

## **Religious Congregations as Havens of Participatory Equality or Fortresses of Privilege? Evidence from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey**

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For more than a decade, researchers and journalists have expressed concern about an apparent decline in Americans' participation in community life. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2005), political scientist Robert Putnam cited as evidence of this decline decreases in everything from having neighbors over for dinner to voting to participation in voluntary associations. Participation in religious congregations, where there is little clear evidence of decrease, has rarely been the focus for Putnam and others participating in this discussion.

An important exception to this focus away from religious congregations is the book *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady 1995). Religious congregations are critically important to U.S. community involvement, Verba and his collaborators argue, partly because congregations offer leadership training to Americans from many walks of life. Verba and his collaborators look for this training by asking people in what settings they have been involved in writing letters, making presentations, and planning and leading meetings. Developing skills needed for these activities can prove to be important, Verba and his collaborators observe, when Americans become interested in contacting elected officials or joining with others to try to solve community problems. Professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs cultivate leadership skills at work. For most Americans, however, work is a place where they follow instructions, not develop leadership skills. American from all classes who are involved in religious congregations, Verba et al.'s data suggest, cultivate and perfect leadership skills in these congregations. If not for leadership development in congregations, they suggest, any decline in U.S. community involvement would be even more precipitous, especially among working-class people.

The early-1990s national survey data that Verba and his collaborators analyzed suggested that many U.S. religious congregations (especially Protestant congregations) do a good job of leadership development with all kinds of people active in their congregations. We wanted, however, to update this analysis, using data from a different kind of survey and from a survey administered more recently. The 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey involved some 300,000 worshipers in 2,000 randomly selected congregations across the country. Researchers asked a random sample of U.S. people whether they participated in religious congregations and, if so, which congregations. They then asked leaders of each of these named congregations to administer a four-page survey to all participants, age 15 or older, in weekend worship. The survey included a set of questions about worshipers' involvement in congregational activities, congregational leadership, and outside activities. (For more information on the survey, see [www.uscongregations.org](http://www.uscongregations.org).) More than 1,100 worshipers in a randomly selected subsample also completed an alternative back page with questions about community involvement.

U.S. Congregational Life Survey results suggest that people attending worship services at religious congregations are indeed active in their congregations and their communities (Bruce 2004; Marcum 2001). Is this true for people from all walks of life? Do U.S. religious congregations involve not only professional-managerial-class people but also working-class people in congregational leadership and activities? And are those involved in congregational leadership and activities more likely to be involved in outside activities, as Verba and his collaborators suggest? Do religious congregations continue to facilitate community involvement for working-class people?

We explored these questions in part by dividing U.S. congregations on several dimensions. First, we divided congregations into denominational families, focusing on congregations in the three families with the largest numbers of congregations and worshipers in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey sample: Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant. We also divided congregations based on how many people had attended services the previous year and on whether their worship services employed written liturgies.

When examining individual worshipers, we incorporated data for variables that the existing community involvement research has identified as potentially important: gender, age, race, marital status, employment status, U.S. versus non-U.S. birth, whether or not English was the worshipers' first language, and whether worshipers had children living at home. Because we were especially interested in class differences, we examined in greater detail the relationship between congregational and outside community involvement, on the one hand, and worshipers' annual household income and the numbers of years that they had attended school, on the other hand. We also included a religious variable: whether the worshipers believe that the Bible should be taken literally.

Because Verba and his collaborators were especially concerned about public advocacy, we focused on this outside activity. We employed as examples of advocacy voting in the previous presidential election, contacting elected officials about public issues, and working with others to try to solve community problems.

If the worshipers' responses to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey were consistent with Verba et al.'s findings, we would expect to find two things: (1) Professional-managerial-class and working-class worshipers are equally involved in congregational leadership and activities; and (2) People more involved in congregational leadership and activities are also more involved in leadership, advocacy, and activities outside the congregations, and this holds true for both professional-managerial-class and working-class worshipers.

Analysis of 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey responses shows that worshipers with larger incomes and more formal schooling were marginally more involved in congregational leadership and activities and in public advocacy. Worshipers from different classes nevertheless volunteered (for assistance and community improvement programs within and outside their congregations) the same number of hours per week.

Analysis of survey responses also shows that slightly larger proportions of worshipers active in congregational leadership and activities were also involved in advocacy. This held true for worshipers in various income and schooling groups.

This analysis suggests that the first Verba et al. hypothesis, that religious congregations involve people from all classes in leadership and activities, is on target. Congregations do indeed draw both professional-managerial-class and working-class worshipers into their group activities and leadership circles. The second hypothesis, that those most active in congregations are also those most active in advocacy, was not supported. Whether the critical role that Verba and his collaborators assign religious congregations in facilitating public advocacy and other outside activities is merited is a matter for further research and discussion. Congregations engage diverse people in leadership, but this may not be preventing an even larger withdrawal by Americans from advocacy and other forms of community involvement. Additional research using more sophisticated data analysis and additional congregational-level variables should shed more light on these issues.

