

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*

Introduction

A SIZEABLE 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.¹ The networks fostered in religious communities appear to play a

¹ 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.² 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

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/10.1177/00211629956500112>.

² 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>.

time” and is likely to occur more easily in more homogeneous groups.³ Social support is a good example of a resource produced through bonding. In contrast, bridging refers to the less intimate, even “weak” ties that link individuals and groups who differ from each other by status or social identity.⁴ Bridging social capital is especially valuable since it promotes a sense of civic responsibility and encourages tolerance and cooperation. Identity-bridging social capital spans meaningful cultural differences like race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Since identities powerfully shape our definitions of “us” and “them,” identity-bridging social capital has the potential to foster cooperation, respect, and tolerance. Status-bridging social capital “refers specifically to networks that span vertical arrangements of power, influence, wealth, and prestige.”⁵ Scholars argue that such social capital can be valuable for accessing information and opportunities. Ties to elites and higher-status individuals could be important for cultural transmission and access to information and influence.

In two studies, the sociologist Robert Wuthnow asked a simple question: does religious involvement bring individuals into meaningful contact across lines of status, privilege, and race?⁶ In other words, does it meaningfully foster bridging social capital? Using national survey data, Wuthnow demonstrated that membership in a congregation and holding a leadership position in a congregation are, in fact, associated with being friends with a high-status individual such as an elected official, a corporate executive, a scientist, or a wealthy person, even with controls for basic demographic characteristics and religious tradition.⁷ What about bridging ties to lower-status individuals or those belonging to more marginalized groups? Understanding such bridging is important, especially since nearly all religious traditions profess values regarding helping the disadvantaged and since religious participation is a frequent route to volunteerism. Wuthnow points out, however, that congregations tend towards homogeneity, which might limit opportunities for

³ Robert Wuthnow, “Religious Involvement and Status-Bridging Social Capital,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2002): 670, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00153>.

⁴ Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–1380, <https://doi.org/10.1086/225469>.

⁵ Wuthnow, “Religious Involvement,” 670.

⁶ See Robert Wuthnow, “Overcoming Status Distinctions? Religious Involvement, Social Class, Race, and Ethnicity in Friendship Patterns,” *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 4 (2003): 423, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712334> and “Religious Involvement,” 669.

⁷ Wuthnow, “Religious Involvement,” 678.

bridging social ties.⁸ Using national survey data, Wuthnow found little evidence that religious participation as measured by weekly attendance is related meaningfully to having such ties.⁹ With basic controls for demographic characteristics and religious tradition, attendance is either negatively or not significantly related to being friends with a manual worker, a person on welfare, an African American, or a Latino. Having volunteered in the last year, however, was consistently a predictor of being friends with someone from any of the aforementioned groups.

Due to data constraints, Wuthnow's studies focused on congregational membership and service attendance as measures of religious involvement. Several studies, however, suggest that other forms of religious participation may more meaningfully predict civic engagement and bridging social capital. Several studies have suggested that, compared with attendance at worship services, participation in congregational and religious activities beyond services is a stronger predictor of bridging social capital. Membership in church organizations strongly predicts participation in nonchurch organizations more so than service attendance alone does.¹⁰ Similarly, time spent in congregational activities beyond services has a positive correlation with both membership in charitable organizations and organizations that are likely to bring individuals into contact with members from other types of social groupings.¹¹ Religious service attendance has only a minimal effect. More recently, using US Congregational Life Survey data, Edward Polson reported that the degree to which individuals are involved in congregational activities outside of services (e.g. Sunday School, Bible study groups, fellowship/social groups) significantly predicts bridging civic behavior, as measured by involvement in social service/charity and advocacy/justice groups.¹² Individuals more highly

⁸ See also, Darren M. Slade, "Religious Homophily and Biblicism: A Theory of Conservative Church Fragmentation," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 9, no. 1 (2019): 13–28, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v09i01/13-28>.

⁹ Wuthnow, "Overcoming Status Distinctions?," 436.

¹⁰ Philip Schwadel, "Individual, Congregational, and Denominational Effects on Church Members' Civic Participation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 2 (2005): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2005.00273.x>.

¹¹ Kraig Beyerlein and John R. Hipp, "From Pews to Participation: The Effect of Congregation Activity and Context on Bridging Civic Engagement," *Social Problems* 53, no. 1 (2006): 106–108, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.1.97>.

