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Moralizing to the Choir: The Moral Foundations of American Clergy*

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Abstract

Objective: In order to understand the role of clergy to shape Americans' moral worldviews, we examine whether the structure of clergy values varies in systematic ways according to contextual factors, such as disagreement in the congregation.

Method: In early 2014 (February), clergy from a variety of Protestant denominations were contacted by email and invited to complete a survey online, which included a 20-item Moral Foundations (MF) battery as well as a variety of attitudinal, behavioral, and relational measures.

Results: Clergy MFs resemble average citizens', they look to preserve their autonomy by emphasizing individualizing foundations when they are in disagreement with their congregation, and emphasize MFs that align with their religious beliefs, especially their views on religious authority.

Conclusion: We reject a special religious emphasis on binding foundations. While clergy take moral positions that reflect their theological commitments, we find evidence of contextualizing in how they weight moral positions.

Keywords: Religion and politics; clergy; moral foundations; authority.

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Social scientists have long been interested in elite behavior – whether it is the influence of political elites on the general public (e.g., Clifford and Jerit 2013; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Zaller 1992) or clergy on parishioners (Djupe and Calfano 2013; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Nteta and Wallsten 2012). Because most of this work is focused on citizen preferences, elite perspectives are treated as exogenous. This need not be the case as elites could rethink their views according to situational input and, especially, consider frames that may be more strategically efficacious. We focus our attention on one kind of social elite – clergy – in the context of their advancement of moral worldviews. In particular, we examine the structure of clergy Moral Foundations (MF), a much-replicated value schema developed by a group of social psychologists (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Graham, Iyer, Nosek, Haidt, Koelva, and Ditto 2011). Moral Foundation theory is a useful framework for this project since it offers a range of moral understandings, it has been thought to connect with a wide range of religious beliefs, and it is linked to political position taking without constituting overt political messaging (Clifford and Jerit 2013; Clifford et al. 2015), which some clergy try to avoid. Furthermore, Graham and Haidt (2010) posit that the certain “binding” foundations have emerged from religious traditions (Authority, Loyalty and Purity), whereas the other “individualizing” foundations (Care and Fairness), that are often linked to liberal social attitudes, are more universally accepted. This strong expectation, consistent with a line of research finding a link between greater religiosity and greater conservatism across a wide range of indicators (Green et al. 1996; Layman 2001; Olson and Warber 2008), allows us to explore the conditions under which clergy demonstrate individualizing foundations. In this paper, we ask how are religious beliefs and values linked to the Moral Foundations and how is the religious context linked to which Foundations are prioritized?

Following a growing line of research, we emphasize the role of the social context – the congregation and community. Clergy are called to minister in place, to address the needs of particular communities and operate effectively within the system of constraints that each community supplies. Those powerful incentives have been linked to clergy political behavior, the amount and shape of their political speech, and their selected reference groups. That is, contextual forces have been linked to the expression of clergy worldviews, but the *worldviews* themselves have been thought to be immune to such forces. It is the imperviousness of their worldviews to contextual forces that we investigate here.

Put differently, we suspect clergy MF patterns are more complicated than simply that clergy model Moral Foundations that would support the religion-conservatism link – more religious conservatism linked to more binding foundations. One crucial step we take is to capture clergy in the social context of religion. Clergy may disagree with their congregations, which provides an incentive for them to emphasize autonomy through emphasis on individualism. Another contribution we make is to disentangle religious conservatism from religious authority, allowing for the

possibility of holding traditional beliefs without demanding fealty to them. Therefore, among religious conservatives, less robust notions of religious authority will boost the weight of individualizing foundations.

Using an original cross-sectional dataset of clergy from a variety of Christian denominations gathered in 2014, we examine the patterns of Moral Foundation support among clergy. Cognizant that we cannot make causal claims, we test how well variance in the Foundations across these denominations is related to measures of theological conservatism, religious authority values, and contextual factors that may condition their emphasis on particular moral precepts.

Why Focus on Clergy Values

On its face, it seems obvious that clergy have a special role to play in constructing the moral worldviews of congregants. They are selected, in some cases assigned, to provide precisely this kind of instruction, guiding members to make decisions in line with moralities deeply inscribed in text and tradition (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Smidt 2016). They may have greater authority than other elites if they are afforded divine sanction for their claims (e.g., Grzymala-Busse 2012). And they are given deference over others at least once a week when clergy deliver sermons to remind congregants about the shape of that worldview and its application to specific situations. In this way, clergy might be thought of as the primary interpreters of the faith, shaping worldviews relevant to public decision making.

A considerable amount of literature in the social sciences adopts this view as justification for undertaking studies of clergy (e.g., Guth et al. 1997; Olson 2000; Smidt 2016). This assumption is not wrong, but these claims are variables. Clergy are given different levels of authority, which is partly a feature of religious traditions (Djupe and Gilbert 2009: 30-33) – it is higher among white and black evangelicals and lower among Mainline Protestants, for instance. Then, conditional on their level of authority, clergy may influence political and social attitudes of their congregants through a variety of direct and indirect mechanisms (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Nteta and Wallsten 2012). Congregants may remain unaffected by overt political messaging (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; but see Bjarnasson and Welch 2004; Djupe and Hunt 2009; Fetzer 2001), as their disagreement conditions the effects of clergy communication through attitude projection, underreporting the frequency of disagreeable messages, and ignoring them altogether (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). However, clergy still do often reference controversial issues in public settings (Brewer, Kersh, and Peterson 2003; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997), though their intent is of some dispute. Some find good evidence that clergy are rational actors pressing a policy agenda (Calfano 2009, 2010), while others find clergy assembling public argumentation consonant with their congregations, which undercuts their potential for persuasion (Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Neiheisel and Djupe 2008).

Given the level of disagreement in the literature and the weak or null effects from studies of clergy persuasion (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Smith 2008), perhaps the most promising avenue of clergy influence concerns the value systems they present that are able to bypass the defenses members erect to protect their attitudes. These value sets, such as those promoting inclusion versus exclusion, have been found to affect a wide range of opinions, including immigration, US foreign policy, and political tolerance in observational (Djupe and Mockabee 2015; Schaffer, Sokhey, and Djupe 2015) and experimental work (Djupe and Calfano 2013, 2015). Generally speaking, highlighting, exploring, and explaining religious values and moral tenets are at the core of most sermons. Moreover, this view of religious influence fits tightly with a long line of sociological work that finds “shared social practice is a more important determinant of religious conversions than specific beliefs” (Graham and Haidt 2010: 142; see also, Cavendish, Welch, and Legee 1998; Cornwall 1987; Welch 1981; Welch and Baltzell 1984).

