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Primed Parsons

Reference Groups and Clergy Political Attitudes

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Abstract

Focusing on clergy in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, this paper investigates the effect of parishioners and institutional superiors on clergy political attitudes. This is important to consider, given that clergy have the potential to wield substantial political influence and, given that conventional wisdom, which suggests that clergy have stable political attitudes. Using a question order experiment to facilitate cognitive priming, our results suggest that when randomly primed to consider their institutional and professional network, clergy are more likely to offer conservative political attitudes. Thus, as much as clergy influence their parishioners, they are themselves subject to influence.

Keywords: clergy, Ireland, political attitudes, experiment, priming

Introduction

Do institutional superiors and/or parishioners influence the political attitudes of clergy? This is an important question, given that clergy have the potential to wield substantial political influence if they chose to express or act on their opinions (Bartkowski et al.; Bjarnason and Welch; Brown; Jelen; Smith). Conventional wisdom suggests that clergy should have stable political attitudes as they function in their elite role. This is because clergy “often possess the resources associated with effective political engagement” (Calfano et al. 2014a: 391), and because of the substantial scholarly effort in constructing religious traditions for use as ideological proxies in models of political attitudes and behavior (Glock

and Stark; Greeley; Welch et al.). As a result, the clergy politics literature tends to either assume constancy in the macro or ignore instability entirely. Either way the possibility of influence from key reference groups is disregarded.

Gaining leverage on the possibility of change has been difficult because there are few investigations of clergy attitudes over time. A notable exception is the Presbyterian Church USA's ongoing panel assessment of its clergy and local congregations. Though the panel asks few explicitly political questions of its participants beyond partisanship, except on issues with clear theological implications (e.g., same sex marriage), a 2008 survey does show that fully one-fifth of clergy report concern with professional burn out, two-thirds worry about their congregation's growth, and half are distressed over congregational finances (Religious Services). The Presbyterian Church is representative of American mainline Christianity (Guth et al.).

We argue that clergy, parishioners, and institutional superiors have competing preferences on political issues – despite what might be considered clergy “self-selection” into denominations (Djupe and Gilbert 2003) – and that this dynamic influences the expression of clergy political attitudes. As much as clergy may influence parishioners, these elites are subject to influence from key reference groups representing distinct constituencies, and this may explain in part why direct evidence of political influence between clergy and their parishioners remains elusive (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). While we cannot yet model clergy political attitude change over time, the pressures hinted at in the Presbyterian Panel data enable us to do the next best thing. That is, we consider whether heightening different frameworks for clergy professional identity affects reported clergy attitudes.

Using a randomized question order experiment on clergy in Ireland, we find that reported clergy political attitudes are affected by professional constituencies made salient at the time of survey response. Specifically, clergy express political attitudes reflecting a type of cognitive averaging not unlike what Zaller proposed for the general public. This suggests that clergy, as quasi-political elites facing labyrinths of multiple and overlapping constituencies, are far more susceptible to exogenous influence in adopting a political posture than has been expected.

Theory

Ideological (Jelen; Guth et al.), institutional (Stark et al.), personal (Deckman et al.), and contextual factors – including local socioeconomic environments and religious economies (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Olson) – have factored prominently in clergy politics research. Scholars have been slow, however, to add a social psychological dimension to their assessments, even as the organizational and social roles that clergy play have clear psychological dimensions (Tyler and Lind; Hogg). Their roles place clergy at intersections with various reference groups whose importance and potential influence are borne out of clergy professional considerations. The most salient groups are the institutional superiors (e.g., bishops) and local congregations (e.g., parishioners) that clergy deal with regularly (Calfano). Both groups are in a position to influence clergy attitudes, but for different reasons and in different ways. When parishioners express clear preferences, they likely have a pride of place given their proximity to clergy and control of collection plate receipts. This is especially true for those in denominations or traditions where theological and political

heterogeneity is the norm (see Steensland et al.). For their part institutional superiors are well positioned to affect clergy career goals. Thus, we expect a substantially different effect on reported attitudes when clergy are cognitively primed to consider their parishioners versus their institutional superiors.

Table 1. Prime Components

Interpersonal Prime (5-point Likert)
“I feel burned out from my parish ministry.”
“I feel fatigued in the morning when I get up and have to face another day in the parish.”
“I don't really care what happens to some of my parishioners.”
“I find it really difficult to listen to what some parishioners are really saying to me.”
“I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my parish ministry.”
“I feel exhilarated after working closely with my parishioners.”