¹² Edward C. Polson, "Putting Civic Engagement in Context: Examining the Effects of Congregational Structure and Culture," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 1 (2016): 95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-015-0223-4>.

involved in congregational activities are also more likely to report having worked with others to solve a community problem in the last year.

How might religious involvement beyond services facilitate bridging social ties? As Kraig Beyerlein and John Hipp argue, “Mechanisms through which congregations mobilize participation in bridging civic organizations do not largely take place during the hour or so spent attending religious services.”¹³ Deeper congregational involvement likely facilitates meeting and interacting with more members of the congregation. Serving on committees, singing in the choir, or participating in social or fellowship groups expands churchgoers’ social circles and introduces them to new information and opportunities both inside and outside of the congregation. Indeed, having both friendship and family ties in a congregation is associated with bridging social capital, as measured by involvement in social service or advocacy/justice groups, or having contacted an elected official about a public issue.¹⁴ Congregational involvement beyond services is likely to place some individuals in leadership opportunities. Occupying a leadership role is strongly associated with status-bridging ties.¹⁵ Additionally, participation beyond services is likely to introduce individuals to volunteering opportunities, both within and outside of the congregation. Numerous studies suggest that congregations and their networks frequently mobilize members for volunteering opportunities.¹⁶ In his study of religious attendance and bridging social ties, Wuthnow found that volunteering was a much stronger predictor of ties to people from lower-status or marginalized groups compared with mere service attendance.¹⁷

This study will examine a number of different types of bridging social ties. Status-bridging ties are valuable because they provide access to those with political or economic power and decision-making abilities. Even relatively weak ties can be conduits for information, job opportunities, or other resources.

¹³ Beyerlein and Hipp, “From Pews to Participation,” 98.

¹⁴ Zubeyir Nisanci, “Close Social Ties, Socioeconomic Diversity and Social Capital in US Congregations,” *Review of Religious Research* 59, no. 3 (2017): 435–438, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-017-0293-6>.

¹⁵ Wuthnow, “Religious Involvement,” 680–681.

¹⁶ Chaeyoon Lim and Carol Ann MacGregor, “Religion and Volunteering in Context: Disentangling the Contextual Effects of Religion on Voluntary Behavior,” *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 5 (2012): 747–779, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0003122412457875>; Stephen M. Merino, “Religious Social Networks and Volunteering: Examining Recruitment via Close Ties,” *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 3 (2013): 509–527, doi.org/10.1007/s13644-013-0113-6.

¹⁷ Wuthnow, “Overcoming Status Distinctions?,” 438.

Elected officials sometimes cultivate ties in religious congregations. Alternatively, congregational involvement may put individuals in contact with elected officials through political events or volunteering opportunities. A sizeable percentage of congregations in the US participate in some kind of political activity.¹⁸ Access to elected officials is obviously valuable and could allow individuals to influence policy-making. Similarly, interaction with highly educated professionals could provide valuable resources and information. Ties to individuals who are lower in status or in marginalized groups may also be important. As Wuthnow notes, most religious groups emphasize norms of helping and compassion.¹⁹ Frequent interaction with individuals from lower-status or marginalized groups may be beneficial for all involved parties by providing a conduit for information, resources, and sharing of life experiences. It may generate empathy and greater concern, as well. Such groups include individuals who receive welfare or public assistance and single parents, who are often low-income and have fewer resources.

Likewise, identity-bridging ties are important and are often status-bridging, as well. American society is characterized by a relatively high level of social and residential segregation along lines of race and ethnicity. Religious congregations are also heavily segregated along such lines. Ties that cross lines of race, ethnicity, or religion may foster cooperation, respect, and tolerance. Surveys consistently show that Muslims and atheists, two small groups that loom large in the imaginations of many Americans, are viewed more negatively than other religious groups in society.²⁰ Additionally, a large body of research suggests that interracial contact has the potential to reduce racial prejudice and help to dispel negative stereotypes.²¹ The two largest racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States, African Americans and Latinos, experience on average lower socioeconomic status compared with whites and continue to face discrimination. LGBTQ+ individuals have enjoyed large gains in social

¹⁸ Kraig Beyerlein and Mark Chaves, "The Political Activities of Religious Congregations in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 229–246, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00175>.

¹⁹ Wuthnow, "Overcoming Status Distinctions?," 424–426.

