

**Civil Society Organizations
and the Enduring Role of Religion in Promoting Democratic Engagement¹**

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“Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society,
but it must be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country”

--- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Part 1*, p. 334

Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic analysis of American life placed religion at the center of our democratic life, arguing that religious congregations not only shape the “habits of the heart,” but also cultivate in members the specific skills necessary for democracy to thrive. For Tocqueville, it was not spirituality in the abstract, but rather the specific dynamics grounded in religious congregations and religious culture that made religion “the foremost of the political institutions” of American democracy (Tocqueville 2000).

Nearly 200 years later, it is unclear whether religion continues to play a central role in undergirding democratic life. Religious traditions in the U.S. have been further colonized by the individualist cultural trends that worried Tocqueville and led him to predict that democracy in the U.S. might ultimately end in “soft despotism” (Bellah et al. 1985; Rahe 2009). Many religious congregations reinforce social segregation rather than bring diverse people together (Christerson et al. 2005; Edwards et al. 2013; Edwards 2008; Emerson and Smith 2000). Furthermore, some religious institutions have been implicated in stoking the intolerance and polarization that threaten our democratic process (Froese et al. 2008; Hout and Fischer 2002; Sherkat et al. 2011; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014); for a counter-example see (Eisenstein 2006). If the cultural resources generated by religious commitments are more oriented toward the “self” than toward society, if religious congregations are more likely to pull people into identity-specific enclaves than into multicultural communities, and if religious institutions disproportionately fuel intolerance and polarization, then contemporary religion in the U.S. may be incapable of fulfilling its Tocquevillean pro-democratic promise.

Many religious congregations, however, deviate from these divisive patterns: generating cultural resources, bridging social differences, and seeking common ground in ways that strengthen the fabric of U.S. society (Christerson et al. 2005; Edwards et al. 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Wuthnow 1991). Among those congregations are many active institutional members of politically oriented civil society organizations (CSOs), which promote democratic engagement across broad sectors of U.S. society (Bretherton 2015; Stout 2010; Wood and Fulton 2015). Such congregations provide evidence that religion may still possess sufficient capacity to undergird democratic life in ways congruent with Tocqueville’s original analysis. This study aims to assess the current impact of religion on democracy in the U.S. by examining a field of politically oriented CSOs to determine whether drawing on structural characteristics of religious congregations and cultural elements of religion—hereafter termed *structural and cultural forms of religion*—helps the organizations promote democratic engagement.

In what follows, we specify the causal chain underlying our claim that religion continues to strengthen democracy in the U.S. We explain how having religion institutionalized in congregations provides a stable institution through which it can promote democratic engagement. We then explain how the structural and cultural forms of religion congregations provide can facilitate democratic engagement and that congregations can further promote democratic engagement among their members and broader society through partnering with politically oriented CSOs. Finally, we explain our use of democratic engagement as a proxy for democracy, while noting instances where democratic engagement undermines democracy. Although this article focuses on a particular pathway by which religion strengthens democracy in the U.S., this pathway is not deterministic, nor is it the only plausible pathway, nor is religion’s influence on democracy always positive.

Congregations mediating religion's impact on democratic engagement

Our analysis of religion's impact on the democratic engagement of politically oriented CSOs focuses on congregations as the key mediating institutions for religion's effect. Although free-floating forms of spirituality can influence organizational outputs (e.g., by shaping the values, cultural preferences, and political priorities of individuals within an organization and/or the organization itself), the impact of these forms tends to be ephemeral unless institutionalized in organizational life (Weber 1968; Zucker 1983; Zucker 1988). Within American civil society, congregations are the de facto form taken by the institutionalization of religion, such that even religious traditions that are typically not organized as congregations outside of the U.S. (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism) tend to take on a congregational form when adherents emigrate to the U.S. (Warner 1993; 1994). Consequently, congregations remain the predominant form in which religion in the U.S. is socially organized (Chaves 2004). Furthermore, with more than 350,000 congregations in the U.S. (Brauer 2017), no other civil society institution gathers more people more regularly than religious congregations. Thus, if religion is to impact democratic engagement, it will most likely occur through religious congregations.

