laboratory Experiment on Sermon Content and Political Participation

We thus turn in this section to the results of two laboratory experiments in Nairobi. In each, we randomly assigned Christian participants to be exposed to messages drawn from actual Pentecostal and Catholic sermons, and, in one experiment, to secular sources in the city. We then

⁵ We use an experimental approach as a part of our multi-method approach because identifying the effects of exposure to religious messages presents certain inferential challenges. If individuals choose to attend a particular religious service based at all on whether they find its message appealing, then exposure to that message may actually have little independent impact on their attitudes and behavior. Just as people sort into media consumption and partisan social ties (e.g. Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Levendusky 2009), they may sort into religious communities that reflect their values and preferences.

measured participation in an activist campaign and reports of efficacy. Our analysis demonstrates that individuals exposed to Pentecostal messages that emphasized the individual capacity for change through a transformation in mindset were more likely to participate politically and to report an ability to face challenges in life.

We focus on the effects of exposure on *Christians*. Boundaries between churches delivering the prosperity gospel and the social gospel are soft in Sub-Saharan Africa and in many other countries (Ngong2014).⁶ While churches try to encourage loyalty from congregants, Christians still have discretion over which churches to attend, and can switch between them, or not attend frequently and thus be more frequently exposed to the secular messages we examine. In this context, a potential outcomes framework makes sense. One can *imagine* a Christian being assigned to any of the treatment conditions,⁷ even if they are not necessarily in practice. Focusing on Christians allowed us to stay reasonably within a potential outcomes framework.

Following similar studies in which the theoretically interesting comparisons are between different primes, rather than between a prime and a control condition (see Chong and Druckman 2007), we compare political participation across people assigned to contrasting recorded messages and do not employ a condition with no recording or with a placebo. Given that the scholarly debates have often been about patterns of participation comparing secular and religious people, or comparing religious people of different denominations, our different treatment conditions approximate those categories with real-world messages whose behavioral consequences are primarily interesting relative to one another.

During the study, participants sat at private, individual cubicles and made their choices through touchscreen computers. The computer screens of the audio recordings were identical so as to minimize experimenter-demand effects. The lab staff could not identify treatment assignment for any participant by looking at her screen.

We drew the phrases for the two religious recordings directly from sermons that have been delivered in Nairobi (McClendon and Riedl 2014). We shared the treatment texts with theologians and scholars of religion and politics in Kenya and received feedback that the two religious texts were a fair reflection of social gospel and prosperity gospel sermons in this context. Any religious phrasing explicitly evoking God, Jesus, the Bible or the spiritual world was then replaced with non-religious language in order to create comparable, secularly-worded texts on the same topics. Pre-experiment, we had Nairobi informants read the English texts of all treatment messages in random order to confirm that there were realistic and distinct. Although the secular treatments were created as derivatives of the religious treatments, they were identified by informants as familiar types of secular messages. Secular self-help books in Nairobi typically feature topics on financial independence and finding one's individual potential that are similar to

⁶ Randomly assigning people to any and all religious ideas may not make sense within a potential outcomes framework (Holland 1986). Exposure to religious ideas is not completely manipulable (Horowitz 1985: 50), because the boundaries between major faith traditions can be quite strong (Barro et al. 2010; c.f. Djupe and Calfano 2013).

⁷ Note that our approach treats subjects with *exposure* to religious ideas, instead of trying to manipulate individual belief systems, which might not be plausible (Djupe and Calfano 2013).

themes in the prosperity gospel (England 2005). Meanwhile, similar to the Catholic social gospel of collective orientations, secular, non-governmental organizations produce signs, pamphlets and radio shows in the city that emphasize prosociality and the alleviation of poverty, so it is not surprising that the secular messages struck informants as familiar.

The treatments vary in the emphasis they place on self-affirmation. Both messages decry the current state of affairs in Kenya, and the religious messages both make reference to a caring God, but only the self-affirming messages claim that the individual can "make success" and can enact change through her own effort (e.g., through trying, asking, seeking). Only the self-affirming messages convey that there are rewards of which the listener herself is worthy, things that she "deserves." The self-affirming messages explicitly underscore the listeners' potentials for achievement, explaining that, by improving their faith and mindsets, listeners are capable of overcoming obstacles, of getting what they seek. The prosperity gospel treatment additionally provides this kind of explicit affirmation along with reminders that the listeners' worth and capabilities are backed by God.