²⁰ Jessica Hamar Martínez, *Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Toward Religious Groups* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017), <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/>.

²¹ John. F. Dovidio, Samuel L. Gaertner, and Kerry Kawakami, "Intergroup Contact: The Past, The Present, and The Future," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 6, no. 1 (2003): 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1368430203006001009>.

acceptance broadly in American society, yet they continue to face hurdles as sexual minorities. Contact with gays and lesbians in particular seems to reduce prejudice and increase support for LGBTQ+ rights.²² The potential for religious involvement to facilitate bridging social ties is, thus, culturally and socially important. In the analyses that follows, this research uses multivariate regression analysis to examine how, among Americans who identify or affiliate with a congregation, service attendance and congregational involvement beyond services are associated with having these sorts of bridging ties.

Data and Methods

The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) is a nationally representative panel study focused on religion in the United States. Its primary investigators are Michael Emerson and David Sikkink. The sample design and interviews were conducted by RTI International, the second-largest independent nonprofit research organization in the United States. The PALS sampling covers the civilian, non-institutionalized household population in the continental United States, who were eighteen years of age or older at the time the survey was conducted and speak English or Spanish. From April to October 2006, face-to-face interviews were conducted in the homes of 2,610 respondents. Interviews lasted an average of eighty minutes and used audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) for more sensitive questions. Based on standards provided by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the response rate was 58% (.83 contact rate \times .86 screening completion rate \times .82 cooperation rate). The data set was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives website (www.TheARDA.com). Another wave of the survey was completed in 2012 but does not contain many of the key variables used in the current study. This study also used a subsample consisting of respondents who reported being “involved in, affiliated with, or a member of a religious congregation or other place of worship” either currently or in the last three years. This subsample represents about 60% of the entire sample being analyzed.

The dependent variables for the study come from a section of the survey on intergroup contact. Respondents were presented with the question, “Now think about conversations you have had with different types of people in the

²² Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–783, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.

past 12 months. How often do you have a conversation with someone who, as far as you know, is...?” To measure both status- and identity-bridging ties, this study used the following categories: “an elected official,” “[a person with] a graduate or professional degree,” “on welfare or government assistance,” “a single mom or dad with children in the home,” “a Muslim,” “does not believe that God exists,” “gay or lesbian,” “black,” and “Hispanic.” Response options were “never,” “once or twice a year,” “about once a month,” “a few times a month,” “once a week,” “a few times a week,” and “every day.” Due to the limited number of response categories and widely varying distributions, the variables are not ideal as dependent variables in an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis. I recoded each variable to indicate whether the respondent had a conversation with such a person “about once a month” or more frequently (coded 1). For less frequent contact, the new variable was coded 0. Wuthnow used measures of friendship as dependent variables to capture bridging social ties. The variables on the PALS sampling do not measure stronger intimate ties, but conversations once a month or more might better capture the kinds of “weak” ties that are valuable for bridging social capital. The recoded variables are also ideal for binary logistic regression, which is employed in the current study.

The key independent variable measures congregational participation beyond attending regular worship services. Respondents who reported being affiliated with a congregation currently or in the previous three years were asked, “In the past three years, not including attending worship services, how often have you participated in activities, groups, or organizations of this congregation? Such as social gatherings, choir, small groups or prayer meetings, outreach or social service groups, etc.?” This survey item captures a wide range of congregational activities that are likely to expose individuals to a wide range of people and opportunities both in the congregation itself and in the broader community. Response options for this ordinal variable included “never,” “less than monthly,” “about once a month,” “a few times a month,” “once a week,” or “more than once a week.” Another important independent variable is religious service attendance, which was measured with the following query, “This question is about how often you attend worship services, not including weddings or funerals. Would that be never, once or twice a year, several times a year, once a month, two or three times a month, once a week, twice a week or three times a week or more?” Both variables are included as ordinal variables in regression analyses. Finally, since volunteering is associated with bridging social capital, and individuals may volunteer through

avenues other than their congregations, this study included a straightforward measure of volunteering. Respondents were asked, “In the past 12 months, have you done any volunteer work—that is, work for a nonprofit, charitable organization, school or group for which you did not receive pay?” Responses were recorded as “yes” or “no.”