Organizational theory suggests three ways that religion, mediated by congregations, can help politically oriented CSOs promote democratic engagement. The first is derived from a "rational" view of organizations, which sees organizations as rational actors that mobilize resources to take action and solve problems (Scott 2013). Although there are similarities between secular and religious organizations, critical differences lie in their organizational form and structure (Tracey et al. 2014). Religious organizations, because of being rooted in religious belief systems, generate distinct structural characteristics compared to those of secular organizations. (Hinings and Raynard 2014). Early research that drew on organizational theory to explain the distinct structural characteristics

of congregations highlighted the primacy of belief systems in their causal models (Hinings and Foster 1973). Unique features of congregations emanating from their religious beliefs include: 1) the special authority bestowed on clergy (Dyck and Wiebe 2012); 2) the relatively stable presence of a religiously motivated volunteer base (Putnam and Campbell 2010); 3) religion's broad appeal to a diverse constituency (Warner 2005); 4) many congregations' religious impulse to partner with other community-based organizations (Ammerman 2005); and 5) resources (generated by some religious systems) for dealing with ambiguity and for balancing contestation and compromise (Wood 2002). Such research suggests that religion can contribute to democratic engagement via the *structural characteristics* of congregations; that is, via the moral resources of congregational leaders (Stout 2010; Wood 1994), the human resources of congregational members (Swarts 2008; Uslaner 2001) and the social resources embedded within congregations' extensive social networks (Foley et al. 2001; Fulton 2011; Fulton 2016a). Each of these structural characteristics has the potential to bolster democratic engagement among politically oriented CSOs that involve religious congregations.

The second way that religion can help politically oriented CSOs promote democratic engagement is derived from an "open" view of organizations, which sees organizations as permeable structures that can be shaped by external cultural influences (Scott 2013). Just as people bring cultural elements of the secular world into congregations, people bring cultural elements of religion into secular institutions (Hinings and Raynard 2014). Recent research shows how cultural elements rooted in religion animate people's action in nonreligious domains (Creed et al. 2014). These elements can inform people's choices and practices and bolster their capacity for action. In addition, religious culture can influence an organization's efficacy through a variety of mechanisms, including driving participants' motivations (Sherkat and Ellison 2007), organizational commitment (Rego and

Pina e Cunha 2008), and political capacity (Harris 1999; Swarts 2008; Wood 1999). Such research suggests that religion can contribute to democratic engagement via the cultural elements of religion. Given that many parts of U.S. society remain permeated by religion, it is likely that incorporating religious cultural elements into a CSO's activities can bolster its efficacy in promoting democratic engagement (Hart 2001; Wood 2002). Religious cultural elements can be incorporated into CSOs either through bottom-up processes whereby participants infuse their organization's culture with religious elements (Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 2005; Lichterman 2006) or through top-down processes by which participants are exposed to religious leaders and teachings (Warren 2001).¹

A third way that religion may help politically oriented CSOs promote democratic engagement occurs at the overlap of religion's structural and cultural forms. Unless an organization operates purely via command-and-control, its participants need to *make sense* of why their organization operates the way it does (Weick 2012; Weick et al. 2005). When an organization incorporates authoritative structures and cultural elements that resonate with its participants, this integration can shift the dynamics of the organization's culture regarding authority (Barnard 1938; Bolman and Deal 2017; Schein 2006). Prior research indicates that in the kinds of CSOs studied here, many participants make sense of organizational experience partly by drawing on religious authority and that incorporating such authoritative structures and cultural elements can help these organizations mobilize people for democratic engagement (Warren 2001). Thus, when these types of CSOs engage in organizational deliberation, those that include more clergy in leadership roles

¹ Incorporating cultural elements of religion into CSOs need not be done uncritically: Hart (2001) coined the term *cultural work* for efforts by organizations to critically appropriate and rework the cultural elements mobilized in political action. In a similar vein, an extensive literature uses the concept of *institutional work* to analyze efforts to reshape the cultural elements previously institutionalized within a given organizational setting (Battilana and D'ahunno 2009; Lawrence et al. 2013; Lawrence et al. 2009; Lawrence et al. 2011). Both concepts have been utilized extensively in organizational studies: cultural work in analyzing social movement organizations (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Nepstad 2004); institutional work more typically in analyzing corporate and nonprofit organizations (Currie et al. 2012; Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013). But cultural work and institutional work are clearly related concepts that help reveal the potential for critical appropriation of culture.

and incorporate religious teaching into their organizational culture may be more effective at promoting democratic engagement.