Moral Foundations

In seeking to understand how individuals make moral decisions, psychologists have developed a pluralistic approach that identifies five dimensions that appear to be culturally widespread, demonstrate an “innate preparedness,” and are consistent with notions of evolutionary adaptive advantages (Graham et al. 2011; Graham, et al. 2013; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Through dozens of studies, multiple approaches, and critical examination, five (now six) Moral Foundations emerged: Care/Harm, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity. The typical survey battery in use, available from the *moralfoundations.org* website, devises individual scores on these dimensions by summing answers across two question styles. A first set asks, “When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?”¹ Examples for each dimension from this battery include:

- Whether or not someone suffered emotionally (Care)
- Whether or not some people were treated differently than others (Fairness)
- Whether or not someone’s action showed love for his or her country (Loyalty)
- Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority (Authority)
- Whether or not someone did something disgusting (Purity)

Scoring on the dimensions are calculated by the degree of relevance that an individual rates related sets of statements ranging from “not at all relevant” to “extremely relevant.” A second set of questions asks about the respondent’s agreement with a set of statements, such as “People should not do things that are disgusting even if no one is harmed” (Purity) and “Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue” (Care).

¹ A complete list of questions and the answer key can be found at www.moralfoundations.org.

These foundations mirror many tenets found across religions; indeed Haidt and colleagues have suggested that the Foundations are cultivated in religious communities and that clergy offer these themes in their sermons (Graham and Haidt 2010; Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009). In the Durkheimian tradition of conceptualizing religion as a moral community, Graham and Haidt (2010: 140) argue that Moral Foundations theory provides a more comprehensive understanding of religiosity in that it moves beyond isolated, individual belief to capture the “group-focused ‘binding’ foundations of Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, Purity/Sanctity.” The dimensions of Fairness and avoiding Harm to others are certainly important aspects of most religions, but they focus more on individual people and human rights whereas the other three foundations serve in “limiting autonomy and self-expression to bind people into emergent social entities” (Graham and Haidt 2010: 144). The Moral Foundations seem to be present in most religious groups, but this does not necessarily mean that each religious person draws upon each intuition equally when making moral decisions.

In one of the few studies that examine Moral Foundations and religiosity, McAdams et al. (2008) identified left-right differences in how highly religious, highly political people described their beliefs in open-ended questions. The authors coded the narratives for references to the five Moral Foundations, assigning a level of concern score on each dimension. Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity were negatively correlated with the other three foundations, though they were not significantly related to each other. When the Moral Foundation scores were separately regressed on self-reported political ideology and right-wing authoritarianism, conservatives were more likely than liberals to describe affinity for the community-binding intuitions (Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity) whereas liberals demonstrated more concern for individual rights (Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity) than conservatives, holding demographic variables constant. These findings and the negative relationship between the individual rights and community-binding dimensions suggest personal narratives about religious faith are linked to political ideology and the Moral Foundations in systematic ways (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; but see Weber and Federico 2012). The same pattern repeated in sermons from religious liberals and conservatives found online (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009).

It is useful to know that the central tendency of messages disseminated in liberal and conservative denominations differ. However, we still do not know whether these messages are generated from actual clergy differences in Moral Foundation support and what religious attributes are linked to holding particular Foundations. The key questions are: Do clergy in conservative denominations exhibit higher levels of the binding foundations than those in liberal denominations? Does commitment to the Foundations vary by commitment to conservative religious beliefs? And to what degree is commitment to the Foundations a function of the different circumstances clergy face in their congregations and communities? Though we cannot speak to causal ordering in cross-sectional data, we are able to

examine individual, congregational and community variables concurrently to better understand the religious correlates of clergy worldviews.

Explaining Clergy Worldviews

While the need for capturing the worldviews of clergy is plain, that is not the same as explaining why they construct particular moral constellations. There is surprisingly little work on such a question, in part because of the widespread assumption that clergy, as elites, have quite well “constrained” opinions, closely connected to social theological underpinnings (e.g., Guth et al. 1997; Smidt 2016). Clergy with different religious backgrounds do clearly differ in how they think people should act in the world that plays out on multiple levels. These views differ on at least two dimensions, dividing clergy on the first dimension between those who see a mission of engagement with public matters versus those who focus on individual change (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Guth et al. 1997; Leege and Trozzolo 2006; Mockabee, Wald, and Leege 2007). The other dimension concerns the ideological direction of their concerns, often summarized as “moral concerns” versus “social justice” (Guth et al. 1997). The two dimensions have never been completely orthogonal (e.g., Stark et al. 1971) and it seems as if the first dimension is collapsing onto the second as fewer clergy appear to remain aloof from political engagement (Djupe and Gilbert 2008; Guth 1996).

This still begs the question of why clergy have the moral constellations that they do, and we naturally peg most of the influence on their religious faith – the combination of their beliefs and values. But we also perceive a potential tension in religious faith that reflects the tension in the Moral Foundations themselves. That is, ethics may be situational, and the tension between individual versus collective interests are not easy to reconcile. Indeed, clergy are called to minister in place, making religious messages applicable to a particular set of people and problems. Thus, we assess to what extent religiously conservative beliefs are linked to Moral Foundations and how the contextual logic of the congregation and community may help shift the construction of morality. We take these up in turn.

Traditional measures of religious conservatism are effectively double barreled. That is, they combine belief in traditional Christian notions, such as the existence of heaven and hell, ordained reasons for gender roles, and the imminent return of Jesus, with notions of religious authority, such as the existence of one truth and the elevation of religious leaders. Though these two notions are related, of course, they can be disentangled in order to ask if the content of these beliefs are driving opinions or whether it is the form in which they held that matters most. In previous work, there is evidence that religious authority is the primary driver of opinions (e.g., Jelen and Wilcox 1991; Owen, Wald, and Hill 1991), with links to authority-mindedness, lower commitment to democratic norms, and intolerance (Burge, Djupe, and Lewis 2016) and democratic practice in congregations (Burge and Djupe 2015). It is straightforward to link religious

authority to the MF dimensions – those high in religious authority subjugate the individual to religious truths and leaders and hence should value the binding Foundations (Authority, Loyalty, Purity) at higher rates and individualizing at lower rates. Those who reject religious authority should value the individualizing Foundations (Care and Fairness) more. Religious conservatives who uphold religious authority follow the traditional combination – they should devalue the individual and empower the group. However, there are religious conservative who question religious authority – those who follow the emergent church and other new evangelicals – and we suspect they value the individual at higher rates.