In contrast, the Catholic message and its secular equivalent ask that, in response to the evils of the world, listeners simply "make [their] wants few." These messages do not explicitly convey that listeners are deserving of rewards or capable of success. They do encourage listeners to think about others "and to care for the poor, sick, and suffering." And the religious version does invoke compassionate images of the divine. But these reminders of compassion and of the moral obligation to be generous never rise to the level of telling the listener that she is capable of achievement, or that she herself is deserving. Instead, she is called to recognize the value and deservingness of others. Following research on altruism and political participation, one might hypothesize that these treatments would be the ones to boost political participation. And yet they do not focus as explicitly on building individuals' confidence and positive sense of a capable self.

Figure 5: Treatment conditions

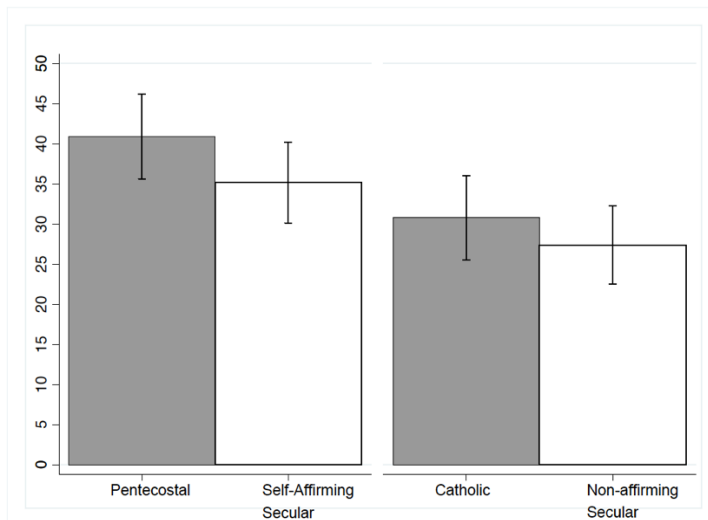
	Religious	Secular
Coping/ Social Spending	Catholic	Radio/ Everyday Conversations
Self-Affirming	Pentecostal	Self-Help Books

To measure willingness to participate in the politics, we partnered with a non-governmental organization in Nairobi that promotes political activism. The group is called the Youth Agenda and works to get younger people (under 40) involved in politics, to promote clean governance and to conduct civic engagement sessions. The organization is not affiliated with any religious organization or denomination. Participants were told about the civic organization and their activities. The Youth Agenda runs a free, anonymous SMS (short message service) campaign to encourage Nairobi residents to report their views on government performance and policy priorities. At the end of the experiment, each participant was individually invited into a private

room where a laboratory staff member confirmed each participant's monetary compensation with her and reminded her about the SMS campaign. The staff member said the participant could take a moment to send a message only if she wanted to and if she were not in a rush---thus providing participants a good excuse not to do so if they felt any pressure. The staff member then stepped out of the room. After the experiment, we collected data from the Youth Agenda on all mobile numbers from which it received SMSes in the weeks during and following the experiment. In the end, 34% of the participants in our experiment sent an SMS expressing their political priorities to the Youth Agenda. This form of political participation was certainly not as costly to participants as, say, taking on the physical risks of participating in a political rally. Nevertheless, it is an unsupervised form of political participation that required some expenditure of time and effort. Indeed, these kinds of text message campaigns are becoming increasingly common opportunities for political participation throughout the developing world (Grossman et al 2014; Paluck et al 2015).

Clear differences between exposure to the self-affirming messages and non-self-affirming messages emerged in measures of political participation in the text campaign. Figure 3 shows rates of SMS participation across treatments. Together, 38% of individuals exposed to either of the self-affirming messages (religious or secular) sent a text message articulating their priorities for the government, whereas only 29% of the individuals in the non-self-affirming messages did so (diff=9.0 p.p., $p=0.079$). This difference remains robust to controlling for a host of individual-level covariates, including number of previous experimental studies, sex, age, marital status, and household assets (see McClendon Riedl 2015 and appendix for full results from tests listed in our pre-analysis plan).