Institutional Prime (11-point Likert)
“As a member of the clergy, I have a responsibility to promote the teachings of the Church to my parishioners as these relate to public policies before elections.”
“My parish's financial health reflects on my performance as a member of the clergy.”
“I am concerned about the financial condition of my parish.”
“My bishop encourages me to make political statements.”
“I am hesitant to discuss certain aspects of the teachings of the Church and public policy issues during worship service if I anticipate a negative reaction from parishioners.”
“I have encountered a negative reaction from parishioners after discussing the teachings of the Church on public policy issues during worship services.”
“I would rather discuss the teachings of the Church as it relates to public policy issues with parishioners outside of services than during services.”
“The Bible is the inerrant Word of God, both in matters of faith and in historical, geographical, and other secular matters.”
“My bishop has reprimanded clergy who have not followed his instructions on how to discuss the religious teachings of the Church relating to public policies with parishioners.”
“I am concerned that discussing public policy issues during services will lead to a downturn in parishioner financial giving.”
“I encourage the distribution of voter information resources to parishioners, even if they may not be entirely consistent with Church teaching.”

Even though clergy may largely self-select into specific denominations, Djupe and Gilbert (2009) show that there is substantial intra-denominational diversity on political matters, which makes clergy attitudes potentially incongruent with certain constituencies. The competing nature of these constituencies recommends differentiating their influence using a priming function. The psychology of religion literature recommends a series of items for use in priming parishioner-oriented frameworks. What we term the *interpersonal prime* in

our experiment is a psychological question battery that raises the salience of emotional aspects of ministry, such as exhaustion, emotional distance from parishioners, and exhilaration (similar to what we referenced in the Presbyterian Panel above). Francis et al. developed the items in this prime to assess dimensions of clergy burnout in England and Wales. They find that in comparing Anglican and Catholic clergy, Catholic priests experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion and emotional distance from their parishioners, but they also experience higher levels of professional accomplishment. Based on the expectations of how institutions shape individual-level outcomes (Peters), the *institutional prime* covers elements of the ideological, denominational, and contextual aspects of ministry. This prime was developed by Calfano et al. (2014b) to assess the effects of institutional concerns on clergy attitudes on several cultural issues. Table 1 contains the items used by Francis and colleagues as our interpersonal prime (which has a rotated polychoric factor eigenvalue of 1.18), as well as the items used as our institutional prime (with a rotated polychoric factor eigenvalue of 1.31).

There is a precedent for anticipating individual ideological alignment with salient institutional expectations (see Wildavsky), and recent priming experiments in the psychology of religion suggest disparate outcomes when religious concepts are framed differently (Preston and Ritter). Our expectation is that, when primed to consider their ministry as meted through the interpersonal frame of parishioner interactions (both positive and negative), clergy will reflect political attitudes characterized by a prophetic concern for their community and the individuals in it. This community concern will manifest as self-reported liberal political attitudes. Conversely, when primed to consider institutional factors, we expect clergy attitudes to closely align with the more conservative preferences of their larger religious institutions (Calfano et al. 2014a, 2014b). Since these institutions are generally more conservative in nature compared to the average parishioner (especially with respect to cultural issues), cognitive reflection on the clergy's relationship with parishioners in the institutional frame should push our subjects toward a more conservative opinion stance.¹

Methods

We assess the possibility of reference group influence on clergy by using a question order experiment embedded in an online survey (see Gaines, Kuklinks, and Quirk). Our original survey experiment was conducted in summer 2011, and was based on a list of 4,520 parish/pastoral clergy in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (essentially comprising the entire clergy population of both). We invited 3,530 clergy to serve as subjects via email – all those for whom we could identify a publicly accessible email address – to participate in our online survey hosted by Qualtrics. Using the Qualtrics algorithm, we randomly assigned 560 consenting clergy subjects to one of the three experimental groups,

¹ We note, for example, that while Ireland's largest Christian denominations – Catholics, Anglicans, and Presbyterians – have all established a conservative profile on cultural issues, the Irish people are far less conservative. According to the 2011 Irish National Elections, more than 60% reject a total ban on abortion in Ireland. In the 2007 survey, about one-third of the sample agreed or strongly disagreed that same-sex marriage should be prohibited by law.

and we received 444 useable survey responses.² Similar to Jerit, Barabas, and Clifford's design, the Qualtrics algorithm conducted random assignment once subjects clicked on the embedded link within their invitation email – not at sending the email itself. Of those 560 clicking the embedded link, 164 subjects were assigned the Interpersonal Prime, 169 received the Institutional Prime, and 227 were placed in the control. Per standard question order experiment construction, all subjects were asked to respond to all survey questions. Only the question order was manipulated. Subjects in the control group received both treatment primes at the end of the survey (with the end-of-survey order set at random to avoid inadvertent question-order effects). We note that there is rough parity between subject participation by denomination. Forty-eight percent of invitations were sent to Catholic priests, who comprise 49 percent of the sample. Fourteen percent and 15 percent of invitations were sent to Anglicans and Presbyterians, and they comprise 20 percent and 15 percent of the sample, respectively.

Our dependent variable is a factor score that represents alignment with a liberal-conservative dimension. The survey asked respondents their level of agreement with the following statements:

- There should be very strict limits on the number of immigrants coming to live in Ireland;
- The government should cut spending on social welfare programs;
- The rights of those in civil partnership should be extended to adopting children;
- Married couples in situations of irretrievable breakdown should have the right to divorce;
- A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who stays at home.

The latter three statements were reverse coded to ensure that high scores reflected a conservative affect. Survey responses loaded on a rotated polychoric factor (eigenvalue = 1.87) (see Holgado-Tello et al.), and this suggests that the questions draw substantially on the same underlying dimension. Higher factor scores reflect conservatism on the part of respondents. Factor scores range from 0 to 9.05, and mean score is 4.6.

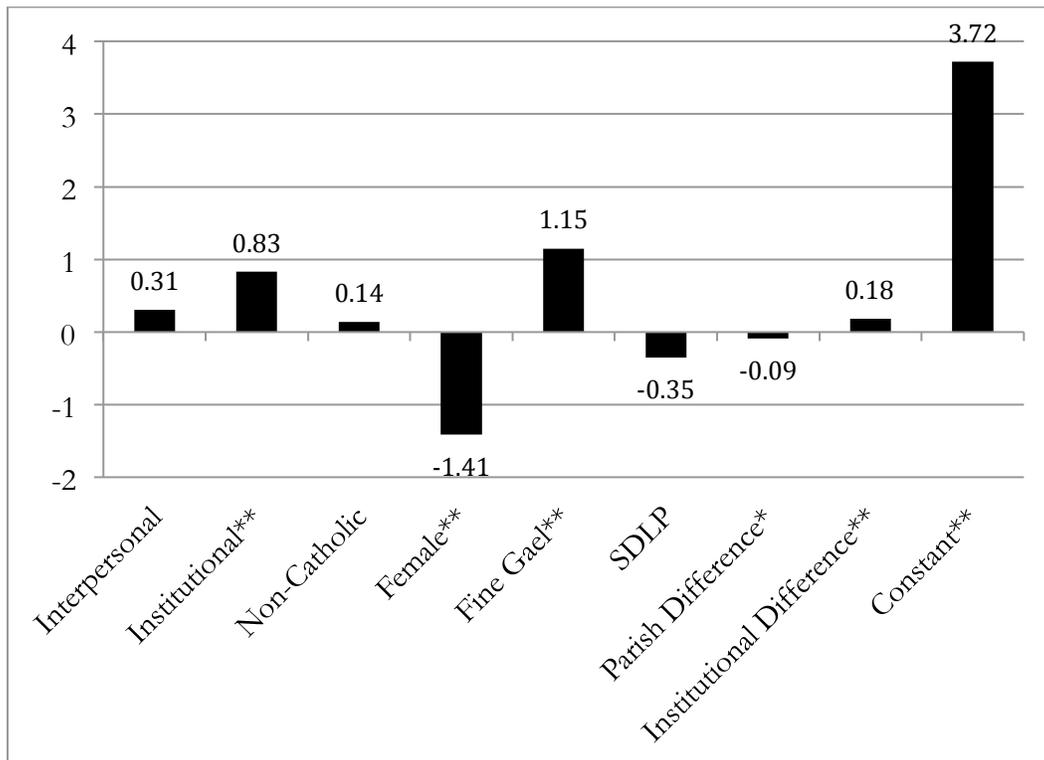
Analysis

In addition to the institutional and interpersonal primes, we include several key controls to account for individual characteristics and contextual factors that are often present in clergy politics studies and are helpful in relating our analysis to the broader literature. Following Djupe and Gilbert's (2003) construction of a similar measure to take reference group ideological influences into account, we model clergy attitudes, taking into consideration the differences in perceived ideological distance between the clergy subject and

² By this we mean that subjects completed the majority of the survey sections included, although they may not have provided answers for every substantive question.

1) denominational/institutional superiors and 2) parish congregants.³ We also include an indicator variable to discriminate between Catholics and non-Catholic clergy. In early models tested for this project, we used separate dummy indicators for each of Ireland’s major Christian denominations. These variables generally failed to reach significance; hence, we opted for a more parsimonious approach. We also include controls for sex (1=women) and political party identification (Fine Gael=1, SDLP=1). We report results from a regression model in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Covariate Model of Treatment Effects in Political Issue Index



N = 444, R² = .17, F=10.80**

** denotes statistical significance at the 0.05 level (two-tailed tests); * denotes statistical significance at the 0.10 level (two-tailed tests)

Notes: Robust Standard Errors: Interpersonal Prime (.23), Institutional Prime (.23), Non-Catholic (.21), Female (.36), Fine Gael (.21), SDLP (.33), Parish Difference (.05), Institutional Difference (.05), Constant (.25)

Of the two treatments, we find that only the institutional prime significantly affects political attitudes. Subjects receiving institutional prime are likely to have factor scores that are higher than their peers by just under one point. Thus, raising the salience on one’s religious denomination or institution is associated with a more conservative affect. To our

³ Distances of the cleric from their superior and from their congregation were calculated by subtracting the perceived ideology of a cleric’s religious superior and the perceived ideology of a cleric’s congregation from the cleric’s reported ideology and then using the absolute value of that figure.

surprise, the interpersonal prime has no significant effect on clergy attitude response. The ideological distance variables provide another way of addressing whether parishioners and institutional superiors affect reported clergy attitudes. The Institutional Difference coefficient is positive and significant. This means that larger perceived distances between clergy and their bishops are associated with higher levels of conservatism. The Parish Difference coefficient is negative and strongly significant. This suggests that perceived distance from one's parishioners is associated with lower levels of conservatism. While support for SDLP had no significant impact on clergy attitudes, Fine Gael supporters were more conservative than their peers by about one point. This finding makes sense, given that Fine Gael is the more conservative of the Republic of Ireland's two main political parties. Meanwhile, the negative coefficient for female clergy indicates that women tend to be more liberal than their male peers in ministry. Finally, and while this is the dog that did not bark, it is notable that Catholic attitudes were indistinguishable from non-Catholics.

Discussion and Conclusion

In a political sense, clergy are significant because they are elites enmeshed in self-selecting networks of voluntary associations known for political mobilization. As a result, clergy have the potential to influence the political attitudes and behaviors of their parishioners. Our analysis shows that when the salience of one's religious institution is raised, reported clergy attitudes tend to be more ideologically conservative. Across major denominations in Ireland, church teaching on issues relating to traditional family arrangements tends to be conservative, so this finding makes some sense. Clergy may influence parishioners, but these elites are themselves subject to influence from their professional network.

The implication here is that religious institutions are well-positioned to shape the political messages clergy convey to the faithful. At the very least we can say that when the salience of their professional network is raised, they are more likely to express conservative attitudes. The ideological difference relationships are also notable because they give us a sense of how clergy are positioned in relation to key reference groups. Perceived distance from one's parishioners is associated with liberalism. This suggests that clergy might be motivated to bring their views in line with their more liberal parishioners. However, perceived distance from one's institutional superior is associated with increased conservatism, and this suggests that clergy might also be motivated to bring their views in line with their more conservative episcopacy.

We argue that there are two key takeaway points from this study. The first is that clergy walk a tightrope. We like to think of clergy as prophetic profiles in courage. Their job is moral guidance, so the idea that they modulate the attitudes based on workplace pressures seems incongruous. Even so, clergy are subject to the push and pull of influence. The second point is that additional focus on the psychological nature of clergy professional identity and its intersection with political outcomes in an experimental context is warranted. Excellent work has been done that explores clergy attitudes and behaviors, and the influence thereof. Moving forward, it is important to consider that the expression of attitudes and behaviors is predicated on institutional and social context, and the salience of these factors is subject to manipulation.

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