**References:**

Deborah Bruce, *How Are Worshipers Involved in the Community? Findings from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey* (Louisville, Kentucky: U.S. Congregations and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 2004).

John P. Marcum, "Civic Engagement," *Monday Morning* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 3 December 2001).

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

**TABLE 1**

**Current Involvement in One or More Congregational Leadership Roles**

**Individual worshiper-level data:**

**Class:**

With no bachelor's degree .....	39%
With bachelor's degree .....	46%
Less than \$50,000 annual household income .	40%
\$50,000 or greater annual household income .	44%

**Gender:**

Female.....	43%
Male .....	40%

**Race:**

Non-white .....	40%
White.....	44%

**Age:**

15-44 .....	36%
45 or older.....	46%

**Nativity:**

U.S.-born.....	44%
Non-U.S.-born.....	30%

**English language history:**

English as first language .....	44%
English not first language .....	28%

**Marriage and family status:**

Currently married.....	44%
Not married .....	38%
Children at home.....	43%
No children at home.....	43%

**Employment status:**

Employed .....	41%
Not employed.....	44%

**Theology:**

Bible as word of God to be taken literally .....	46%
Bible not to be taken literally or don't know ..	41%

**Congregational-level data:**

**Worship style:**

Written liturgy or outline .....	42%
No written liturgy or outline .....	49%

**Worship attendance size:**

1-99 .....	66%
100-349 .....	60%
350 or greater .....	38%

**Denominational family:**

Roman Catholic .....	33%
Mainline Protestant .....	58%
Conservative Protestant .....	56%

**TABLE 2**

**Involvement During the Previous Year in Voting, Contacting Elected Officials,  
and/or Working with Others to Try to Solve Community Problems**

**Individual worshiper-level data:**

**Class:**

With no bachelor's degree .....	71%
With bachelor's degree .....	88%
Less than \$50,000 household income .....	73%
\$50,000 or greater household income .....	86%

**Gender:**

Female .....	78%
Male .....	77%

**Race:**

Non-white .....	51%
White .....	84%

**Age:**

15-44 .....	67%
45 or greater .....	85%

**Nativity:**

U.S.-born .....	82%
Non-U.S.-born .....	47%

**English language history:**

English as first language .....	82%
English not first language .....	46%

**Marriage and family status:**

Children at home .....	70%
No children at home .....	82%
Currently married .....	84%
Not married .....	66%

**Employment status:**

Employed .....	80%
Not employed .....	69%

**Theology:**

Bible as word of God to be taken literally .....	72%
Bible not to be taken literally or don't know ..	76%

**Congregational-level data:**

**Worship style:**

Written liturgy or outline .....	74%
No written liturgy or outline .....	77%

**Worship attendance size:**

1-99 .....	76%
100-349 .....	80%
350 or greater .....	74%

**Denominational family:**

Roman Catholic .....	71%
Mainline Protestant .....	84%
Conservative Protestant .....	78%

**TABLE 3**

**Regular Participation in Congregational Activities**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
In Sunday school or Sabbath school.....	16%	21%	25%	26%
In prayer, discussion or Bible study groups .....	18%	22%	21%	19%
In fellowships, clubs, or other social groups.....	24%	29%	30%	28%
No such activities .....	3%	2%	1%	9%
Not regularly involved .....	51%	46%	43%	44%

**TABLE 4**

**Regular Participation in Congregational Group Activities**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
In Sunday school or Sabbath school.....	20%	21%	24%	26%
In prayer, discussion or Bible study groups .....	18%	20%	21%	23%
In fellowships, clubs, or other social groups.....	25%	28%	29%	30%
No such activities .....	10%	10%	9%	7%
Not regularly involved .....	49%	46%	44%	42%

**TABLE 5**

**Regular Participation in Congregational Outreach**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
In evangelism .....	13%	14%	14%	12%
In community service, social justice or advocacy .....	17%	19%	20%	20%
No such activities .....	9%	7%	6%	6%
Not regularly involved .....	67%	66%	66%	67%

**TABLE 6**

**Regular Participation in Congregational Outreach**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
In evangelism .....	12%	14%	12%	13%
In community service, social justice or advocacy .....	16%	19%	20%	24%
No such activities .....	8%	7%	7%	6%
Not regularly involved .....	68%	66%	66%	64%

**TABLE 7**

**Current Involvement in Congregational Leadership Roles**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
Governing board member .....	2%	4%	4%	5%
Committee or task force member .....	4%	7%	8%	10%
Worship leader or assistant .....	10%	13%	14%	14%
Group officer or leader .....	6%	13%	14%	14%
Musician, choir member, or director .....	6%	8%	8%	7%
Sunday school or Sabbath school Teacher .....	5%	7%	8%	8%
Liturgical role (Catholic) .....	2%	2%	3%	3%
Sacramental role (Catholic) .....	2%	2%	2%	2%
Teacher or parish school teacher (Catholic) .....	2%	2%	2%	3%
Other role .....	11%	12%	12%	11%
None .....	68%	61%	58%	58%