Figure 6: Rates of Sending Text Messages, by Treatment Type



Moreover, the prosperity gospel's self-affirming message in particular produced the overall highest rate of participation among the four treatment conditions, with 40.9% of subjects

assigned to its exposure sending an SMS. The non-self-affirming secular message in turn induced the overall lowest rate of participation, with only 27.4% of subjects assigned to it participating in the campaign. The difference between these two conditions (13.5 p.p., $p=0.062$) constitutes a 49% increase in the participation rate from the non-self-affirming secular message condition to the religious, self-affirming message condition. The difference in behavior between those exposed to the prosperity gospel and those exposed to the secular self-affirming message was in the expected direction but did not reach statistical significance (diff=5.7 p.p., $p=0.431$). We note that, in such a religious place, there was a chance that everything would be interpreted as having religious connotations and thus that this contrast likely underestimates any effect religious wording has above and beyond its self-affirming content.

By exposing participants in Nairobi to realistic religious and secular messages in a controlled laboratory environment in partnership with local organizations that offered real opportunities for measures of political participation, we found that self-affirmation messages, particularly in the religious form of the prosperity gospel, boosted political participation. They did so in contrast to messages that were less explicitly focused on cultivating a positive image of a capable self, even ones that encouraged prosociality.

V. Focus Groups: An Exploration of Mindset and Duration

As a third methodological approach, we organized focus groups with members of both Pentecostal and Catholic congregations in Nairobi, in order to explore whether worshippers would show evidence in open-ended discussions of outlooks consistent with the findings in the laboratory and observational survey data. In particular, we wanted to observe whether the religious content received in the actual service was absorbed into citizen's perspectives as they thought about political participation and leadership accountability, and whether particular themes of significance were reflected in their language. Did the church members use language of empowerment or coping to frame their response? Did they discuss their capacity to confront challenges and engage in the political world, or did they express their sense of anxiety in the face of challenges? We observed duration effects of the religious content by varying the length of time since participants had been exposed to a sermon throughout the week, to assess the importance of frequent reinforcement.

We chose two churches, one Pentecostal and one Catholic, that, based on our previous observations of their Sunday worship services, typified the types of messages (individualistic, focused on earthly change versus communal, focused on coping with this life and waiting for the next) that we found to be common and most different in our descriptive study, described earlier in the book. These two congregations were the Full Gospel Church of Kenya, Buru-Buru (Pentecostal), and the Blessed Sacrament Church in Buru-Buru (Catholic). The congregations were in the same neighborhood in the city and both catered to working, middle-class, mixed-age congregations.

With the permission of church leadership, we invited congregants to sign up if they were interested in participating in a focus group study and if they were available on *both* a Friday evening *and* on a Sunday afternoon. We made an announcement during a Sunday worship service and collected names of interested people after the service so as to recruit from people

likely to be regular attendees. Once we had a list of interested participants from both congregations that met these criteria, we randomly assigned each person on the list to be invited via text message to either a Friday evening discussion (i.e., a pre-weekly sermon discussion) with others from their congregation or to a Sunday afternoon (i.e., a post-weekly sermon discussion) with others from their congregation. In this way, we were able to hold group discussions with members of these congregations who just happened to be talking with us either before they had heard that week's sermon or just after.⁸

The discussions were causal and open-ended, lasted about forty-five minutes and took place in a non-religious venue (a small hotel conference room) in the neighborhood. Participants were reimbursed for their transportation and given 300KES (approximately 3 US dollars) for their time through mobile phone transfer.

We visited both churches during the Sunday worship service between the Friday and Sunday focus groups so that we could have experience and a record of the messages to which the congregants had been exposed.

The participants in the focus group are regular members of the selected churches, and in going about their usual practices, they were exposed to the religious messages according to their actual, lived events through attending mass, bible group discussions, and engaging in church activities. This means that there was a high level of comfort within each focus group, because all members of the group were recruited from the same congregation, and they knew that they were part of the same church community. The focus group participants may or may not have known each other previously, but they were aware that their circles overlap through this network.

The goal of the focus groups in the overall study is to generate data based on the synergy of the group interaction (Green et al 2003), and particularly to observe two distinct dimensions of interaction. The first dimension is to assess the longevity of treatment effects, by observing whether there are differences in the conversation themes and question responses according to whether the denominational group met a day or two *prior* to the Sunday service (and thus had not been exposed to the group treatment for approximately a week) or *post* Sunday service (and thus directly exposed). Here we look at the conversation within the group to see if there are differences across time (pre or post service) as well as across denominations, to assess if the longevity of the treatment varies by type of message.