Individuals who are deeply involved in religious congregations may possess certain characteristics that otherwise increase the likelihood that they would interact with a wide range of people and engage in civic and community activities more frequently. Indeed, selective affiliation describes the scenario in which people who join and become active in congregations may be the type of people with broader social networks and access to higher-status individuals.²³ In addition, contextual factors such as where one lives or works influence the likelihood of having contact with various groups of people. Thus, a robust set of controls for such characteristics is important for determining whether congregational involvement itself is likely to be responsible for bridging social ties. Dichotomous control variables measure whether the respondent works part- or full-time, is married, has a four-year degree or higher, and reports good or excellent health. Additional controls include sex, race, household income, and the population of the respondent’s county census subdivision. Since more sociable and outgoing individuals are more likely to interact with a wider range of people, this study controlled for sociability with a six-item scale. Respondents were asked how many times in the past year they socialized with coworkers, exercised with friends, visited family, had friends over, played games with others, and went out in public with friends. Each of these items is coded on an eight-point scale (0 = “never” 1 = “once,” 2 = “2–4 times,” 3 = “5–9 times,” 4 = “once a month,” 5 = “twice a month,” 6 = “once a week,” 7 = “more than once a week”). Respondents’ scores on the six items were simply added together and the resulting scale was included in the regression models. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .65, suggesting that the items are fairly strongly intercorrelated and form a reasonably consistent measure of sociability.

Results

Table 1 below contains descriptive statistics for all variables included in the study. All statistics are means or proportions, whichever is more appropriate. The sample ($N=809$) consists of respondents who currently identify

²³ Wuthnow, “Religious Involvement,” 671.

or affiliate with a congregation, or have in the previous three years (roughly 60% of the entire PALS sample). Not surprisingly, service attendance is high for these respondents. Nearly half report attending at least once a week or more, and an additional 16% report attending two or three times a month. In contrast, participation in congregational activities outside of services is less common. Over half report either never having done so or only a few times in the previous three years. The bottom of the table shows that respondents' frequency of conversation with various groups of people varies widely. Most report having a conversation at least monthly with a person with a graduate degree, a single parent, a black person, and a Hispanic person. Less than half of respondents say they have had a conversation often with any of the other groups. Contact with elected officials and Muslims is the least common.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Independent Variables	
Male	0.33
Married	0.49
College Degree	0.33
Employed Full- r Part-Time	0.67
Good or Excellent Health	0.82
Age	44.0
Household Income	7.83
County Census Subdivision Population	5.62
Sociability	22.3
<i>Race</i>	
Black	0.24
Hispanic	0.14
Asian	0.51
Other	0.43
Volunteered in Last 12 Months	0.48
<i>Religious Service Attendance</i>	
Never	0.05
Once or Twice per Year	0.09
Several Times per Year	0.17
Once a Month	0.08
2–3 Times per Month	0.16
Once a Week	0.30
Twice a Week	0.09
Three or More Times per Week	0.07
<i>Congregational Participation Beyond Services in Previous Three Years</i>	
Never	0.28
A Few Times	0.34
Once a Month	0.12
More than Once a Month	0.09

Once a Week	0.10
More than Once per Week	0.07
Once a Day	0.002
Dependent Variables	
<i>Has had a Conversation At Least Once a Month or More Often</i>	
Elected Official	0.16
Person with Graduate or Professional Degree	0.83
Person on Welfare	0.43
Single Mom or Dad	0.69
Gay or Lesbian	0.48
Atheist	0.28
Muslim	0.20
Black Person	0.76
Hispanic Person	0.76

Note: Means and proportions are reported. N=809.

Table 2 below contains a set of results from relatively straightforward logistic regression analyses. The dependent variable in each case is whether or not the respondent has had a conversation at least once a month or more (up to several times a day) with a person from the group in question. Each analysis contains a number of controls for sociodemographic characteristics, sociability, and whether the respondent has volunteered in the last year. Additionally, religious service attendance and congregational participation beyond services are both included as independent variables to allow for comparison between the two. Table 2 shows that, among Americans affiliated with a congregation, participation beyond services is positively and significantly associated with more frequent interaction with an elected official, a person with a graduate or professional degree, a single parent, and an atheist. In addition, the results approach statistical significance as a predictor of frequent conversations with someone who is gay or lesbian ($p = .10$) or Hispanic ($p = .06$). In contrast, religious service attendance is not a positive predictor of contact with someone from any of the nine groups in question. In fact, more frequent service attendance is associated with *less* contact with someone who is gay or lesbian, atheist, or Muslim ($p = .065$). Having volunteered in the last year is only significantly associated with having more frequent contact with someone who is Hispanic or Muslim. The results here approach significance for contact with an elected official, a person with a graduate or professional degree, and a single parent.

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Table 2. Estimated Odds Ratios Predicting Conversation At Least Once a Month

	Elected Official	Person with Graduate or Professional Degree	Person on Welfare	Single Parent
Male	1.04	0.75	0.84	0.69*
Married	0.80	0.64*	0.73+	0.63*
College Degree	1.45	2.90**	0.81	0.73+
Employed	0.85	1.93**	1.43*	2.14**
Good Health	1.03	1.98**	0.75	0.88
Age	1.03*	1.01	1.00	0.99+
Household Income	0.98	1.03	0.99	1.03+
County Subdiv. Pop.	0.89*	0.93	0.94+	0.98
Sociability	1.02	1.08**	1.03**	1.04**
<i>Race^a</i>				
Black	2.02**	0.88	2.40**	3.33**
Hispanic	1.36	0.53+	1.24	0.92
Asian	0.77	1.15	0.80	0.61
Other	1.78	0.94	1.77	1.50
Volunteered in Last Year	1.48+	1.53+	1.05	1.36+
Service Attendance	0.95	1.02	1.07	1.03
Congregational Participation	1.16*	1.25**	1.08	1.19**

^a Reference group is white

+ *p*-value < .10; * *p*-value < .05; ** *p*-value < .01

Beyond key independent variables, a number of other independent variables are significant predictors of bridging social ties. More sociable respondents have more contact with someone with a graduate degree, someone on welfare, a single parent, and a gay or lesbian person. Working full- or part-time increases the likelihood of contact with seven of the nine categories of people. College-educated respondents report more contact with someone with a graduate or professional degree compared to less educated respondents. Men have more contact with blacks and Hispanics, and less with single parents. Not surprisingly, living in a more populous census county subdivision is associated with less contact with an elected official but more interaction with someone who is gay or lesbian, atheist, black, or Hispanic. Compared with white respondents, black respondents report having more contact with an elected official, someone who is on welfare or a single parent, or a Muslim. They have

less interaction with someone who they believe to be an atheist or Hispanic. Similarly, Hispanics report having less contact with an atheist or a black person.

Table 2 -continued-

	Gay or lesbian	Atheist	Black person	Hispanic person	Muslim
Male	0.96	1.13	1.60*	1.53+	1.13
Married	0.63**	0.94	0.94	0.62*	0.84
College Degree	1.29	1.13	0.82	1.10	1.20
Employed	2.10**	1.16	3.75**	2.55**	1.83*
Good Health	1.05	0.71	1.15	1.66*	0.73
Age	0.99	0.98**	0.98*	0.99	1.00
Household Income	1.02	1.02	1.04*	1.05*	1.02
County Subdiv. Pop.	1.09*	1.08*	1.17*	1.25**	1.06
Sociability	1.04**	1.01	1.02	0.99	1.02
<i>Race^a</i>					
Black	1.07	0.33**	--	0.77	1.81*
Hispanic	0.98	0.45**	0.46*	--	0.56
Asian	0.34**	0.78	0.43*	2.04	2.22*
Other	1.58	0.96	3.29	3.55+	1.88
Volunteered in Last Year	1.11	1.24	1.07	1.73**	1.77**
Service Attendance	0.89*	0.90*	1.06	1.02	0.90+
Congregational Participation	1.09+	1.23**	1.05	1.14+	1.03

^a Reference group is white

+ *p*-value < .10; * *p*-value < .05; ** *p*-value < .01

Discussion and Conclusions

While many studies assume that religious participation fosters the formation of bridging social ties by leading people into civic engagement and community involvement, few studies have tried to determine whether status- and identity-bridging contact actually occurs. Wuthnow’s studies suggest that the evidence is mixed. However, his studies employed measures of congregational affiliation or service attendance as predictors of bridging ties. Several studies suggest that congregational involvement beyond services is

more strongly associated with bridging social capital, typically defined in survey research as volunteering in the community or being involved with nonchurch or bridging organizations. The findings of the current study would appear to lend some support to those conclusions. Among individuals who are affiliated with a congregation, those who participate in congregational activities beyond services report significantly more interaction with individuals from a number of different groups, including elected officials, those with a graduate or professional degree, single parents, gays and lesbians, Hispanics, and atheists.²⁴ In contrast, attendance at regular worship services was not a predictor of more frequent contact with any of the nine groups in question and was negatively associated with having contact with gays and lesbians, atheists, and Muslims. Interestingly, service attendance and deeper congregational involvement appear to have countervailing influences in some instances.