**TABLE 8**

**Current Involvement in Congregational Leadership Roles**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
Governing board member .....	2%	3%	4%	6%
Committee or task force member .....	4%	6%	9%	12%
Worship leader or assistant .....	10%	12%	14%	18%
Group officer or leader.....	6%	8%	8%	8%
Musician, choir member, or director .....	6%	6%	7%	9%
Sunday school or Sabbath school teacher .....	5%	6%	8%	8%
Liturgical role (Catholic) .....	2%	3%	3%	4%
Sacramental role (Catholic) .....	2%	2%	2%	3%
Teacher or parish school teacher (Catholic).....	1%	2%	3%	4%
Other role .....	11%	12%	12%	12%
None.....	67%	62%	58%	52%

**TABLE 9**

**Participation in Service or Advocacy Groups Outside the Congregation**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
In social service or charity group....	22%	26%	28%	34%
In advocacy, justice or lobbying groups.....	4%	4%	6%	8%
Not involved in such groups .....	76%	72%	69%	63%

**TABLE 10**

**Participation in Service or Advocacy Groups Outside the Congregation**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
In social service or charity group....	21%	27%	32%	40%
In advocacy, justice or lobbying groups.....	3%	4%	6%	12%
Not involved in such groups .....	78%	71%	65%	54%

**TABLE 11****Involvement in Advocacy or Assistance During the Previous Year**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
Loaned money to person outside the family.....	30%	29%	29%	30%
Cared for sick person outside the family.....	23%	22%	20%	19%
Helped person outside the family find a job.....	18%	21%	24%	31%
Donated or prepared food for person outside family or congregation.	38%	48%	53%	55%
Voted in last presidential election...	59%	77%	82%	85%
Donated money to charitable organization other than the congregation .....	54%	73%	79%	86%
Worked with others to try to solve a community problem.....	14%	18%	22%	28%
Contacted an elected official about a public issue .....	11%	18%	21%	26%
Did none of these .....	6%	2%	2%	1%

**TABLE 12****Involvement in Advocacy or Assistance During the Previous Year**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
Loaned money to person outside the family.....	30%	31%	28%	26%
Cared for sick person outside the family.....	20%	25%	20%	23%
Helped person outside the family find a job.....	17%	25%	27%	31%
Donated or prepared food for person outside family or congregation.	41%	51%	54%	56%
Voted in last presidential election...	62%	78%	83%	89%
Donated money to charitable organization other than the congregation .....	60%	74%	82%	88%
Worked with others to try to solve a community problem.....	13%	20%	24%	35%
Contacted an elected official about a public issue .....	12%	19%	23%	32%
Did none of these .....	6%	2%	2%	1%

**TABLE 13**

**Self-Described Involvement in Congregational Decision Making**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
Often participate.....	11%	12%	13%	13%
Occasionally involved.....	16%	19%	20%	20%
Not usually involved.....	36%	37%	38%	40%
No opportunity, and that's fine .....	30%	25%	23%	22%
No opportunity and unhappy.....	7%	5%	6%	6%

**TABLE 14**

**Self-Described Involvement in Congregational Decision Making**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
Often participate.....	11%	12%	12%	16%
Occasionally involved.....	17%	19%	20%	21%
Not usually involved.....	37%	37%	39%	39%
No opportunity, and that's fine .....	29%	25%	24%	18%
No opportunity and unhappy.....	6%	6%	5%	6%

**TABLE 15**

**Hours Volunteered During the Previous Month in this Congregation's  
Programs to Help People or Improve the Community**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
None.....	58%	58%	55%	58%
One to five.....	27%	27%	28%	25%
Six or more.....	15%	15%	17%	18%

**TABLE 16**

**Hours Volunteered During the Previous Month in this Congregation's  
Programs to Help People or Improve the Community**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
None.....	60%	48%	55%	62%
One to five.....	26%	29%	27%	29%
Six or more.....	14%	23%	18%	9%

**TABLE 17**

**Hours Volunteered During the Previous Month Outside the  
Congregation's Programs to Help People or Improve the Community**

	<b>Annual Household Income Less Than \$25,000</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	<b>Annual Household Income \$75,000 or Greater</b>
None.....	53%	46%	51%	45%
One to five.....	28%	34%	33%	35%
Six or more.....	19%	20%	16%	20%

**TABLE 18**

**Hours Volunteered During the Previous Month Outside the  
Congregation's Programs to Help People or Improve the Community**

	<b>High School Education or Less</b>	<b>Some College or Trade School without Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	<b>Graduate or Advanced Degree</b>
None.....	55%	43%	46%	38%
One to five.....	28%	38%	31%	46%
Six or more.....	17%	20%	23%	16%

**TABLE 19**

**Worshippers Having Engaged During the Previous Year in Voting, Contacting  
Elected Officials, or Working with Others to Try to Solve Community Problems**

	<b>Involvement with No Congregational Leadership Role</b>	<b>Involvement with One or More Congregational Leadership Roles</b>
Annual household income less than \$50,000.....	68%	80%
Annual household income \$50,000 or greater.....	83%	91%
No bachelor's degree.....	67%	78%
Bachelor's degree.....	84%	93%