The second dimension is to observe the within-group dynamic to see how references to God and specific religious messages within the focus group discussion itself may be influential in their own right, that lead other participants to begin to take up particular lines of conversation. In particular, whether participants who are frequent attenders at church (engaging in church activities multiple times per week, and are otherwise highly observant) might influence other focus group participants in their discourse. We imagine that reference to God and reminders of shared religious messages that are reinforced in their congregation may encourage others who

⁸ The participants who turned out were a smaller subset than those who agreed to participate based on schedules, and therefore some availability bias was potentially present, although all participants were equally available at both times at the invitation stage.

are less frequent attenders to follow that line of thought and bring in more mention of God as well as references to the optimism and individualism versus collectivism and enduring suffering, by congregation.

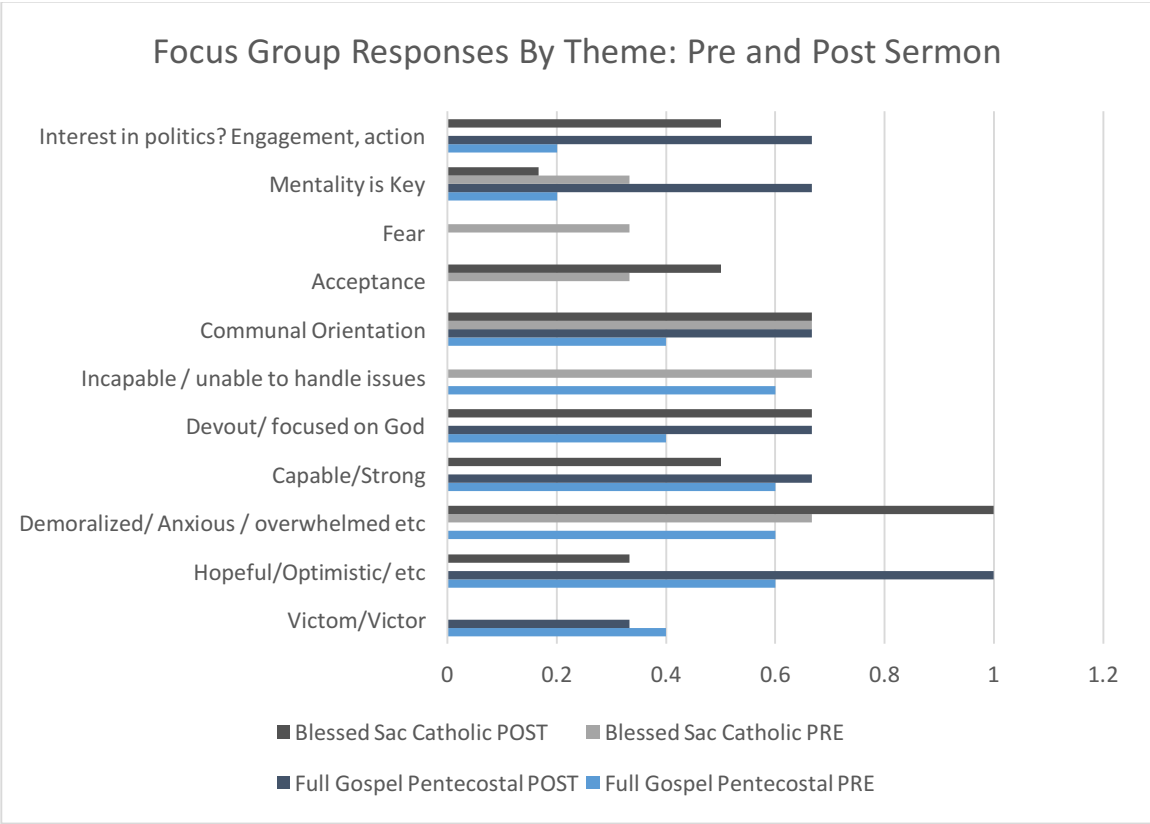
The analysis reflects these two dimensions, with one level of analysis with mixed groups of recent exposure (among frequent attenders) and lagged attendance to assess patterns of take-up *within* groups, and one level of analysis by individual based on their last attendance (within the last day versus longer) to assess patterns of treatment longevity by congregation.