In this article, we use democratic engagement as a proxy for democracy for two reasons. First, impact on democratic institutions or on democracy itself is measurable only over much longer time scales than we can use here. For example, Putnam's (1993) analysis of structural and cultural factors impacting democracy and democratic institutions in Italy assessed changes over two decades. Second, although things like representative politics via elections can and do occur in the absence of democratic engagement, a long tradition of political thought argues that the more substantive forms of democratic life require citizen engagement to assure that representative politics actually represents the interests of non-elite members of society (Bretherton 2015; Dryzek 1996; Pateman 1970). In using democratic engagement as a proxy for democracy, we do not assume that all forms of democratic engagement strengthen democracy. For example, forms of engagement in politics that balkanize the polity along identity, ideological, or interest lines at least sometimes threaten to undermine the substance of democracy. Rather, we posit that the form of democratic engagement studied here, which mobilizes constituents across dividing lines of race, class, and religion, and does so in ways that embrace both institutional politics and more disruptive but non-violent political forms, is highly likely to strengthen the substance of democracy.

Institution-Based Community Organizing: A Field of Politically Oriented CSOs

To examine whether drawing on structural and cultural forms of religion can help politically oriented CSOs promote democratic engagement, we analyze the organizational field known as institution-based community organizing (IBCO).² The IBCO field arises from the democratic

² Institution-based organizing, sometimes referred to as "broad-based," "congregation-based," or "faith-based" organizing, differs from other types of community organizing in that the organizations have institutional members rather than individual members.

ideals promoted by grassroots political activists such as Jane Addams, Saul Alinsky, Larry Itliong, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King Jr., and shares roots with union organizing efforts and civil rights movements concerning the status of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and women (Bretherton 2015; Orr 2007; Smock 2004; Wood 2002). Ed Chambers of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) pioneered early elements of organizing based explicitly in community institutions, which were often religious congregations but also included a variety of secular institutions such as parent-teacher organizations, labor unions, and neighborhood associations (Stout 2010; Swarts 2008; Warren 2001).³

IBCO organizations operate as community-based organizations that bring together individuals from their member institutions to address social, economic, and political issues that affect poor, low-income, and middle-class segments of U.S. society. These organizations have characteristics of both social movements and civic organizations. Similar to social movement organizations, IBCO organizations address issues through the public exercise of political power by engaging constituents via “mobilizing structures” (e.g., religious congregations and other community institutions) (Giugni et al. 1999; Morris 1984; Tarrow 1994). Similar to civic organizations, IBCO organizations are typically non-partisan and their most common form of public engagement is collective civic actions (Sampson et al. 2005).

Although the IBCO field has existed for several decades (Bretherton 2015; Rogers 1990), only since the turn of the millennium has the field received extensive attention from scholars (Hart 2001; Osterman 2003; Stout 2010; Swarts 2008; Warren 2001; Wood 2002; Wood 2007)

³ Today, most IBCO organizations are affiliated with one of several sponsoring networks. Nationally, these include IAF, the PICO National Network, the Gamaliel Foundation, and National People’s Action. Important regional networks include the Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART) in the Southeast and Midwest and the InterValley Project (IVP) in New England. In addition, a smaller number of IBCO organizations are independent of the formal sponsoring networks.

and from intellectually-inclined practitioners (Chambers and Cowan 2003; Gecan 2009; Jacobsen 2001; Whitman 2007; Whitman 2017). During this time, the IBCO field has built a significant presence throughout the U.S. by building its member base among congregations and other community institutions (Fulton and Wood 2012). As of 2011, there were 189 local IBCO organizations in the U.S., with a presence in 40 of the 50 states and in every major city and most mid-major cities (Wood and Fulton 2015). Approximately 7 percent of all U.S. congregations are members of a local IBCO organization (Chaves et al. 2014). The people represented in these organizations (i.e., in the congregations and other types of member institutions) number over 5 million. CSOs that incorporate such a large number of people are rare in U.S. history, and those that have accomplished this level of engagement (e.g., the American Anti-Slavery Society, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and the American Red Cross) have profoundly shaped society (Skocpol et al. 2000).⁴