While congregational participation beyond services does appear to foster some bridging social ties, its record on that account appears to be mixed. Similar to Wuthnow's findings, this study suggests that it tends to promote status-bridging ties more than identity-bridging ties. It is a significant predictor of more frequent contact with an elected official or someone with a graduate or professional degree. While it also predicts greater interaction with someone who is a single parent, it was not a predictor of interacting with someone on welfare at least monthly. In terms of identity-bridging ties, it is positively associated with more contact with gays and lesbians and, interestingly, atheists. It could be that congregational involvement brings people into interaction with a more diverse set of community members through outreach programs or cooperation with other community organizations. Significantly, it did not predict more contact with someone who is black or Muslim. This perhaps unsurprising finding is a reminder that the color line in American society is a formidable one. Congregations, schools, and neighborhoods in the United States display high levels of racial and ethnic segregation. It appears that religious involvement does little to bridge those divides.

The current study has clear limitations. The 2012 iteration of the PALS survey was missing several key dependent variables, requiring the use of the earlier 2006 survey. Additionally, while multivariate analyses included a fairly robust set of controls for factors that could plausibly contribute to selection

²⁴ Analyses were run with the entire sample using the same set of controls but with congregational affiliation as an independent variable. Being affiliated with a congregation was only a significant predictor of more interaction with single parents and people with a graduate/professional degree.

effects, rather than participation effects of congregational involvement on bridging social ties, it is nonetheless difficult to make strong causal claims using cross-sectional survey data. Moreover, the mechanism by which congregational involvement beyond services fosters the bridging ties described in the current study is unclear. Other studies have suggested that such involvement may draw individuals into community volunteering or affiliation with other local organizations. Multivariate analyses in the current study controlled for volunteering in the past year, which means that the findings could somewhat understate the impact of congregational involvement on bridging contact. Alternatively, some of the contact described in this study could actually occur *within* congregations as individuals expand their social circles and interact with more congregation members by participating more fully in groups, committees, and programs. That may help explain why interracial and interreligious contact were not especially promoted by congregational participation, given that congregations tend to be racially and ethnically homogeneous.

A key difference between the current study and Wuthnow's studies is how bridging social ties are measured. Wuthnow's studies used a measure of whether or not the respondent is friends with someone from each group. In contrast, this study uses a measure of frequency of conversation with someone from each group with the cutoff being an interaction at least once a month to daily contact. On the one hand, this could more accurately represent the "weak" ties envisioned by scholars interested in bridging social capital. Moreover, a conversation implies more than a passing encounter with a cashier at a store, for example. Nonetheless, it is difficult to know how meaningful such ties are, particularly at a threshold of once a month or more. Future research should examine different types of ties and frequencies of interaction.

Several studies have suggested that additional factors like congregational size and composition, along with religious tradition, influence the degree to which congregational participation fosters bridging social capital.²⁵ Notably, research suggests that evangelical Protestant congregations and congregations that are more strict or separatist foster less bridging social capital. Future research should examine how these factors shape the likelihood of contact with specific groups of people in society.²⁶ The current study, like many others, lends support to the notion that religious communities are valuable sites for the development of bridging social capital. However, their role in doing

²⁵ Schwadel, "Individual, Congregational, and Denominational Effects," 167–169; Polson, "Putting Civic Participation in Context," 95–97.

²⁶ Cf. Slade, "Religious Homophily and Biblicism," 13–28.

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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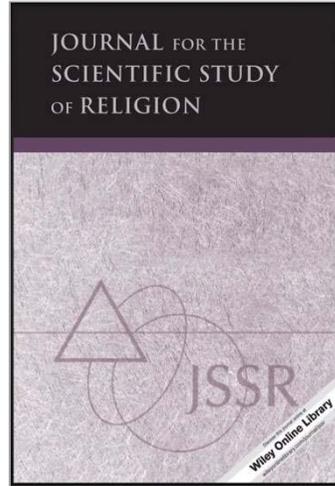
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