Our analysis of individuals according to whether they had recently been exposed to a sermon message delivered through their congregation (attended church or bible study in the last two days) suggests interesting patterns of amplification by attendance, as well as expected denominational differences across groups (Figure 7). For the Pentecostal Church (Full Gospel), represented in shades of blue, there were expected references volunteered by participants to themes such as “victims and victors”; “hopefulness and optimism”; “capability and strength”; “devotion and focusing on God”; and the importance of shaping one’s own “mentality.” Within this group, there were interesting divergences between those that had recently been to church (dark blue; “Post treatment”, and those that had not been for a week (light blue; “Pre treatment”). Those in the post treatment, that came to the focus group generally directly after church, there was a higher frequency of participants referring to these expected themes, particularly “hopefulness and optimism.” Indeed, 100% of post-treatment focus group respondents discussed these topics in detail in their personal responses. There were also upticks in the frequency of participants referencing their devotion, and the importance of mentality, as well as their *interest in politics*. Related to our hypotheses on this political reference point, there was a decrease of Pentecostals post-treatment who mentioned their sense of demoralization or anxiousness over the general state of affairs. In the Nairobi climate, many of the participants throughout the focus groups (65%) expressed this sentiment of anxiety, demoralization, or concern over the state of life in various ways. In the Pentecostal Pre-Treatment group, 60% referenced these concerns. However, in the Pentecostal Post-Treatment group, none did. These conversations suggest that in a post-treatment world, the Pentecostal participants were less focused on the difficulties and struggles of life that surrounded them, more hopeful, and more interested in politics.

For the Catholic Church (Blessed Sacrament) participants, there was an *increase* in “demoralization or anxiety” from 66% to 100% between pre and post-treatments, suggesting that the focus on the difficulties of struggle raise consciousness of the challenges in the earthly world. There was also an expected increase in “devotion and focusing on God” and an increase in the mention of the need for “acceptance.”

The Catholic participants also showed an increase in references of “strength and capability,” which suggests a sense of capacity to endure and the strength to take on the struggles of life’s challenges through devotion to God. In this comparison, Catholics also experienced an uptick interest in politics, which reflected their stated concerns that engagement with the political system was very difficult and “to do so with a sound mind is challenging.”