The IBCO field promotes democratic engagement by developing civic leaders and organizing a diverse base of constituents. Through the process of addressing particular social issues, IBCO organizations bolster public life by identifying leaders (often from marginalized and/or historically disenfranchised groups) and developing them into effective advocates for their communities in the wider civil society (Andrews et al. 2010).⁵ In 2011, a survey of the field indicated that more than 20,000 core leaders were playing active voluntary roles within local IBCO organizations, and more than 5,000 of those leaders had attended a multi-day training event in the past year (Fulton and Wood 2012). These intensive training events and other ongoing leadership development

⁴ The key historical threshold for such influential CSOs is mobilizing 1 percent of the U.S. population. The 5 million people represented by the IBCO field's member institutions easily exceed this figure (~1.5 percent). However, with this form of organizing, membership is composed of institutions rather than individuals, so the comparison is not exact.

⁵ See Osterman (2003), Gecan (2009), and Wood et al. (2012) for extensive, in-depth analyses that highlight IBCO organizations' impact on specific social issues and the public arena in general.

workshops give participants opportunities to learn how to organize their community, interview policy experts, engage political officials, and build broad-based coalitions (Wood and Fulton 2015). Through these training programs and on-the-ground organizing, the field develops volunteers into leaders, cultivates their democratic skills, and promotes greater engagement at the local level (Speer et al. 2010) and in higher-level political arenas (Fulton and Wood 2017).

While U.S. society at large is becoming increasingly fragmented (Fischer and Mattson 2009), a large proportion of IBCO organizations have substantial internal diversity along racial, socioeconomic, and religious lines (Wood and Fulton 2015). More than 50 percent of the field's board members are people of color, whereas only 19 percent of all nonprofit board members in the U.S. (Ostrower 2007) and only 13 percent of Fortune 500 board members are people of color (Lang et al. 2011). In terms of socioeconomic diversity, over 50 percent of the field's board members have a household income of less than \$50,000 per year and roughly 25 percent have less than a bachelor's degree (Braunstein et al. 2014). The IBCO field is also religiously diverse. While Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Black Protestant congregations make up the core of the field, Jewish, Unitarian-Universalist, and Evangelical congregations have doubled their representation from a decade ago, and 20 percent of the organizations have at least one Muslim member institution. In addition, secular institutions (mostly public schools, unions, and neighborhood associations) represent approximately one-fifth of all member institutions.

Although 78 percent of the field's member institutions are congregations, some IBCO organizations are composed exclusively of congregations, while others include many secular member institutions. Likewise, some IBCO organizations systematically mobilize religious cultural elements within their organizational culture and bring that culture to bear on civil society and politics; others largely eschew the invocation of religious culture or tap into it only cursorily. This

variation in the extent to which IBCO organizations incorporate structural characteristics of congregations and cultural elements of religion enables us to analyze how religion influences these organizations' efficacy in promoting democratic engagement.

Methods

To assess whether incorporating structural and cultural forms of religion helps politically oriented CSOs foster democratic engagement, this study analyzes original data from the National Study of Community Organizing Organizations (NSCOO) (Fulton et al. 2011).⁶ The organizations in this study are distributed throughout the country and share relatively similar structures and missions. They operate as local federations comprised of institutional (rather than individual) members that include religious congregations, nonprofit organizations, schools, unions, and other civic associations with representatives from its member institutions serving as board members. The organizations seek to empower residents of poor, working-class, and middle-class communities to build enduring structures that can address a broad set of social, economic, and political issues. These commonalities enable the analyses to hold the organizations' form relatively constant, while allowing their member composition, organizational culture, and organizing outcomes to vary.

The NSCOO surveyed the entire field of IBCO organizations by distributing a two-part survey to the director of each organization. Part one was an online survey that gathered extensive data on each organization's history, activities, and outcomes. Part two consisted of customized spreadsheets that directors used to provide detailed demographic information about their institutional members, board members, and paid staff. This study achieved a response rate of 94 percent, gathering data on

⁶ The population for the NSCOO comprised every IBCO organization in the U.S. that has an office address, at least one paid employee, and institutional members. The NSCOO did not include community organizing organizations that have only individual members. Based on these criteria, the study identified 189 active IBCO organizations by using databases from every national and regional community organizing network, databases from 14 foundations that fund community organizing, and archived IRS 990 forms.