The available influences on moral worldviews are not limited to belief systems, but extend to include the situations clergy find themselves in. Morality is one way of resolving social conflict and, given a broad toolkit, there is reason to believe that choice of a moral tool is made to favor the individual or ingroup (Petersen 2013). We consider two contexts where we might observe this taking place – the congregation and community. Despite the possibility for the selection of like-minded clergy, there is considerable disagreement between clergy and their congregations (Calfano 2009; Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Hofrenning 1995). Therefore, a reasonable expectation is that when confronted with minority status, individuals would augment the importance of values that preserve their autonomy – here, favoring the importance of Care and Fairness considerations, which preserve the rights of individuals. Since we suspect that this situation is most likely to be experienced by liberal clergy, it is important to control for political and religious ideology. But we should also examine an interaction between ideology and the experience of difference. Since liberals adhere to “binding” norms at lower rates, they might be unlikely to respond to homogeneity by deemphasizing the individualizing values they already hold dear. On the other hand, conservative clergy who perceive disagreement with the congregation may emphasize individualizing values at greater rates.

Since clergy are also responsible for the success of the congregational franchise, they are often sensitive to the existence of disagreement *among* congregants (e.g., Djupe and Neiheisel 2008; Neiheisel and Djupe 2008). Here, heterogeneity among congregants may raise the need to emphasize individualizing notions to promote acceptance and social harmony among members. Congregational homogeneity, on the other hand, would weaken this need and allow clergy to emphasize binding norms in the congregation.

The congregation’s interface with the community occurs on several levels. First, congregations have varying mixes of openness to the community that establish the basis of the religious economy (Stark and Finke 2000). All congregations establish some emphasis on inclusion that helps to bring in new members and emphasize exclusion to some degree that helps to retain members (see, e.g., Djupe and Calfano 2013, 2015). It is straightforward to expect that those with an inclusive orientation, which explicitly acknowledges openness in the face of disagreement, would value

individualizing norms, while an exclusive orientation would be linked to a higher binding commitment. Behavioral representations of openness should display the same tendencies. That is, church outreach activities to find new members should be linked to great individualizing norms. It is not clear how outreach, in and of itself, should be linking to binding, given that outreach may concern accepting people for who they are or changing them to fit a prescribed model. That tension suggests that we should examine an interaction between religious authority and outreach.

Data and Design

To explore these notions, we gathered a sample of clergy from several Protestant Christian groups, including the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Greek Orthodox Church, (GO) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA).² This set includes a variety of American Christianity, though is obviously not a random sample, and groups were picked to capture variation across the religious and political spectrum.³ The advantage is that, so far, there are no samples of clergy, national, communal, or denominational, that include detailed questions about their Moral Foundations. The sample does include a wide variety of theological traditions and thus it will be surprising to note the degree of uniformity across these religious groups in key variables. Still, caution should be exercised with extending any of the descriptive evidence presented below to the population of clergy. We employed a variety of measures to test the nature and correlates of the Moral Foundations for our participants; some are detailed below, and the rest are available in the online Appendix.⁴

Moral Foundations. A 20-item questionnaire was used to measure an individual's Moral Foundations' scores (www.moralfoundations.org). As noted above, for the first set of items, participants were asked to rate statements from "not at all relevant" (1) to "extremely relevant" (5). Two statements are tied to each of the five Moral Foundations, as indicated in the online Appendix. This set also included an item, which tested for attention and full use of the scale:

² In February, 2014, we emailed 16,740 survey invitations. Clergy were contacted to participate via their listed office email address. For the smaller denominations in our study – the Greek Orthodox and RCA – addresses were culled from publicly-available parish and denominational websites that listed this individual-level contact information. PCUSA clergy contact information was provided to the authors from the denomination's in-house research office. For the largest denominations in our study – the UMC and SBC – we relied on a commercially-generated email list from the vendor Exact Data, which maintains current congregational lists for a variety of US denominations. Each of the culling methods has drawbacks from the standpoint of representativeness, although it is not possible to determine exact sampling biases a priori. In each denominational case, we endeavored to use the total population of clergy with listed email addresses, which is a subset of the total clergy population in each denomination. Three reminders were sent and the survey closed 4 weeks later. The sample consists of 456 respondent clergy. The sample is 94% white and 18% female – while surely unrepresentative of all American clergy, it is representative of the clergy from these denominations. Our denominational breakdown was as follows: 48% PCUSA, 26% RCA, 12% SBC, 8% UMC, and 6% GO.

³ The religious conservatism measure from our data has a mean of 3.6 (sd=1.1), which is close to the scale midpoint. That is, the distribution of religious conservatism in our data is relatively flat. Our data are also symmetrically distributed in terms of partisanship (45 percent each Democrats and Republicans), which is to say that there is considerable diversity in our sample.

⁴ The Appendix is available here: http://pauldjupe.com/s/FD_Appendix.docx

“Whether or not someone was good at math.”⁵ The second set of questions provided a list of statements with which participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement – “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), as well as an attention check – “It is better to do good than to do bad” – and individuals who slightly disagreed through strongly disagreed were dropped (this snared very few participants).

Results

Because the early evidence about the Moral Foundations of clergy in sermons suggested differences by denomination (Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009), we were interested in first depicting our data in this manner. Figure 1 displays the average level of agreement with and variation in each of the five Foundations by denominational affiliation. In support of the literature, those in denominations that tend more theologically left scored slightly higher on the individualizing Foundations than their theologically conservative counterparts. For instance, PC(USA) clergy rate Care considerations higher than SBC clergy, but while those two are significantly different from each other, the rest are not. The differences reversed for the binding Foundations, as those on the theological right scored significantly higher than the others on Authority, Loyalty and Purity, with Greek Orthodox clergy demonstrating similar binding Foundation preferences to SBC clergy and PC(USA) clergy showing the least concern for the binding considerations. These findings suggest that Graham, Haidt, and Nosek’s (2009) sermon content results may be driven by actual differences in individual-level clergy values, but there is quite wide variation within denominations. We will explore this in more detail in a multivariate analysis below.

[Figure 1 about here]

One argument for the association between Moral Foundations and political and religious beliefs is that the Foundations are capturing a latent trait of general conservatism (cite omitted for review; but see Smith et al. forthcoming). Specifically, Haidt (2012) suggests that differing levels of the binding foundations reflect religious beliefs along a liberal-conservative continuum. Whether the cause is clergy self-selection into more conservative or progressive congregations, an uptake of that denomination’s beliefs once the clergy is affiliated, or a combination of both that creates a reinforcement effect, we expect a relationship between the binding foundations and religious conservatism (based on a set of 6 beliefs reflecting a more literal view of the Bible). Figure 2 displays the relationship of religious conservatism with binding and individualizing Foundations. As expected, theological conservatism is positively associated with the binding Foundations and negatively associated with the individualizing ones. Whether conservative

⁵ Ninety-two percent replied that the math consideration was “not at all relevant.” Ninety-eight percent agreed that it is better to do good than to do bad. The results shift very slightly when those few who failed these attention checks were excluded, but the substantive interpretation of variables maintains the same.

religious beliefs cause clergy to rely more upon Authority, Loyalty, and Purity than their more progressive peers or the reverse, there is a clear connection between these two domains. At the same time, it is clear that there is considerable variation left to explain at each level of religious conservatism.

[Figure 2 about here]

Drawing on recent research (Burge, Djupe, and Lewis 2016), we argued earlier that religious conservatism is double-barreled, including belief in traditional Christian ideas as well as commitment to the authority of those ideas. This survey included measures appropriate to capture variation in commitment to religious authority, which others have found are linked to identity in and support for the emergent church movement (Burge and Djupe 2016). The measures include agreement that there are many valid interpretations of the Bible, that congregations should construct their own salvation, and that clergy lead best by stepping out of the way (see the online Appendix for full variable coding). The link of this index to individualizing and binding norms is shown in the bottom panels of Figure 2. They show the same association as religious conservatism – emphasis on religious authority (disagreement with the statements listed above) is linked to a de-emphasis on individualizing and a greater emphasis on the binding Foundations. The relationships are quite similar in strength – the religious authority effect is a bit stronger for the individualizing Foundations, while religious conservatism has a stronger link to the binding Foundations. The consistency in bivariate relationships merely begs the question of whether the ideas or the way in which they are held matter more for the emphasis on individual versus binding Foundations.

We have developed a bivariate picture of how clergy MFs relate to important religious measures, which serves to reinforce extant notions taken from other data, such as sermon content. The next step is to combine these measures with others to better understand what constitutes the mix of clergy Foundations. Our focus will remain on whether these bivariate relationships hold in the presence of controls, but will also extend our look to see if the effects of religious beliefs and values shift depending on the context.

Model Results

Figure 3 displays the results of the individualizing and binding Foundations regressed on religious, contextual, and demographic variables (the coefficients are available in the online Appendix in Table A.1). Each variable has been transformed to run from 0-1 so that the marginal effects shown in Figure 3 represent the full effect of each independent variable.

[Figure 3 about here]

The results highlight the worth of separating out religious authority from religious conservatism. Religious authority has a quite large effect, serving to weaken support for the individualizing Foundations. Since authority is about submitting to religious ideas and leaders, this result is no surprise. Once authority is controlled, religious conservatism has no effect on individualizing, but it is significantly linked to the binding Foundations – this is the now traditional pattern. However, in results shown in Figure A1 in the online Appendix, there is an interaction between these two variables that shows heretofore hidden variation in individualizing. Religious liberals value the individualizing Foundations at high rates regardless of their expressed value of religious authority. Only religious conservatives differentiate in the individualizing Foundations based on their religious authority levels. They are less supportive the more authority they adopt. So, who are the religious conservatives who reject religious authority? They might be called new evangelicals – in our data they support the “emergent church” and feel more positive toward, for instance, illegal immigrants. It makes sense, then, that new evangelical issue agendas include immigration, sex trafficking, and climate change that focus on individual rights (Pally 2011). There is no interaction between them on binding – the differences between liberals and conservatives are consistent across authority levels. That is telling since liberals consistently support binding Foundations at lower levels; hence most of the interesting variance in clergy Moral Foundations is in their support for individualizing Foundations.

Remaining closely connected to other church members (exclusive values) is linked to greater support for binding Foundations, while reaching out to diverse others (inclusive values) is linked to greater individualizing. These are the effects of values that demand action. Thus, it is instructive to observe what happens to support for the individualizing Foundations when churches actually reach out to new members.⁶ The interaction between exclusive values and church outreach is shown in Figure 4. The most committed to exclusivity actually are more supportive of individualizing Foundations as their church outreach to new members grows. The opposite occurs among the least exclusive – their emphasis on individualizing drops considerably (by 13 percent) the more outreach their church engages in. Recruiting new members requires some balance of welcoming and accepting new people while preserving what was valuable about the church culture. This is why Stark and Finke (2000) suggest that the balance of inclusion and exclusion drives the religious economy.

[Figure 4 about here]

The homogeneity of congregants bears on both Moral Foundations. The most homogeneous congregations have clergy who are 10-15 percent less committed to *both* individualizing and binding Foundations. If the Foundations

⁶ The relationship between exclusive value holding and church outreach is positive and significant – $r=.13$, $p=.02$.

are cultural strategies to navigate social differences, then the absence of problems caused by difference would entail less clear need for these tools.

Clergy drop their commitment to binding Foundations when faced with disagreement with their congregation.⁷ The effect is small, but significant and suggests that clergy deemphasize Foundations that would inhibit their autonomy. That interpretation is bolstered on the other side. While the sample-level effect is indistinguishable from zero, disagreement with the congregation has different effects on individualizing for conservatives than liberals (here Republicans versus other partisans⁸). As shown in Figure 5, Republicans raise their support for individualizing when faced with greater disagreement with the congregation, while liberals (technically, non-Republicans) maintain a consistent level of support for individualizing Foundations in the face of disagreement. We believe the interpretation is the same as above – clergy place greater weight on moral considerations that preserve their freedom to advocate. Since Republican clergy also face somewhat less disagreement in their congregations (.26 versus .41 for others on a 0-1 scale), this is one important explanation why Republican clergy evince less support for the “liberal” individualizing Foundations.

[Figure 5 about here]

The similarity of the church to the community has no direct effect on clergy’s Moral Foundations, but that is because that status interacts with their values. In particular, we find that inclusivity interacts with community similarity. As shown in Figure 6, the most inclusive clergy are committed to individualizing Foundations at high rates no matter how they compare to the community. The least inclusive, on the other hand, react to community similarity in ways consistent with their values. That is, the value of individuals is greater when they are similar to the community and becomes more threatening to the group (and hence are devalued) when they are dissimilar.

[Figure 6 about here]

Perhaps surprisingly, there are no gender differences on the Foundations when controlling for all other variables. Years in the ministry is associated with higher scores on all the Foundations, perhaps as clergy find their voice and engage with larger congregations in which more moral strategies are needed. As evidenced by Figure 1, significant denominational effects are not present in the binding Foundations but Greek Orthodox, UMC, and PCUSA clergy are

⁷ Given the possibility that these results are driven by religious liberals who value the binding Foundations at lower levels, we also re-estimated these results using data pre-processed with coarsened exact matching. The result holds. Please see the online Appendix (pp. 7-8) for further discussion.

⁸ For some reason, this survey did not ask the standard ideology question, so partisanship is a necessarily imperfect proxy. By 2014, Americans are well sorted on these measures. But we also have access to clergy data from the 2009 Cooperative Clergy Study, which included 10 Christian denominations. The correlation between the traditional ideology and partisanship measures is $r = .83$. It is $r = .8$ when using the denominations that overlap the two studies (the UMC, SBC, and RCA).

more likely to score higher on the individualizing Foundations than their SBC counterparts (the excluded reference), even when controlling for the other variables.

Discussion

When controlling for other individual-level and contextual variables, the relationship between denominational affiliation and the binding Foundations fades – none are distinguishable. So, if religious communities are important for developing the particular moral understandings of their members, then these data suggest those communities are not tightly organized under denominational labels. Instead, the variation across religious organizational leadership is best characterized by their religious conservatism and authority for which denominations are noisy proxies. Clergy resemble rank-and-file Christians (McAdams et al. 2008) in that religious conservatism and exclusive values predict higher levels of the binding Foundations. References to these Foundations may find their way into sermons, institutional decisions, and ministry opportunities that highlight boundaries with the world. In this way, clergy may avoid controversial overt political statements but still convey conservative values to their constituents. If understood generally as a message promoting exclusion, then research supports the link to conservative positions against, for instance, immigration and for interventionist foreign policy (see Djupe and Calfano 2013).

Though denominational affiliation does not distinguish the binding Foundations of the clergy in our sample, there are some affiliation effects on the individualizing Foundations. For example, Southern Baptist Convention clergy place less value on the individualizing Foundations than their Greek Orthodox ($p=.04$) and PCUSA ($p=.00$) peers – and the comparison with United Methodists is nearly distinguishable ($p=.14$) even after controlling for religious conservatism and authority. Referring back to Figure 1, much of this effect appears to be driven by low SBC scores on Care. The Care questions in our sample include making moral decisions based on whether someone “suffered emotionally” or whether an animal was harmed, areas where SBC clergy may demonstrate less concern than, say, indicating that compassion “is the most crucial virtue.” We tested each of the Care items separately. SBC clergy were still more likely to score lower on each of these when compared to clergy from the other denominations but the largest differences were, as expected, with the animal harm and emotional suffering items. This supports the extant findings about the association between the individualizing foundations and liberal views and demonstrates that conservative clergy may speak less about Care/Harm themes in their sermons (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Since religious conservatism is unrelated to Fairness or Care, the denominational difference points to the importance of authority – those who emphasize religious authority devalue the individualizing Foundations considerably. It is only the conflation of authority and conservatism that makes conservatives look like they value individualizing. It is still possible to possess religiously conservative beliefs and have a

high concern for individual rights, which can be seen in numerous issue areas (see Djupe, Lewis, Jelen, and Dahan 2014; Lewis 2014), but especially now in appeals to reinforce religious liberty.

Our findings also shed further light on the conditions under which religious institutions and their leaders may be teachers of the Foundations that “bind” communities together (Graham and Haidt 2010). Higher scores on the binding Foundations are *negatively* related to similarity among congregants, indicating there is more concern for binding values when faced with diverse pews. Of course, we cannot speak to causal ordering – whether clergy low in the binding Foundations seek out homogeneous churches or whether homogeneity undercuts the need to develop a worldview supportive of binding. But homogeneity is also negatively associated with the individualizing Foundations, which places emphasis on the latter interpretation: the Foundations are tools marshalled to address social problems. Homogeneous societies are simply less prone to problems that moral logics are drawn on to solve. Hence, diverse societies might be seen as stimulants to moral development.

Conclusion

Though our study is not without its limitations, it is the first of its kind to examine the Moral Foundations of American clergy. Our findings speak to the context and content of possible clergy influence, suggesting that religious values interact with congregational, community, and individual-level variables to shape clergy moral worldviews. Graham and Haidt (2010) tend to emphasize the role of religious institutions in cultivating the binding Foundations. Our sample, however, shows clergy resembling average people, demonstrating considerable variance in binding and more consistent emphasis on the individualizing Foundations across denominations – strong majorities of every denomination’s clergy in this sample place more emphasis on the individualizing Foundations save the SBC where 47 percent value them more.⁹

The binding Moral Foundations that promote self-control as a way of organizing group life may work for some clergy in some congregations, but others may find themselves leaning toward a promotion of Care and Fairness to bring the congregation together through selfless beliefs and behaviors on behalf of others. This is where we see the tension between the literature on clergy influence, our findings, and how Haidt and colleagues understand the religious origins of Moral Foundations. Liberal clergy and those who reject religious authority may not need to endorse or advocate the binding Foundations in order to create cohesive or effective moral communities.

We offer some evidence that clergy may adapt their worldviews to their contexts, which quite likely shapes the messages they send to congregants. Moral worldviews are answers to questions about how to organize society and hold

⁹ The percent of clergy in each denomination that values individualizing over binding is: 67% for the Greek Orthodox, 91% of the UMC, 68% of the RCA, and 90% of the PC(USA).

it together, about how to weigh the autonomy of individuals. Clergy may value the individualizing Foundations more when those moral arguments are needed to support their own autonomy, but they appear to be quite sensitive to the optimal moral structure that would accommodate growing congregations and diversity in the pews. That is, Moral Foundations might be usefully thought of as a reasonably flexible set of tools that help clergy minister to a particular congregation set in a community with particular needs. That interpretation begs the question of just how foundational the Foundations are. Asking that question is consistent with emerging research that shows instability across time (Smith et al. 2016) and generations (citation omitted for review). Of course, only longitudinal research of clergy across congregations can reveal whether clergy do truly adapt to new circumstances through a shift in their moral worldviews or attempt to self-select contexts congenial to their preferred moral approach.

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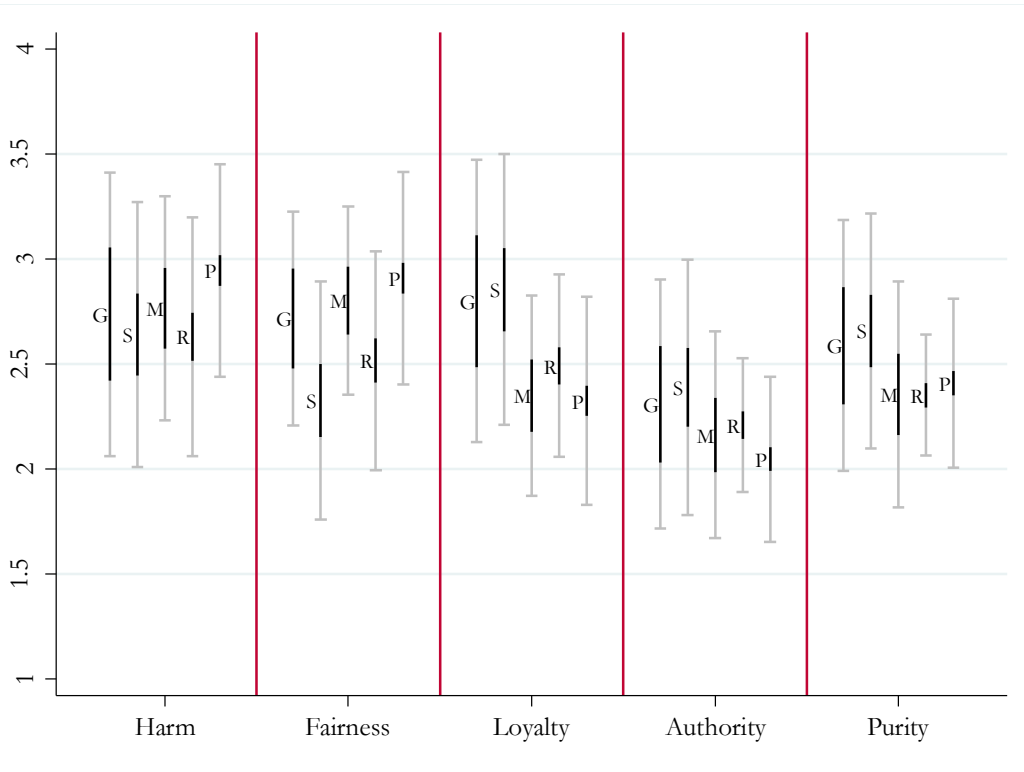
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Figure 1 – Moral Foundations Support by Denomination



Note: The gray capped lines represent 2 standard deviations around the mean; the black spike represents 95% confidence intervals for the mean. G=Greek Orthodox, S=Southern Baptist Convention, M=United Methodist Church, R=Reformed Church in America, and P=Presbyterian Church (USA)

Figure 2 – The Link between Religious Orientations and the Binding and Individualizing Moral Foundations

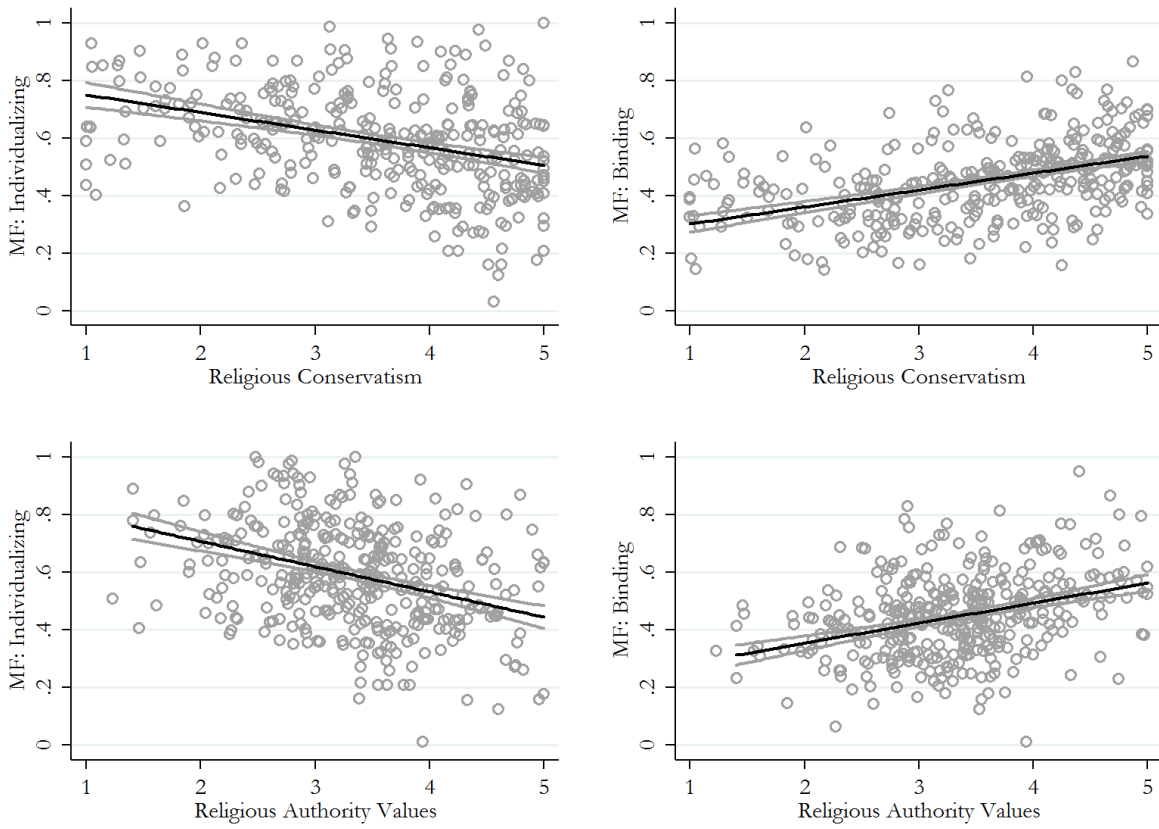
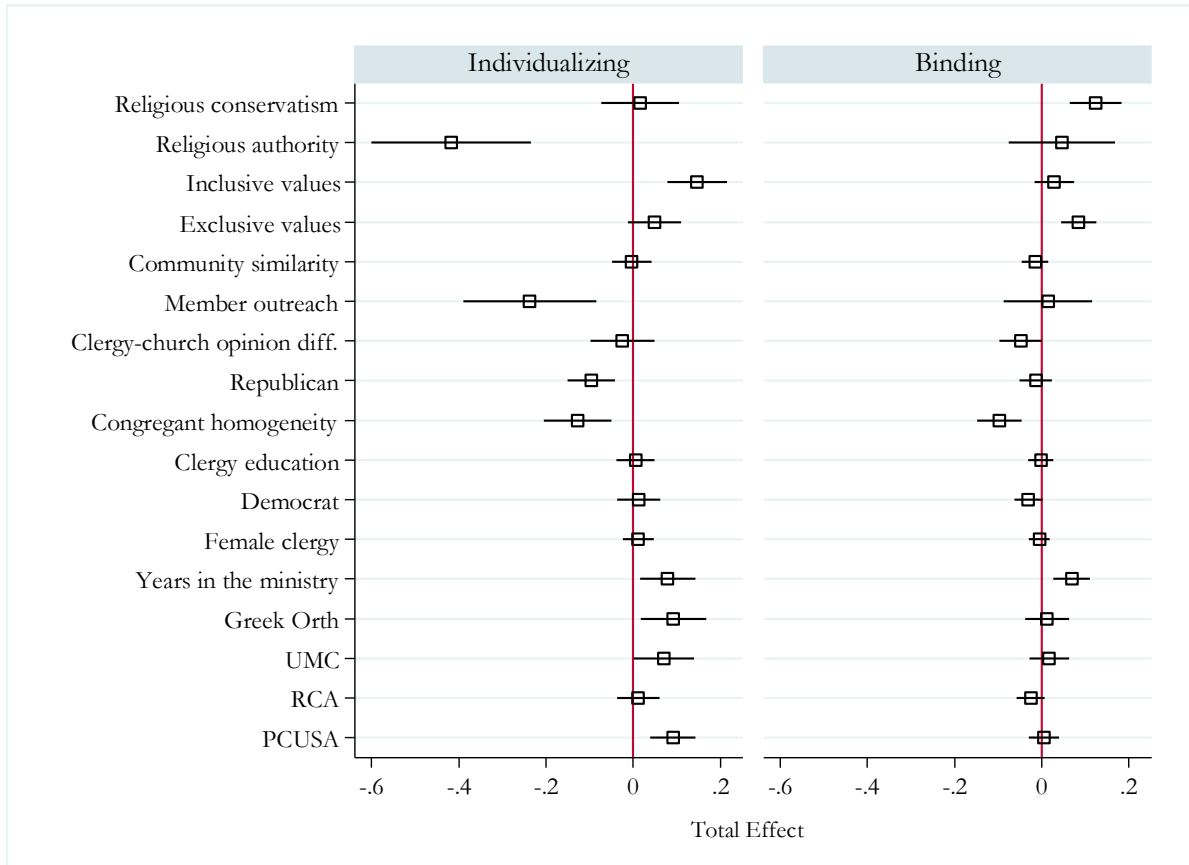
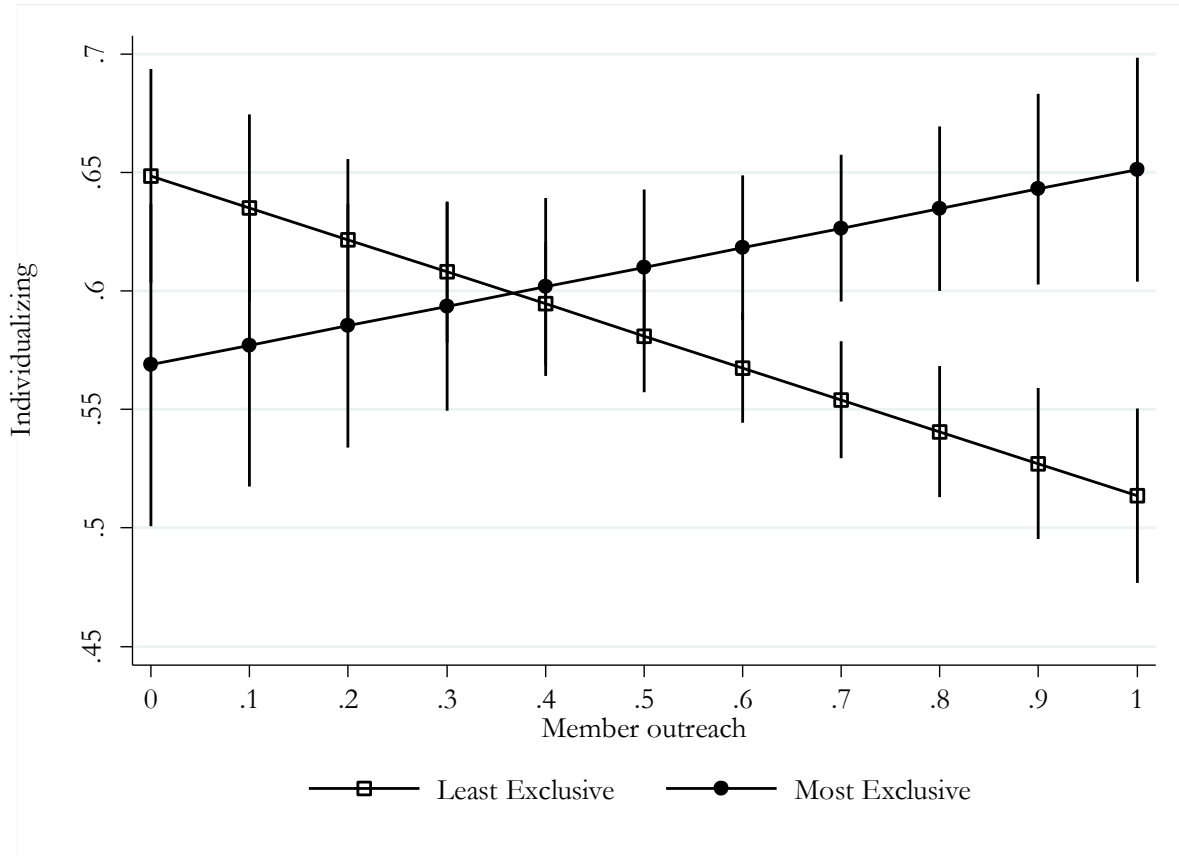


Figure 3 – OLS Regression Estimates of the Individualizing and Binding Moral Foundations



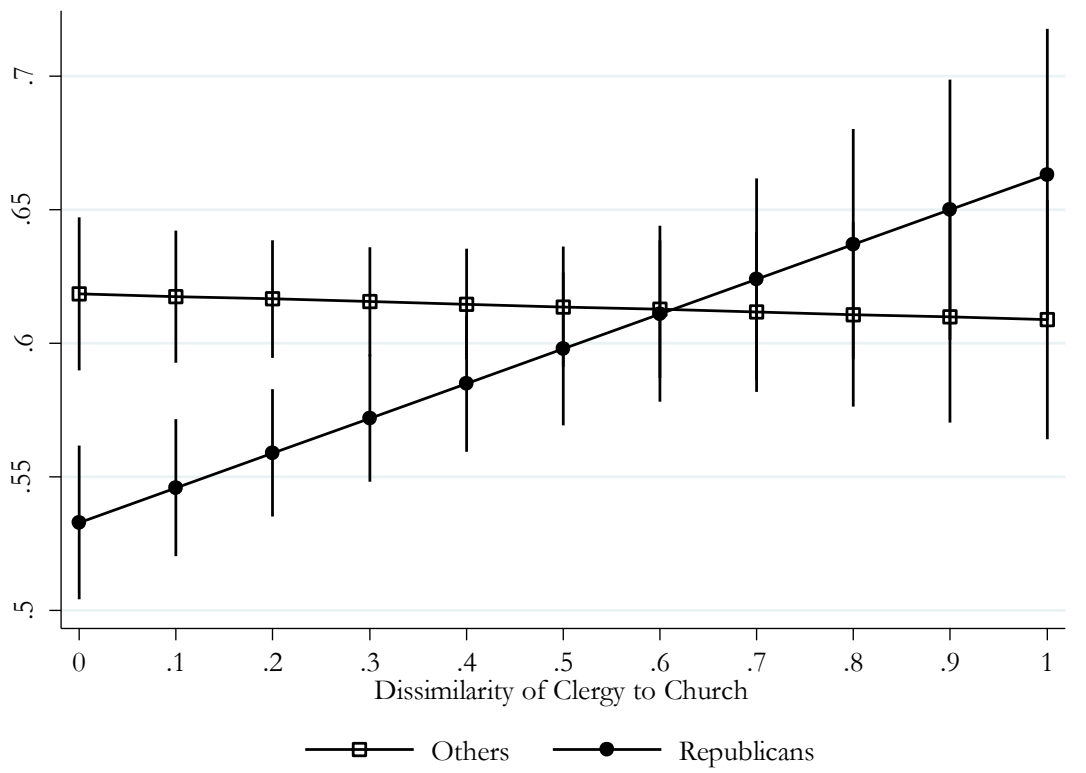
Note: 90% confidence intervals.

Figure 4 – Interactive Effects of Church Outreach Activities and Exclusive Values on Individualizing Foundations



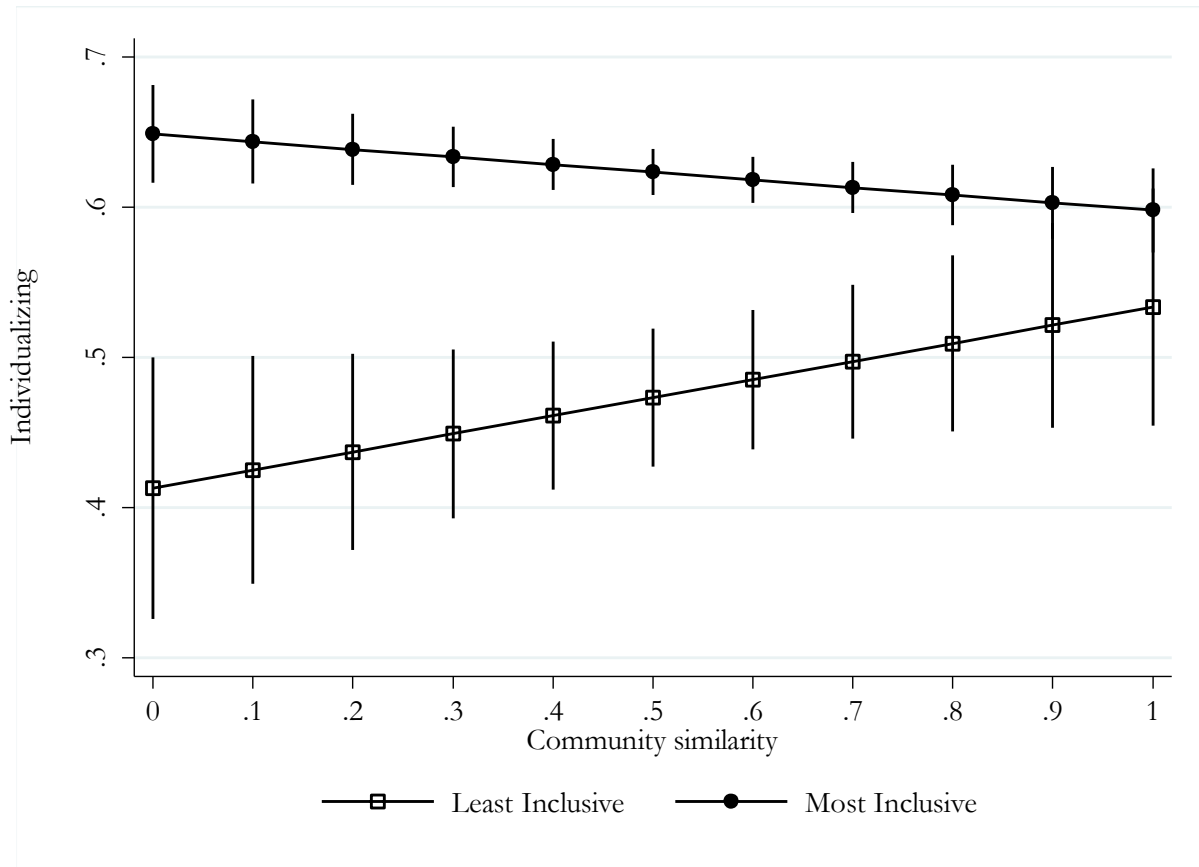
Note: 90% confidence intervals.

Figure 5 – Differential Effects of Congregational-Clergy Disagreement on Individualizing Norms Among Partisans



Note: 90% confidence intervals.

Figure 6 – Interactive Effects of Church-Community Differences and Inclusive Values on Individualizing Foundations



Note: 90% confidence intervals.