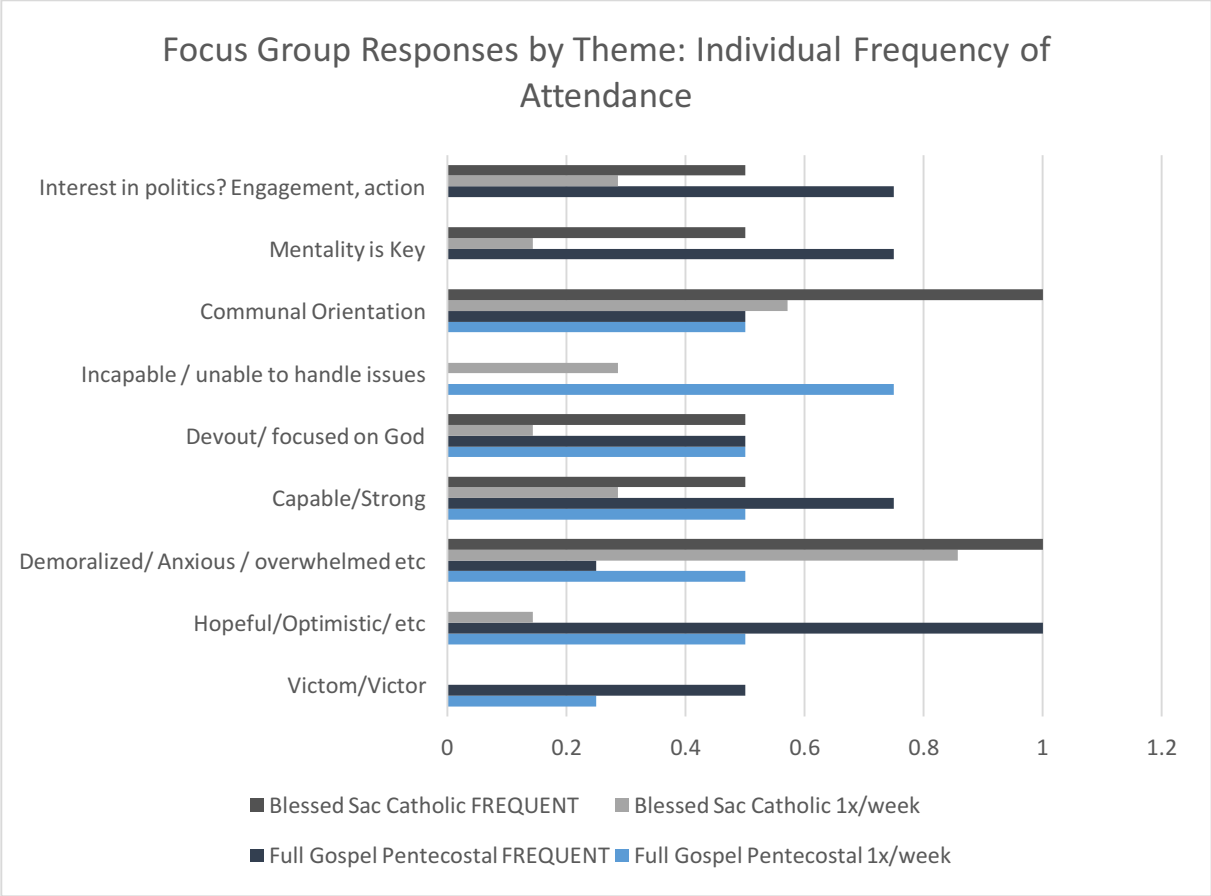
Figure 7



Both denominations experienced a decrease between pre and post treatment in their references to “feeling incapable, unable to handle issues.” The means through which issues might be addressed, however, offer illuminating views of varied strategies. Among the Catholics, participants post-service suggested that they had the God-given strength to endure the challenges of daily life. They would cope with their situation by focusing on God’s grace. In contrast, the post-service Pentecostals were oriented around their capacity to succeed, and change their challenging circumstances into victories. Therefore, both groups had ways to handle issues following their service, but even their perspectives of how to handle issues demonstrated very different mentalities.

We see similar patterns in sorting individual responses in the focus group according to each participants’ frequency of attendance at church (Figure 8). For the Pentecostals who were frequent attenders, they were more likely than those who attend only once a week (and much more likely than the Catholics) to express themes of “victims and victors”; “hopefulness and optimism”; “capability and strength”; the importance of shaping one’s own “mentality”; and “interest in politics.” For the Pentecostal frequent attenders, there was a decrease in the reference to “demoralization or anxiety” over the state of affairs and “unable to handle issues.

Figure 8



Among the Catholic participants, we see a slight increase among the frequent attenders in levels of “demoralization or anxiety”; “capability and strength”; “interest in politics”; and a greater increase in reference to the need for “devotion and focus on God”; and, a “communal orientation.”

Moving to a second level of analysis, the *within* group dynamic was striking in the degree to which one “frequent attender” could shape the direction, tone, and references of the conversation as a whole. This sequencing and take-up was particularly striking among the Pentecostals pre-treatment focus group. Among the participants, most had not been to church in a week, as the focus group was held on Friday evening and the participants had only been to church the prior Sunday. However, in two separate focus groups, one participant in each was a “frequent attender” who was frequently at the church and involved in volunteer and service roles, and had been engaged in outreach prayers and discussions during the week. In each of these scenarios, the conversation started out with the “once per week” attenders responding to the question about pressing problems they were facing, and what they think about how to address those problems. George* began by saying “Everyone has a challenge as an individual. My personal challenges are about education [for my children], it increases your poverty.” He described how lack of access to further education and joblessness led many youth to drugs and alcohol, thinking of general societal issues in the broader structural context. The next respondent was Susan*, who suggested “When as a Christian, one of the challenges is that we trust in God, but sometimes we forget and see challenges of human beings... But if you search in his name, the Holy Spirit will

direct you... and that's the way for each and every Christian." In the next set of questions, George again responded first by highlighting the struggles of coming from a poor family with little opportunity for upward mobility. Susan chimed in with a reference to God, saying that how you manage challenges and emerge from them depends upon that individual relationship, according to "each and every person". George responded directly and began to bring in his own religious references, suggesting that "the Bible says we have to persevere because problems will be there, but through perseverance, we will become *victors*." From this initial sequencing, George thereafter began referencing God in most of his subsequent responses, suggesting the role of individual activism rooted in religious beliefs as a way to address poverty, for example: "If you believe that you cannot make it, then you come a beggar. Unless a person is cursed, you will stand strong and see problems, but do something with your own strength. And God is going to use you and expand you."