178 of the 189 organizations in the country and demographic information on the 4,145 member institutions, 2,939 board members, and 628 paid staff affiliated with these organizations (Fulton 2016b).

The survey data are supplemented with qualitative data collected from 23 organizations that participated in the NSCOO. These organizations are located in California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. and they vary in their size, social composition, internal dynamics, and organizational outcomes. The data include ethnographic observations of multiple organizational meetings and training sessions, which involved discussions on topics such as forming alliances, developing organizing strategies, recruiting new members, and planning large-scale events. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the directors of 18 organizations. The interview questions focused on the organizations' history, internal dynamics, and organizing strategies. Additional data were collected through several informal conversations and correspondence with the organizations' core leaders and volunteers. The observational data and individual accounts of the organizations' activities and dynamics are used to help explain the findings generated from the quantitative analysis.

Measures

To operationalize how extensively an IBCO organization incorporates structural characteristics of religion, the analysis uses the composition of its institutional members and governing board. The number of congregations that are institutional members of the organization measures the extent to which religion provides the institutional base of the organization. The number of clergy who serve on the organization's board measures the extent to which formal religious authority is incorporated into the organization's deliberations and decision-making.

To measure the extent to which an organization incorporates cultural elements of religion,

the analysis uses responses from the following survey item. Directors were asked to indicate how often their organization's activities included discussions about the connections between faith and organizing over the past year. This ordered categorical variable has five response options (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always). The responses were used to construct a binary variable—*regularly discusses the connections between faith and organizing*—such that the “often” and “always” responses were coded as 1 and the other responses were coded 0. To measure the extent to which an organization's culture includes a role for authoritative religious teaching, the analysis uses responses from the following survey item. Directors were asked to indicate how often their organization's activities included religious teaching from a leader or clergy. This ordered categorical variable has five response options (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always). The responses were used to construct a binary variable—*activities regularly include teaching from a leader/clergy*—such that the “often” and “always” responses were coded as 1 and the other responses were coded 0.

The analysis includes four dependent variables related to an IBCO organization's organizing capacity, political access, and mobilizing capacity as a means to measure its efficacy in promoting democratic engagement. First, like many grassroots organizations, IBCO organizations tend to rely heavily on volunteers to implement their activities (Chetkovich and Kunreuther 2006; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Swarts 2008). Thus, an organization's ability to recruit volunteers and sustain their participation significantly influences its organizing capacity. To measure an organization's organizing capacity, the analysis constructs a count variable using responses from the following survey item. Directors were asked to indicate the number of people who regularly attend planning meetings or work on the organization's projects.

Second, IBCO organizations often pursue policy change by defining certain issues as important, shaping public discourse about these issues, and developing responsive policy innovations

(DeFilippis et al. 2010; Rusch 2012; Wilson 1999; Wood 2007). Furthermore, organizations advocate for those policies by cultivating relationships with elected officials through public and private meetings. Having elected officials as allies is a critical component of an organization's political influence (Baumgartner et al. 2009). To measure an organization's political access, the analysis uses responses from the following survey item. Directors were asked to provide the name and position of every political official with which their organization had met in the previous 12 months. The responses were used to construct a count variable that indicates the number of city officials with which the organization met in the past year.

The third and fourth dependent variables relate to IBCO organizations' demonstration of power through their ability to mobilize people, which includes both the volume of people they can assemble for a particular event and the total number of people they can mobilize over the course a year (Hackman 2002; Swarts 2008; Warren 2001; Wood 2002). To measure these two aspects of an organization's mobilizing capacity, the analysis uses responses from the following survey items. Directors were asked to indicate: 1) the number of people that had attended their largest single event in the previous 12 months and 2) the total number of different people that had attended at least one of their events in the previous 12 months. Each of these dependent variables represents a form of democratic engagement as well as a key output of the community organizing process that is crucial for the organization's impact on civil society and public policy.

The analysis also controls for the organization's annual revenue, age, and the number of paid organizers and member institutions. Each of these organizational characteristics is known to be associated with the outcome measures and the independent variables (Swarts 2008; Wood and Fulton 2015). Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses.

