

# Religious Involvement and Bridging Social Ties: The Role of Congregational Participation

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***Abstract:** Research indicates that religious communities are important sites for the development of social resources, including social capital. Several studies suggest that religious involvement beyond worship services is a meaningful predictor of civic engagement that may foster bridging social capital, or ties that bridge social groups and cross lines of status and identity. This article explores the relationship between religious involvement and bridging social ties. Using nationally representative survey data and a subsample of individuals who are affiliated with one particular congregation, the article examines how religious service attendance and congregational participation (beyond services) are associated with frequency of interaction with someone from one of nine different social groups that vary along dimensions of social status and identity. Congregational participation beyond services positively predicts contact with several of the groups. In contrast, service attendance is either negatively related or not at all significantly related to interaction with someone from each of these nine different social groups.*

***Keywords:** Religious Involvement, Congregational Participation, Bridging Social Capital, Intergroup Contact*

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## Introduction

A **SIZABLE LITERATURE** in the social sciences examines the social resources that religious communities generate. Many of these social resources remain within the community, of course, such as access to social support or a sense of belonging and cohesion. Other research examines how these resources can spill out into the broader community. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effects of religious participation on volunteering and other forms of civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> The networks fostered in religious communities appear to play a

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<sup>1</sup> See Penny Edgell Becker and Pawan H. Dhingra, “Religious Involvement and Volunteering: Implications for Civil Society,” *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2001): 315–335, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712353>; Jerry Z. Park and Christian Smith, “‘To Whom Much Has Been Given...’: Religious Capital and Community Voluntarism,” *Journal for the Scientific*

key role.<sup>2</sup> A key concept in this literature is that of social capital, which refers to features of social organization (e.g. networks, norms, and trust) that help individuals and communities attain goals. Researchers distinguish between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is generated within a group or community whereas bridging social capital occurs between social groups defined by social class, race, religion or other important sociodemographic or socioeconomic characteristics. Bridging social capital is especially valuable since it promotes a sense of civic responsibility and encourages tolerance and cooperation. Studies of religion and bridging social capital generally measure volunteering or membership in local organizations that are assumed to bring into meaningful contact individuals who differ along one or more meaningful social dimension (e.g. race, education, status, profession, etc.). Few studies measure whether such contact or relationships are actually linked to religious participation. Using data from the nationally representative Portraits of American Life Study, this article seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining how congregational participation is associated with status- and identity-bridging ties, as measured by frequency of contact with individuals from a range of different social groups.

### Religion and Bridging Social Capital

A large body of research suggests that religious congregations and communities are fertile ground for the development of social capital. Social capital is a concept that captures features of social organization (e.g. networks, norms, and trust) that help individual and communities attain goals. Scholars often distinguish between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding “refers to the interpersonal solidarity that is often present among people who associate in small groups, local communities, and other settings over extended periods of

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*Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): 272–286, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0021-8294.00023>; and Corwin Smidt, “Religion and Civic Engagement: A Comparative Analysis,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 565, no. 1 (1999): 176–192, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F000271629956500112>.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie A. Lewis, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, “Religion, Networks, and Neighborliness: The Impact of Religious Social Networks on Civic Engagement,” *Social Science Research* 42, no. 2 (2013): 331–346, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.09.011>.

so appears to have clear limitations, and additional research is needed to understand better the relationship between religion and social capital in American society today.

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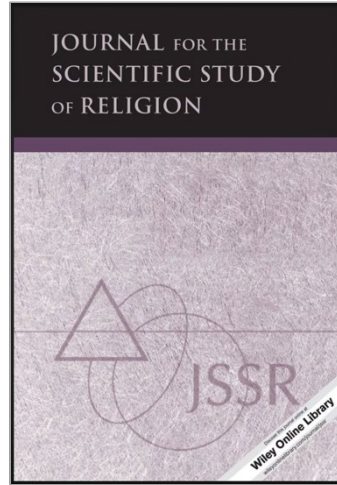
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