This type of sequencing repeated itself in another Pentecostal pre-treatment focus group on the same evening, wherein one participant was a frequent attender throughout the week, and was headed to the church's bible study group directly after our discussion. The conversation began with Margaret* suggesting that the concerns and challenges of the lack of business and unemployment weigh people down. "When you have problems, then you return home demoralized. [This occurs] Most of the time." Lucy* followed in the same stream, suggesting "I lack hope. Because like me and my husband, we are young and we are worried about our children. If this is the way of the world, it is demoralizing, even in your job." Following these two, Jennifer*, the frequent attender, suggested a different approach to thinking about how to address problems: "I am motivated. I like facing challenges because they make me stronger." This sentiment may have influenced Lucy and Margaret in their subsequent evaluations; while they both continued to reflect upon the lack of capacity they had to handle problems, Lucy suggested that various levels of inequality within society were acceptable: "it is making those who want to work harder to reach the others," and Margaret agreed. Lucy also suggested that you can solve your problems by handling your finances first, after which you can move to another area within Nairobi and "not face the same challenges." This group also referenced the social media network the church shares via What's App, and suggested this is an important tool for them to stay involved and engaged. The forum is a way for church members to be connected throughout the week and share important updates, information, and be reminded of their religious community and commitments. At the time of the focus group, the social media network had over 100 members.

Among the Catholic focus groups, there was little pick-up among the pre-treatment group who go to church once a week, despite the presence of one "frequent attender" who regularly mentioned the importance of devotion and reliance on God, and the strength that provided to endure hardships. In the post-treatment group on Sunday following service, there was a sequence effect wherein the first to speak generally focused on their concerns in thinking about problems, saying they were "frustrated," "anxious," "found it difficult" and didn't "know if things would change." The second participant to speak, Sylvie*, suggested the need to pray, and that "sometimes God answers your prayers." The third participant took up the reference to God in her comments, and suggested first that she was concerned about jobs and her children's education, "but as a Christian you have hope. That was the theme of today's service at Church. One day God will visit us, we hope that [our children] will get jobs, even though they have a

degree and they haven't yet had a job... We have problems but one day God will come.... Keep praying, this is how we have sorted out our problems." In this example, the reference to hope is about the strength to endure the hardships while living according to your values, to hope that God will provide solutions in the future, and to cope with adversity until that time. In this post-treatment condition, all focus group participants had just received a powerful sermon message, and in the group dynamics we see this reflected rapidly in the take-up of references to God and perspectives on life's challenges.

VI. Conclusion

We take advantage of the contemporary pluralism in Christian denominations in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the recent, explosive growth in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, to test what influence different churches' messages are having on citizens' willingness to participate in politics. We find that an important distinction among Christian messages is the extent to which they emphasize *individual faith* as the key to solving the world's problems. Pentecostal churches typically emphasize the earthly power of individual faith, while mainline and Catholic churches focus either on otherworldly salvation or on collective solutions to life's challenges. We show that short-term exposure to messages emphasizing individual faith in turn affects people's politics in important ways: it boosts their sense of political efficacy, and makes them more likely to participate in politics. This emboldening effect can be seen in relation both to exposure to other Christian messages *and* to exposure to secular, control messages.

We seek to more deeply connect the microfoundations of citizens' beliefs and political behavior to macrolevel outcomes by understanding the effect of exposure to different worldviews and religious creeds. How does this translate into the mobilization of ordinary citizens' political action? Why do citizens engage, or exit? How do religious messages inform political perspectives?

To return to our motivating puzzle, religious organizations are the most prevalent form of associational life across much of the Global South, and are attributed great power in their ability to shape individuals' minds and preferences. While the hypothesis that such ideas can directly shape human behavior extends back at least to Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, relatively little work has been done to identify the causal mechanisms and direction of impact. Many scholars have explicitly argued or implicitly assumed that religion is a symptom rather than a cause of people's political attitudes and actions. Here we propose multiple factors to be tested cross-regionally in future work: content effects, duration effects, and relational effects between the sequence of individuals' interactions.

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