[Table 1 about here]

Results

The analysis examines whether incorporating structural and cultural forms of religion is associated with each measure of an IBCO organization's efforts to promote democratic engagement.⁷ Poisson regressions are performed for each of the dependent variables. Table 2 displays the results of the four multivariate regression models. The analysis finds that incorporating structural characteristics of religion is positively related to the IBCO organization's efficacy in fostering democratic engagement. All else being equal, having more religious congregations as institutional members of the IBCO organization is associated with having more volunteers, meeting with more city officials, mobilizing more people, and having larger turnout for public actions. Similarly, the number of clergy members serving on an IBCO organization's board is positively related to the number of people the organization mobilized in the past year and for its largest single event.

[Table 2 about here]

The analysis also finds a positive association between an IBCO organization incorporating religious cultural elements and its efficacy in promoting democratic engagement. All else being equal, IBCO organizations that regularly discuss the connections between faith and organizing have 13 percent more volunteers, meet with 23 percent more city officials, mobilize 12 percent more people, and have turnouts to public actions that are 14 percent larger. Similarly, IBCO organizations whose activities regularly include religious teaching have 29 percent more volunteers, mobilize 43 percent more people, and have 56 percent higher turnout to public actions.

⁷ Because this study surveyed the entire population of IBCO organizations in the U.S. and received responses from 94 percent of the organizations, a finite population correction factor— $\sqrt{(N - n)/(N - 1)}$ —is applied to each analysis (Cochran 1977). The finite population correction factor is based on the 168 organizations (out of 189) that provided complete information on all of the variables used in the analysis.

Overall, the analysis provides strong evidence that incorporating structural and cultural forms of religion into an IBCO organization is positively associated with its efficacy in promoting democratic engagement.

Discussion

The analysis supports the claim that incorporating structural characteristics of congregations into a politically oriented CSO can help the organization promote democratic engagement. The finding that involving religious congregations is positively associated with an IBCO organization's organizing capacity, political access, and mobilizing capacity demonstrates structural routes by which religion can increase an organization's political efficacy. This increase is likely to result partly from having access to congregations' moral resources as well as their social networks and associated social capital (Wood 2002). In our ethnographic fieldwork, we observed regular examples of organizers working through social networks embedded in congregations both to build their own organization and to mobilize congregants for political actions. For example, organizers would ask the heads of congregational choirs, men's prayer groups, or women's service societies to bring their members to organizing meetings and public actions or to be introduced to those members. Such practices occurred among congregations affiliated with a wide variety of religious denominations and non-denominational traditions. In addition, when appealing to elected officials, both professional organizers and unpaid leaders would regularly "credential" their organization by noting the congregations involved in their work, emphasizing the socially diverse base the congregations represent and the influence they wield.

The analysis also indicates that having clergy members on an IBCO organization's board is positively associated with its ability to mobilize people, but unrelated to its ability to recruit volunteers and meet with political officials. The positive finding regarding mobilization might

reflect another dynamic we observed in our fieldwork, whereby only those clergy most convinced of the value of organizing were typically willing to invest their time in board service. As board members, such clergy could help shape organizing events in ways that appealed to their constituents, and thereby, they were more likely to promote the events from the pulpit and recruit constituents to participate. The mixed finding, however, suggests that incorporating religious authority into an IBCO organization's decision-making structure is useful for mobilizing constituents, but not necessarily for organizing them into long-term civil society work nor for expanding the organization's political access. This variation could be explained partly by the fact that the extent to which people bring their religion into non-congregational settings varies by context (Lichterman 2012). Clergy board members may be more likely to draw on their religious identity when mobilizing constituents than when meeting with political officials. Alternatively, when religious authority *is* mobilized in both settings, it may make more impact on religious constituents (the majority of participants in this field) than on political officials (who operate in more secularized settings, whether personally religious or not).

The analysis also supports the claim that incorporating cultural elements of religion into a politically oriented CSO can help it promote democratic engagement. The finding that regularly discussing the connections between faith and organizing is positively associated with an IBCO organization's organizing capacity, political access, and mobilizing capacity indicates cultural routes by which religion can increase an organization's political efficacy. Based on our ethnographic observations, in the more effective IBCO organizations the leaders more regularly invoked religiously-based meaning systems as rationales for building their organization, engaging political officials, and mobilizing people for public action. Such invocations ranged from rather simplistic claims like Moses (or Aaron) was 'the first organizer' or suggestions that political officials who

refuse to meet are behaving unaccountably like Pharaoh or Herod to more theologically complex arguments regarding God's desire for justice in the world and regular calling forth of social prophets to lead in building such a world (with the suggestion that faith-based organizing leaders are such contemporary prophets, akin to Isaiah or Amos). Both the quantitative analysis and ethnographic observations provide evidence that infusing an organization's culture with elements of religion that participants find meaningful can boost participants' motivations, organizational commitment, and political capacity, and in doing so can bolster democratic engagement. The analysis also indicates that regularly including religious teaching from a leader or clergy in an IBCO organization's activities is positively related to the organization's ability to organize and mobilize participants, but unrelated to the number of political officials it can access. This finding suggests that incorporating religious authority into an IBCO organization's culture, like having clergy on the board, is useful for organizing and mobilizing constituents, but will not necessarily help the organization obtain an audience with political officials.

Overall, the analysis indicates that religion can help politically oriented CSOs promote democratic engagement via the structural characteristics of congregations and the cultural elements of religion. Less consistent is religion's impact where its structural and cultural forms overlap, namely in the arena of religious authority. The analysis indicates that among IBCO organizations, empowering professional religious leaders and incorporating authoritative religious teaching are strongly associated with mobilizing people, marginally associated with recruiting long-term volunteers, and unrelated to gaining access to political officials. These findings suggest that drawing explicitly on religious authority can help an organization mobilize people for particular events, but not necessarily promote participants' sustained engagement nor increase the organization's effectiveness at engaging political officials.

We submit that the inconsistent findings regarding the impact of religious authority on promoting democratic engagement reflects the complexity of religion's role in the United States. In more religiously diverse parts of the U.S., invoking religious authority in ways seen as appropriately pluralistic may lend moral legitimacy to an organization's work; however, invoking religion more narrowly may be seen as violating the religious neutrality of the public arena. In less religiously diverse parts of the country, invoking religious authority in ways seen as insufficiently expressive of locally dominant religious views may actually *de*-legitimize the organization's work. In highly secularized parts of the country, any invocation of religious authority may undercut the organization's ability to wield public influence. Thus, while we find that drawing on religious authority can help an organization promote democratic engagement among its participants, it is not surprising that the impact of drawing on religious authority is less consistent in public settings.

Conclusion

Analyzing original data from a national study of politically oriented CSOs, this study finds a positive relationship between organizations that incorporate structural and cultural forms of religion and their efficacy in promoting democratic engagement. In particular, organizations that involve congregations as institutional members and clergy as board members tend to have greater organizing capacity, political access, and mobilizing capacity. Similarly, organizations that regularly discuss the connections between faith and organizing and those that regularly include religious teaching into their activities tend to be more effective at fostering those forms of democratic engagement.

The findings from this study are not intended to refute the findings of extensive research that identifies hyper-individualist trends in religion, the decline of many religious institutions, and the complicity of some forms of religion in rising intolerance and political polarization. Ample evidence has been marshaled for these trends rendering them as well-established social facts.

Nevertheless, our findings do indicate that in the U.S., religious congregations and religious culture retain sufficient civic vitality to strengthen democratic life.

Two caveats, however, must be noted. First, our research on religion's capacity to promote democratic engagement is limited to cases that have the support and expertise of professional democratic organizers trained in the art of organizing in civil society. It is unknown whether our observations hold in cases that do not have qualified professional organizers. Second, our study shows that Tocqueville's original insight regarding the role of religion in American democracy—that is, that religion helps to undergird democratic life—continues to hold up partly due to choices made by organizational participants. Much of religion's capacity to promote democratic engagement among politically oriented CSOs depends on congregational leaders choosing to invest their faith-driven passion in efforts to improve society. It also depends on civil society leaders choosing to draw on structural and cultural forms of religion by involving congregations and incorporating religious culture into organizational life, presumably in ways that value religious pluralism and respect religious teachings, even while drawing on the latter in ways that are simultaneously constructive and critical.

Future research on this terrain could explore whether the patterns we identify result from something in religion *qua* religion (Wood 2002) or from the particular “fit” between religion and core structural and cultural features of U.S. civil society. If the former, then the patterns we identify may apply in many societies; if the latter, then CSOs in more secular societies may not benefit from incorporating structural and cultural forms of religion. In addition, this study has focused on a specific type of CSO and on a specific outcome—democratic engagement—which is an important measure of organizational efficacy for IBCO organizations. Future research could analyze whether incorporating structural and cultural forms of religion has a similar positive impact among other types of CSOs and on other organizational outcomes.

More broadly, our study illustrates the fertile analytic possibilities of linking organizational theory and research on the structural and cultural forms of CSOs (see Davis et al. 2005). In particular, the findings from our study suggest that research on CSOs could benefit from giving greater attention to the impact of culture on organizational outcomes, including both organizational culture generally and religious culture specifically. Our findings also suggest that studies of organizations need to carefully disentangle the structural and cultural routes through which an organization's capacity and efficacy are influenced. Scholarship could benefit from a better understanding of how culture flows across institutional boundaries (here, from religion to politically oriented CSOs) to shape organizational dynamics and civil society.

If civil society-based efforts to buttress democracy in the U.S. are to deliver on the nation's democratic promise, they need to be pursued in ways appropriate to the contemporary context of religious pluralism and a diversifying U.S. society. This study has focused on a field of CSOs that has embraced such pluralism and diversity. At a time when democracy in the U.S. is facing deep challenges, invigorating a broader set of diverse and pluralist CSOs as active democratic agents is urgently needed. Religion appears to be a capable contributor to that project—but only if religious leaders embrace public responsibility and civil society leaders draw judiciously on the structural and cultural forms of religion that can promote democratic engagement.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the field of institution-based community organizing organizations

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
<i>Structural and Cultural Forms of Religion</i>				
Number of congregational member institutions	18.57	11.54	.00	78.00
Number of board members who are clergy	5.41	5.35	.00	33.00
Regularly discusses the connections between faith and organizing	.77	.42	.00	1.00
Activities regularly include religious teaching from a leader/clergy	.57	.50	.00	1.00
<i>Measures of Democratic Engagement</i>				
Number of volunteers (x 100)	1.11	1.01	.03	6.00
Number of city officials with which the organization met	7.26	6.10	.00	39.00
Number of people mobilized (x 1,000)	1.25	1.44	.00	11.86
Largest single turnout (x 1,000)	.59	.61	.00	4.00
<i>Characteristics of the Organization</i>				
Annual revenue (x \$100,000)	3.10	6.59	.11	75.00
Age of the organization	13.62	8.79	1.00	40.00
Number of paid organizers	2.92	2.66	1.00	19.00
Number of member institutions	23.93	14.22	4.00	82.00

Source: 2011 National Study of Community Organizing Organizations (Fulton et al. 2011); N = 168

Table 2: Poisson regressions estimating the relationship between an IBCO organization incorporating structural and cultural forms of religion and its efficacy at promoting democratic engagement

	Number of volunteers	Number of city officials with which the organization met	Number of people mobilized	Largest single turnout
<i>Structural and Cultural Forms of Religion</i>				
Number of congregational member institutions	1.014*** (.002)	1.004* (.002)	1.004* (.002)	1.018*** (.003)
Number of board members who are clergy	1.005 (.004)	.992 (.004)	1.020*** (.005)	1.014*** (.004)
Regularly discusses the connections between faith and organizing	1.126* (.061)	1.234*** (.067)	1.116* (.059)	1.139* (.058)
Activities regularly include religious teaching from a leader/clergy	1.294*** (.042)	1.077 (.052)	1.425*** (.068)	1.563*** (.074)
<i>Characteristics of the Organization</i>				
Annual Revenue ^a	1.123*** (.036)	1.140*** (.033)	1.237*** (.060)	1.110** (.040)
Age of the organization ^a	1.272*** (.033)	.991 (.028)	1.240*** (.037)	1.150*** (.031)
Number of paid organizers ^a	1.085* (.036)	1.032 (.041)	1.202*** (.055)	.992 (.031)
Number of member institutions ^a	1.258*** (.052)	1.250*** (.055)	1.255 (.145)	1.342*** (.068)

Note: Coefficients reported as incidence rate ratios; linearized standard errors reported in parentheses; constants are not displayed; N= 168.

^a Logged values.

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests).