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The 2012 U.S. Election and Political Messages in Sermons

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Abstract

This study sought to determine to what degree clergy members of various denominations mentioned the 2012 Presidential Election in their sermons. A convenience sampling of 1,012 sermon texts prepared and delivered by 141 Protestant Christian clergy members from August 5 through November 4, 2012, were gathered and analyzed for occurrences and type of political messages.

Analysis found that political messages were more likely to be given by clergy located in Blue States and least likely to be given by clergy located in Red States. Extensive political messages were more likely delivered by clergy located in Swing States. Clergy members were most likely to speak against the prevailing political environment perceived as divisive, polarizing, negative, and attack oriented and called upon their listeners to act in such a way as to minimize and eliminate the influence of such destructive forces in their personal and social lives.

Introduction

Numerous studies conducted over the years have focused on the political activism of clergy members, which can take several different forms, including the delivery of political messages from the pulpit. A number of past studies utilized surveys to query large pools of clergy informants to self-report political activity, including political messages in sermons or have engaged in direct observation of a limited number of worship services. These studies have thoroughly established the fact that many clergy members approve of and/or engage in giving political messages from the pulpit, have arranged instances of these messages into useful categories, and have also quantified the impact of variables such as denominational affiliation, education, orthodoxy, etc., on the likelihood and frequency of political cue giving.

The following paper reports on a research project that sought to determine to what degree clergy members of various denominations mentioned the 2012 Presidential Election in their sermons. A convenience sampling of 1,012 sermon texts prepared and delivered by 141 Protestant Christian clergy members serving 117 local congregations around the country of various denominations from August 5 through November 4, 2012 were gathered and analyzed for occurrences of political messages. The political messages were then coded for intensity and content and then compared by clergy member gender, denominational affiliation, and political environment.

A Review of the Literature

Guth et al. (1997) conducted the seminal study determining that the political activism of clergy members tends to follow one of two agendas depending on degree of orthodoxy. Conservative or high orthodox clergy members report giving political messages from the pulpit that promote a moral values agenda while liberal or low orthodoxy clergy members report giving

political messages that promote a social justice agenda. Guth et al. used data collected from four different, non-identical mail surveys of more than 5,000 clergy members from eight denominations conducted over a four-year period from 1988 to 1992. Guth et al. (1997) culled the survey data for “core batteries on ministers’ theological, social, and political characteristics” and for responses regarding “several political questions that surfaced during the 1988 presidential campaign” (p. 192).

A number of studies grew out of the work of Guth et al. (1997) that focused on the political activity of clergy members during the 2000 Presidential election year (Smidt et al. 2003; McDaniel 2003; Kellstedt and Green 2003; Djupe and Sokhey 2003; Green 2003; Jelen 2003; Campbell and Monson 2003; and Deckman et al. 2003). While these studies were able to gather data from a large number of informants, they were limited in their ability to report on specific examples of political activity as afforded by observation or analysis of sermon content.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the political engagement of clergy members was coordinated by Smidt (2004), effectively updating and expanding the scope of the Guth et al. (1997) study from seven to 15 Protestant Christian denominations. The study also included Jewish rabbis, Roman Catholic priests, and clergy from the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Smidt brought together 21 studies that focused on the political activity of clergy members within the context of the 2000 Presidential election. Each study analyzed “the theological and political beliefs expressed by clergy of one denomination or religious body, their assessments about what constitutes appropriate political activities for clergy, and the extent to which clergy in contemporary American political life are actually engaged in politics” (p. 4-5). Separate surveys were developed for each study and delivered to random samples of clergy members generally numbering 1,000 per study; response rates were usually around 50%.

The work of Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) expanded the research methodology to include systematic observation of religious services. By attending nearly 100 religious services in 1998 and 1999, they documented 264 occurrences of political messages delivered by clergy members and other congregational leaders during the sermon and other moments within the services. They developed a three-part scale to measure the intensity of the political message delivered by individual clergy members.

In addition to a mailed survey, Roland (2011) used content analysis of 251 full-text sermons delivered by 88 different clergy members from six denominations on the five Sundays leading up to the 2008 U.S. National election. He found a correlation between the occurrences of political messages within the sermons and those clergy members who use a lectionary calendar for the weekly selection of scripture texts upon which to base their sermons. Specifically, the highest incidents of political messages in the Roland study occurred less than three weeks before the 2008 election, when the lectionary gospel scripture text recounted a story of religious leaders asking Jesus a politically loaded question. Roland related the incident as an example of Lowry's (1992) "serendipitous juxtaposition," which is the coincidental connection between a current congregational or worldly event and a weekly lectionary reading that results in a sermon that is "powerfully timely by bridging the biblical and contemporary world in serendipitous fashion" (p. 30).

The current paper seeks to build on these previous works in order to discover and document in greater detail both the substantive purposes and degree of involvement of clergy members who speak to political issues from the pulpit within the context of the Sunday sermon. By using sermon texts as the primary data, the current paper seeks to qualify the substantive purposes of the use of political terms within a large sample of sermon texts by using Brewer,

Kersh, and Petersen's (2003) six categories of political message content. It also seeks to quantify the degree of involvement by using particular political terms in the sermon texts and categorizing the use of these terms by Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's three levels of intensity for political messages.

The Research Question

The research project sought to answer the following question: Did Protestant Christian clergy members give political messages in their sermons in the three months leading up to the November 6, 2012 election and, if so, what was the extent and content of those political messages?

Methodology

The sermon texts used for this study were collected from the Internet by accessing public web sites and blogs. The web sites and blogs were located by using the Sermon Texts Posting Sites Index (STPSI) located at <http://bit.ly/STPSI>. STPSI maintains a list of clergy member blogs and congregational web sites that include sermon text archives, including the name and denominational affiliation of the clergy member as well as the name and location of the congregation that the clergy member serves. Researchers can easily follow the links on the STPSI list to the blogs and websites in order to download sermon texts or subscribe to blog feeds for automatic delivery of sermon texts. Table 1 below lists the number of sermon texts and clergy members by denomination included in the data sample.

Table 1

Distribution of Sermon Text Samples and Clergy Members

Denomination	Sermon count	Clergy count
American Baptist Church	3	1
Anglican Church	3	1
Disciples of Christ	81	9

Denomination	Sermon count	Clergy count
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	208	22
Episcopal Church	202	34
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	122	12
Mennonite USA	67	8
Non-denominational	18	2
Presbyterian Church USA	140	21
Southern Baptist Convention	10	1
United Church of Christ	72	11
United Methodist Church	82	13
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	8	2
TOTALS:	1,012	141

Once collected, the sermon texts were entered into an electronic database to facilitate full-text searching, categorization, and analysis. Each sermon text was tagged by clergy member name; denominational affiliation and gender of the clergy member; the state in which the congregation served by the clergy member is located; the date of sermon delivery; and the scripture text upon which the sermon was based. Individual text files were replicated into sub-groups of denominational affiliation, gender, political environment, state, and date in order to facilitate searching and analysis by variables.

The database concordance tool indexed the occurrence of every word three characters or more in length in every sermon text within the sample, yielding a total word count of 31,257. In order to search the database for particular words germane to the focus of the study, the index was customized to list only those words seven characters in length or more—generating a total of 19,749 words—and to list the words in order of least frequent to most frequent occurrences. The database allowed for the selection of any particular word in the index list and would create a list of each sermon text in which the selected word appeared. The selection of a particular sermon text opened the text and highlighted the selected word, which facilitated a quick scan of the sermon text for the use of the particular word and for the discovery of the use of other words

within the sermon text to be noted for the purposes of the study. The database also featured a synonym tool so that, when a particular term was highlighted from the index list, the database of all text was automatically searched and a list of synonyms created; this greatly expanded the text searching function.

A scan of the index of words seven characters or more in length revealed the use of terms relevant to the study such as “political,” “politician,” “politics,” “polarized,” “polarizing,” “polarization,” “civility,” “President,” “election,” “liberal(s),” “conservative(s),” “contentious,” “vitriol,” “convention(s),” “Democrat,” and “Republican.” Scanning the use of these terms within the sermon texts and using the synonym tool revealed more relevant terms that were less than seven characters in length, such as “elect,” “vote,” “debate(s),” “Obama,” and “Romney.”

The database was searched by each of these terms, and the returned list of sermon texts was carefully reviewed to insure that the use of each term was relevant to the 2012 national election. If the use of the term was indeed relevant, the sermon file was tagged for the particular term and the number of occurrences of the term within the particular sermon. Each sermon text that included any of the search terms was then flagged for easy visual recognition within the database. This facilitated the quantification of sermon texts with political terms by various tags and sub-groups, such as clergy name, denominational affiliation, gender, sermon date, scripture text, political environment, and state.

Finally, the sermon texts found to contain political terms were carefully reviewed and coded using Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen’s (2003) alphanumeric system for identifying the intensity and nature of the political message.

Problematic Issues in Comparing the Current Study with Previous Studies

The attempt to compare the current study with previous studies, e.g., Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003), and Roland (2011), raises some problematic issues. First, the current study sampled the sermons of clergy members from a narrower range along the religious spectrum, e.g., Mainline Protestant, than did Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen. The Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study observed worship services in the Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Jewish traditions. The primary reason for this disparity is related to the data collection method of full text sermons, which serve as the primary data for the current study. As noted above in the methodology section, large quantities of full text sermons are publically available on the Internet and are posted each week on hundreds of blogs and congregational websites. Clergy members from Mainline Protestant denominations are much more likely to post full-text sermons to blogs and congregational web sites than are the clergy members from the religious traditions included in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study. The sermons of Evangelical Protestant clergy members are more likely to be posted to the Internet in an audio-video format such as an mp3, podcast, or streaming video. To use these sermons in the current study would require transcription of the audio-video files, a rather labor intensive and time-consuming task, in order to facilitate full-text searching of the sermon contents. While a number of blogs published by Jewish rabbis were discovered during the current research project, it was difficult to determine with any confidence that messages posted to these blogs were sermons delivered at congregational worship services, which was a requirement for inclusion into the data sample. Likewise, the current research project searched for blogs and congregational web sites containing sermons from Roman Catholic priests, but posting sermon texts online does not seem to be a practice in that religious tradition.

The current study includes sermon texts from all four of the Mainline Protestant denominations included in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study: Episcopal, Presbyterian USA, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ. However, the current study also includes the American Baptist Church, Disciples of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, all of which fall within the Mainstream Protestant category. The current study also includes sermon texts from clergy members of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Mennonite USA, Southern Baptist Convention, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and two non-denominational congregations. Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen did not include any of these denominations save the Southern Baptist Convention, and they are not considered Mainstream Protestant. Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen included all Baptists in the Evangelical Protestant tradition. The sample in the current study for both American and Southern Baptists is too small to be included in the analysis by denominational affiliation, but the sermon texts are included for analysis by gender and political environment. The same is true for the sermon texts by the two Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod clergy members and the two clergy members serving non-denominational congregations. The Roland (2011) study included sermons by clergy members of six different denominations, all of which are represented in the current study.

A second issue closely related to the first is that, of the 95 worship services observed in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study, only 37 of the worship services were of Mainline Protestant congregations. Therefore, a maximum of only 37 sermons were observed in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study, whereas the current study analyzed 1,012 sermons. The Roland study sample of sermon texts was much smaller than that of the current study due its focus on only the five Sundays prior to the 2008 election and its smaller number of clergy

members. The disparity in the sample size of sermon texts is a cause for concern in any comparison of findings of the three studies.

A third issue is that, while the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study broke down its findings by the four religious traditions mentioned above, it did not break the data down among the denominations included in the Mainline Protestant tradition. The Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study observed worship services in the Episcopal, Presbyterian USA, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ denominations, all of which are included in the current study. However, the 26 sermons with political messages attributed to Mainline Protestant clergy members in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study are not distributed by the four denominations represented.

Finally, the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study observed worship services for instances of political messages in 1998 and 1999. Only the former was an election year—and not a Presidential election year at that. The current study focuses on the three months leading up to the 2012 Presidential election. One can safely assume that the pervasive political atmosphere around the country was markedly different between the two studies. The Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study was conducted, at least in part, during a time period that would have been mostly, if not totally, absent of political messages and news on television, in the mail, and online. Indeed, as the findings presented below will detail, it was the political atmosphere permeating society that was the topic of many political messages given by clergy members in the current study.

While these issues do raise some problematic concerns for purposes of comparison, they also create the possibility for the current study to expand upon and explore to a greater depth in at least one area of the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study.

Findings

Political messages were found in 169 (16.7%) of the sermons in the data sample. Nearly 60% (101) of these political messages were categorized as brief and bland references to the election or political environment. Nearly 28% were categorized as more extensive messages but without a direct call for action, and 12% were categorized as extensive messages with direct calls for action.

Contrasts with Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003)

In comparing Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's (2003) findings with those of the current study, the distribution of political messages between Categories 1 and 2 flip. As presented in Table 2 below, Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's study found that only 22% of political messages in sermons fit the Category 1 definition of bland, with little accompanying commentary and no call for action to be taken; however, 60% of the political messages found in the sermons of the current study fell into that category.

Conversely, the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study found that 66% of the political messages found in sermons fell into Category 2, as they had a more explicit message, but were not accompanied by a specific call for action; only 27% of the political messages found in the sermons of the current study fell into this same category. The distribution of political messages for Category 3—represented by an explicit call to action—was essentially the same in both studies: 12% for the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study and 13% for the current study. When the findings of the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study are limited only to the Mainstream Protestant tradition they remain mostly consistent with the overall study for Categories 1 and 2; however, no Category 3 political message was discovered within the sermons of Mainstream Protestant clergy members. In this regard, the findings of the current study are notably different.

Table 2**A Comparison of Political Messages in Sermons**

Study	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (78)	17 (22%)	52 (66%)	9 (12%)
Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen Mainline Protestants (26)	8 (31%)	18 (69%)	0
Current (169)	101 (59.8%)	47 (27.8%)	21 (12.4%)

The findings suggest that when clergy members spoke about the 2012 election in their sermons, the majority did so briefly and blandly, with less commentary and directness than did those clergy members that Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) observed in 1998 and 1999. However, unlike the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study—in which Mainstream Protestant clergy members never delivered political messages that called for direct action—the current study found that more than a few clergy members chose to give an extended political message that included an explicit call for action on the part of their audience regarding the 2012 election.

Distribution of Political Messages

The Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study did not distinguish between clergy member gender and the occurrence of political messages in sermons. Therefore, the current study broke new ground in the study of political messages from the pulpit. Table 3 below presents the distribution of sermons with political messages coded with Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's three categories of intensity by clergy member gender and political environment. The political environment is defined by the geographical state in which the congregation served by the clergy member is located and how that state was categorized by the political strategists leading up to the election, e.g., blue state, red state, or swing state. The numbers listed in parentheses represent the sermon count by gender, as well as the combination of gender and political environment.

The findings indicate that male clergy members had political messages in a slightly higher percentage of their sermons, 131 of 838 (15.6%), than did female clergy members, 26 of 174 (14.9%). However, female clergy members gave extensive and more explicit Category 2 and 3 political messages in 8% of their sermons, while their male counterparts had Category 2 and 3 political messages in only 4.8% of their sermons. Clergy members of either gender were more likely to give a political message in a sermon if they served a congregation located in a blue state and were less likely to do so if serving a congregation located in a red state. However, male clergy members serving congregations in swing states were much more likely to give a political message in a sermon, especially a Category 2 or 3 message, than were their female counterparts.

Table 3: Distribution of Political Messages

Gender (Sermon Count)	Cat. 1 Political Message	Cat. 2 Political Message	Cat. 3 Political Message
Female clergy (174)	12 - 6.9%	10 - 5.7%	4 - 2.3%
In blue states (72)	7 - 9.7%	5 - 6.9%	2 - 2.8%
In red states (34)	4 - 12.1%	1 - 3%	0
In swing states (68)	3 - 4.4%	2 - 2.9%	2 - 2.9%
Male clergy (838)	89 - 10.6%	25 - 3%	17 - 1.8%
In blue states (259)	32 - 12.4%	17 - 6.6%	5 - 1.9%
In red states (275)	22 - 8%	6 - 2.2%	2 - .7%
In swing states (304)	33 - 10.9%	13 - 4.3%	10 - 3.3%

Denominational Affiliation

Table 4 below presents the distribution of sermons with political messages coded with Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's (2003) three categories of intensity by denominational affiliation. Mennonite USA clergy members had the highest percentage of sermons with political messages at 29.2%. Lutheran Church Missouri Synod clergy members had the lowest percentage of sermons with political messages at 9.2%. Neither of these denominations are considered to be Mainstream Protestant, so the findings are slightly problematic for a proper comparison of the

current study with the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study. However, the numbers for both denominations are not so far removed from those of the other denominations in the current study as to negatively impact the overall findings. Compared to the 29.2% rate of Mennonite USA clergy members, Presbyterian Church USA clergy members gave political messages in 27.1% of their sermons; this represents the second highest rate by denomination. Compared to the 9.2% rate of Lutheran Church Missouri Synod clergy members, United Methodist clergy members gave political messages in only 11% of their sermons—for the second lowest rate by denomination.

Table 4: Political Messages by Denominational Affiliation

Denomination (Sermon Count)	Cat. 1 Political Message	Cat. 2 Political Message	Cat. 3 Political Message
Disciples of Christ (92)	12 - 13%	4 - 4.3%	1 - 1%
Episcopal (189)	13 - 6.9%	8 - 4.2%	5 - 2.6%
Lutheran ELCA (202)	20 - 9.9%	12 - 5.9%	2 - 1%
Lutheran LCMS (120)	8 - 6.7%	2 - 1.7%	1 - .8%
Mennonite USA (65)	10 - 15.4%	3 - 4.6%	6 - 9.2%
Presbyterian USA (140)	21 - 15%	14 - 10%	3 - 2.1%
United Church of Christ (64)	7 - 11%	2 - 3.1%	3 - 4.7%
United Methodist Church (82)	7 - 8.6%	2 - 2.4%	0

A comparison of the two studies is further hindered by the fact that the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen (2003) study observed only 2 PCUSA and 15 United Methodist worship services respectively (Table 1, p. 127). The study also did not specify if any political messages were observed in those worship services and, if so, in which category the political message(s) fell and whether they occurred in the sermon or some other component of the worship service. The current study offers more extensive data on the occurrence of political messages in sermons by intensity of message and by denominational affiliation.

Political Messages in Swing States

Table 5 below presents the distribution of sermons with political messages by political environment and denominational affiliation. Clergy members serving congregations in the so-called Blue States gave political messages in 20.5% of their sermons in the 13 weeks leading up to the November election. Category 2 and 3 political messages were given in 8.7% of the sermons. By contrast, clergy members serving congregations in the so-called Red States gave political messages in only 11% of their sermons during the same 13-week time period, and only 2.9% were Category 2 or 3. Clergy members serving congregations in the so-called Swing States gave political messages in their sermons at a rate of 16.9%, with a Category 2 and Category 3 rate of 7.2%.

Twelve of the 21 (57%) Category 3 political messages occurred in sermons by clergy members serving congregations in a Swing State; Mennonite USA clergy members gave half of those. Mennonite USA clergy members were responsible for 29% of all the Category 3 messages in the current study. The fact that Mennonite USA clergy members gave the highest number and rate of Category 3 political messages explicitly calling for action on the part of the audience is very noteworthy, because this is a denomination with a strong tradition of non-participation in government including conscientious objection during times of war and not voting in elections at any level. However, the Mennonite USA denomination also has a strong history of action regarding issues of social justice and a historically strong commitment to community building, both of which figured prominently in the political messages given by Mennonite USA clergy members in their sermons. The political messages of Mennonite USA clergy members are discussed in more detail below.

Table 5: Political Messages in Swing States

Political Environment (Sermon Count)	Cat. 1 Political Message	Cat. 2 Political Message	Cat. 3 Political Message
Blue States (331)	41 - 11.8%	22 - 6.6%	7 - 2.1%
Disciples of Christ (31)	5 - 16%	2 - 6%	1 - 3%
Episcopal (39)	6 - 15%	2 - 5%	3 - 8%
Lutheran ELCA (120)	10 - 8%	8 - 7%	0
Lutheran LCMS (10)	0	0	0
Mennonite USA (0)	0	0	0
Presbyterian Church USA (50)	11 - 22%	7 - 14%	1 - 2%
United Church of Christ (26)	6 - 23%	2 - 8%	2 - 8%
United Methodist Church (17)	3 - 18%	0	0
Other	2	1	?
Red States (309)	25 - 8.1%	7 - 2.3%	2 - .6%
Disciples of Christ (25)	2 - 8%	1 - 4%	0
Episcopal (80)	4 - 5%	1 - 1%	1 - 1%
Lutheran ELCA (31)	2 - 6%	1 - 3%	0
Lutheran LCMS (100)	7 - 7%	2 - 2%	1 - 1%
Mennonite USA (4)	2 - 50%	0	0
Presbyterian Church USA (32)	3 - 9%	1 - 3%	0
United Church of Christ (17)	2 - 12%	0	0
United Methodist Church (15)	3 - 20%	1 - 7%	0
Swing States (372)	36 - 9.7%	15 - 4%	12 - 3.2%
Disciples of Christ (36)	5 - 14%	1 - 3%	0
Episcopal (70)	3 - 4%	1 - 1%	1 - 1%
Lutheran ELCA (51)	9 - 18%	2 - 4%	2 - 4%
Lutheran LCMS (10)	1 - 10%	0	0
Mennonite USA (61)	8 - 13%	3 - 5%	6 - 10%
Presbyterian Church USA (58)	6 - 10%	4 - 7%	2 - 3%
United Church of Christ (21)	3 - 14%	1 - 5%	1 - 5%
United Methodist Church (50)	1 - 2%	1 - 2%	0
Other	0	2	0

Community, Divisiveness, and Ethical Speech

A significant number of the political messages found in the sermons of the current study did not properly fit within Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's (2003) six codes, requiring the creation of two new codes, one each for Categories 2 and 3. In Category 2, Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen subdivided political messages between those that reflected a social justice theme, SJ, and those

that reflected a personal morality theme, PM. All other political messages that Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen found to fit category 2, but without a social justice or personal morality theme, were placed in a generic category, 2G. In Category 3, Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen subdivided political messages between those that explicitly called for action in either a political or a social arena, e.g., to vote or to volunteer at a soup kitchen. Evidently, all of the Category 3 political messages in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study fit into one or the other of these sub-divisions so that a generic category was not necessary, but such was not the case for the current study.

The initial coding of the sermons in the current study yielded 35 political messages in Category 2, 15 of which were clearly Category 2 SJ, and only 3 of which were clearly Category 2 PM. The remaining 17 sermons were coded for the generic Category 2G. A second review of the sermons in Category 2G revealed that a significant number, 12 of 17, spoke about the political environment surrounding the 2012 election in terms of community, especially in terms of concern for the negative impact that the political environment was having on the community on congregational, local, and national levels. With this finding, a new category, 2C, was created for explicit political messages found in sermons that spoke to a concern for community.

A sample of the titles and contents of the sermons in Category 2C, one each from a Blue, Red, and Swing State, include:

- The Zombie Apocalypse: Rev. Maria Tafoya, Delhaven Christian Church, La Puente CA (Disciples of Christ). Date: November 4, 2012. Scripture text: John 11:32-34.

“We are living in a particularly difficult time. I greatly fear that the hatred and vitriolic speech that is filling the airways and the Internet will not ease up after the election no matter who wins. I fear that the growing evidence that racism had merely gone

underground in the last decades means that we are in danger of losing freedoms. And I say that with the belief that either side in the current climate of political, racial and religious hatred is perfectly capable of visiting “punishment” on whichever side loses. I believe that a sort of Zombie Apocalypse is possible. Not with literally undead creatures roaming the earth, but rather with people who do not love as we are commanded to love, whose souls are dead to love, whose hearts are filled with hatred and anger. There is a saying among Zombie Apocalypse fans that “there are two kinds of people in the world. Those who plan what to do in the event of a Zombie Apocalypse and those who don’t. We call the second kind dinner.” Which I find funny in a disturbing sort of way. But I’m sort of afraid that someone is going to become dinner, soon, if we do not change quickly, if we do not live out the plan that Jesus gave us for our lives.”

(http://delhaven.org/Delhaven_Christian_Church/Sermons/Entries/2012/11/4_The_Zombie_Apocalypse_John_11_32-44.html)

- You Gotta Move – Toward Unity: Rev. John Bedingfield, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Lafayette LA. Date: September 9, 2012. Scripture text: James 2:1-17.

“All of this was playing out against this political backdrop created by the conventions; gatherings in which the highlights all involved one speech [after] another where the speaker really “told off” the people of the other party, and where sharp distinctions between people were drawn.

Our society seems in many ways to be devolving before our eyes into a place in which you have to choose a side and stand strong with that side as it does verbal battle with

the “other” side. We have become almost completely polarized: top to bottom; left to right; and inside to outside.

Here is what I’ve observed recently. In this country, state, parish and city; in this Church, in this diocese and in this parish, we are being constantly bombarded with messages from people who would like to divide us.”

(<http://stbarnabaslafayette.podbean.com/2012/09/10/you-gotta-move-toward-unity-sept-9/>)

- Sticks and Stones Speech: Rev. Phil Kniss, Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg VA (Mennonite USA). Date: September 16, 2012. Scripture text: James 3:1-12.

“Like many of you, I get wearied to the point of disgust, with all the negative, one-sided, and dishonest speech that passes as legitimate political campaign rhetoric. But are we surprised? These persons are immersed in a “community” of ambitious, manipulative, self-interested, competitive, and cut-throat partisan politicians. It’s just the way things are done. It’s how elections are won. And winning is everything.

What if, instead, we all were deeply immersed— I mean, deeply immersed in, not wading in— a community of people who have together decided to give up their egos for something larger than themselves, who are devoted to the purposes and priorities of God’s kingdom of peace, who are followers of Jesus, the one who gave up all for the sake of the kingdom.

What if that community so shaped us and our lives that our speech naturally conformed to those values?

Jesus is our model for ethical speech. As we immerse ourselves in the Jesus community, and recognize that much of what passes for legitimate, “free speech” in our culture, is actually not coming out of community at all, but coming out of a place of isolation and alienation. Or, perhaps, coming out of an anti-Kingdom community, a community being formed by values opposed to the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.”

<http://www.pvmcsermons.com/2012/09/phil-kniss-sticks-and-stones-and-speech.html>

In each of these examples, the clergy member related the political message to the scripture text on which the sermon was based, making the political message an integral part of the clergy member’s interpretation of the scripture text. In these three particular sermons, the scripture texts coincided with lectionary calendar readings for the particular dates on which the sermons were delivered, and it is assumed that the clergy members chose these particular scripture texts from the lectionary calendar.

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) is an information resource often used by clergy members of some denominations to assist with the weekly sermon preparation task. The lectionary provides clergy members with at least four scripture texts for each Sunday of the year in a three-year cycle designed to facilitate preaching that draws from a wide sampling of scripture texts. Often the four texts for each Sunday are thematically related, and they always relate to the liturgical seasons of the church calendar: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Kingdomtide. Seven of the 12 sermons with Category 2C political messages used

scripture texts that coincided with the lectionary calendar. The link between scripture text and political message is discussed in more detail below, but it is raised at this point to call attention to the fact that clergy members of different denominations, located in different states around the country, and presumably differing in other contextual factors, prepared sermons from the same scripture text to be delivered on the same Sunday. They also spoke on similar themes regarding the election.

Calls to Action

The number of sermons with Category 3 political messages in the current study that fit neither the Category 3P or Category 3S subdivision was even more pronounced than was the case with Category 2. Of the 21 sermons in the current study with Category 3 political messages, only three each were designated 3P and 3S. The remaining 15 sermons were designated to a new category, 3STU, as these messages made explicit calls for action on the part of the listener to seek to understand and/or to strive towards unity. These messages included specific behavior that the clergy member asked the audience to undertake for the sake of preserving their communities in the face of the heated political environment.

Excerpts from two sermons with Category 3STU political messages are presented below. The scripture texts for these sermons were not chosen from a lectionary calendar, but rather were intentionally selected by each clergy member as part of a sermon series on a particular theme. The first sample was the second sermon in a three part series on the topic of “Faith and Politics.” The second sample was the fourth sermon in a five part series on the topic of “Practices of Fruitful Congregations.”

- Seeking the Welfare of the City, or Beyond the Attack Ads: Rev. Mark Longhurst, Canaan Congregational Church, Canaan NY (United Church of Christ). Date: September 16, 2012. Scripture text: Jeremiah 29:4-7.

“The psychologist Jonathan Haidt tells of a neuroscience study that took place during the 2004 elections. The researchers took 15 hard-core Republicans and Democrats and they studied their brain activity while showing them a set of three slides. The first slide had a quote from either Bush or Kerry. In Bush’s case, the slide was about Ken Lay, the disgraced Enron CEO. Bush’s quote read: “I love the man. When I’m president I plan to run a government like a CEO runs a country. Ken Lay and Enron are a model of how I’ll do that.” Then the second slide showed a statement that contradicted the first one: “Mr. Bush now avoids any mention of Ken Lay, and is critical of Enron when asked.” The third slide resolved the tension brought up by the contradictory second slide: “People who know the President report he feels betrayed by Ken Lay, and was genuinely shocked to find that Enron’s leadership had been corrupt.” And the researchers did the same thing with quotes from Kerry.

The results of the brain study are fascinating. What part of the brain do you think was activated by seeing the contradictory or negative slide? Was it the part of the brain that makes cool and rational decisions? Absolutely not. Emotion-related areas of the brain were activated when people saw their candidate contradicting himself. And once the third slide came on, which resolved the contradictory statement, the researchers found something further. When people viewed the third slide the brain area related to reward and pleasure lit up in everyone. According to Jonathan Haidt, this is the same area of

animal brains associated with pleasure when the animal does something to ensure its survival. So seeing the resolution of negative information about each party's candidate was connected in the brain with the survival instinct. Well, why go into all this? Because the study demonstrates that we are hard wired in our brains to support our tribe, our group, even against our own rationality. And so when someone threatens that sense of belonging that we have, that sense of security, we don't turn to reason or compassion to respond, we get defensive and irrational, because our sense of survival is at risk. That's what our brain thinks. That's why it's so difficult to talk about politics with people who don't agree with us.

Scripture is quite clear, though, that God expects more out of us than just defensive survival and loyalty to our own group—God is always calling us beyond our own group, beyond our party affiliations, to pursue peace. The author of Hebrews puts it this way: “Pursue peace with everyone...See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.” Wouldn't we have a different world if our politicians heeded that verse? To pursue peace and grace for everyone—even our enemies. And of course, one of the centerpieces of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is just that: “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:27-38).

That *sounds* nice, but how do we do it? Here are three short, practical suggestions for cultivating shalom during the election season.

1. Be honest about our own weaknesses and try to see the humanity in the other person.

We don't have all the answers. Every time we are tempted to get up in arms about our issue or position, let's remind ourselves that the other person, from the other side, is human too. They have their unique gifts and pain, just like you.

2. We can pray. There are new research studies showing that our brains change due to

meditation and prayer. During the election season, especially, let's get serious about taking time to be silent and pray. The spiritual practice of prayer can help our brains

literally *not* to get as caught up in the Republican-Democrat horse race. I'm convinced it's the only thing that will help us withstand the constant temptation to think our group is bears the absolute truth and the other group is irrational.

3. Come to church. If we can't see past our differences at church, where can we? The

church is the place to work on this, to be reconciled to each other. As the writer of

Hebrews says, may we pursue peace—harmony—with everyone. May we be bearers of shalom in all the aspects of our lives—especially politics. Amen.”

(<http://liminalpreacher.blogspot.com/2012/09/seeking-welfare-of-city-or-beyond.html>)

- Risk Taking Mission and Service: Rev. Dave Mauer, Bethel Mennonite Church, West Liberty OH (Mennonite USA). Date: October 21, 2012. Scripture text: Luke 4:14-30.

“You may have noticed in your bulletin that there is an insert that invites us to be

intentional about how we approach the closing days of this election season. Mennonite

Church USA is calling us to express our ultimate allegiance to Jesus by spending time

in fasting and prayer over the next couple of weeks.

Along with that, we will be joining a movement of many other churches across the US that will host a communion service on Election Day evening. Why are we inviting you to join together at the end of Election Day to celebrate communion? Well having talked with many of you at various times, I can say with a fair level of certainty that there are those among us that will vote Republican, Democrat and third party on Election Day. There are also those among us that will choose not to vote. We are a diverse people and yet we serve the same God.

In the midst of that diversity, we will gather on Tuesday evening after we have done what we have been called to that day and we will reunite and remember where our ultimate allegiance lies. Though we are participants in this nation, our ultimate citizenship lies with the kingdom of God. Despite our various perspectives, our ultimate hope lies with the God of the universe not with any government or any political leader.

Like the nations of Israel and Judah that we studied through the words of the minor writing prophets last winter and spring, we do not need to fear the outcome of this election. Regardless of who wins and who loses, God is still in control and we are still one people of God. We cannot allow the divisions of our culture and the fear mongering of our media divide us from each other or distract us from the God that we serve, from the mission that God calls us to.

And so we will be gathering to share communion together, but we are taking this one step

further. We will be hosting this Election Day Communion service and we have extended the invitation to the other churches in town, to the broader body of Christ, to come and join us that we as a larger church might reunite and remember where our ultimate allegiance lies and where our ultimate hope rests.”

(<http://thequest.blogspot.com/2012/10/risk-taking-mission-and-service-sermon.html>)

Both of these sermons make an explicit call to action on the part of the listener, with the common theme to engage in a spiritual approach to the political environment surrounding the election. Several of the congregations served by clergy members in the research sample held Election Day communion services, and congregational members were strongly encouraged to attend. Many of these services included the participation and attendance of clergy and congregational members from different denominations within the same communities. Many of the calls to attend the Election Day communion service were accompanied by detailed suggestions similar to those made in the first sample sermon for personal action on the part of the listener leading up to the day of the election. It is notable that the Jonathan Haidt book, *The Righteous Mind*, was referenced in another sermon with a Category 3STU political message.

Common Themes by Scripture Text Selection and Date

Six of the 68 Category 2 political messages (3 – 2C, 2 – 2PM, 1 – SJ) were delivered in sermons on September 30, 2012, which, in the Revised Common Lectionary, is the 18th Sunday after Pentecost in the third year of the three-year calendar cycle, also referred to as Year C. Each of these six sermons used the same scripture text, Mark 9:38-50, which is one of four scripture texts listed for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C. The sermon titles, clergy member names and locations, and links, when available, are as follows:

- Category 2 C:
 - “Is God on Our Side?” by Rev. Klaudia Smucker, Bally Mennonite Church, Bally PA (URL unavailable)
 - “Let’s Get it Right!” by Rev. Susan Sloan, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Huntsville AL (<http://www.ststephenshsv.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2012-09-30-Lets-Get-it-Right-Proper-B21.pdf>)
 - Untitled sermon by Rev. Jamie Parsley, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Fargo ND (<http://jamieparsley.blogspot.com/2012/09/18-pentecost.html>)
- Category 2 PM:
 - “Whose Side is God on?” by Rev. Ruth Everhart, Western Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington DC. (<http://www.westernchurch.net/blog/?p=682>)
 - “To Stop or Not to Stop: The Scandal of it All!” by Rev. Jason Zirbel, Grace Lutheran Church (LCMS), Greenwood AR (<http://www.lcmssermons.com/index.php?sn=2930>)
- Category 2SJ:
 - “Pluralists and Extremists” by Rev. Joe Zarro, United Church of the Valley, Murrieta CA (<http://revjoezarro.wordpress.com/2012/10/09/pluralists-and-extremists/>)

The political message found in five of these six sermons focused on the words of Jesus from the scripture text, Mark 9:40: “For he that is not against us is for us.” They also contrasted these words with a sentiment that seemingly permeates the national political environment since the post-9/11 proclamation by then President Bush, “You are either with us or against us” (CNN 2001). These political messages tended to address the social divisiveness being generated by the political environment and sought to dispel any notion that God had a favored candidate in the election race. The fact that these clergy members each made a connection, presumably independent of each other, between the biblical words of Jesus and the words of a U.S. President and a pervasive sentiment in contemporary society is an example of what Eugene Lowry has termed “serendipitous juxtaposition,” or the coincidental connection between a current congregational or worldly event and a weekly [lectionary] reading that results in a sermon that is “powerfully timely by bridging the biblical and contemporary world in serendipitous fashion” (Lowry, p. 30).

In similar fashion to the six Category 2 political messages listed above, five of the 15 Category 3STU and one of the 12 Category 2C political messages were delivered on September 16, 2012, in sermons that used James 3:1-12 as the scripture text focusing on the words: “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire? And the tongue is a fire. ... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so” (5b-6a, 9-10). In these sermons, clergy members directly called on their listeners to conscientiously refuse to participate in the vitriolic political environment as a matter of personal responsibility. In none of these political messages is the call to take political or social action, but rather the call is to engage in a spiritual action within the context of a political environment perceived as a threat to local community and society at large.

Excerpts from three of these sermons are presented as follows:

- Tongues of Fire: Rev. David Ensign, Clarendon Presbyterian Church, Arlington VA (PCUSA)

“Do y’all know Godwin’s Law? It’s the dictum that holds that any Internet debate will devolve within about six comments to the point of invoking Hitler and the Nazis. I call my corollary David’s Rule for Internet Serenity and it goes like this, ““Never, ever, ever read the comments on any even vaguely political article on any web site. Ever.”

If you break my rule – as I do with regularity – you will discover all too quickly that most folks out there were not raised by my mother, who told us often, “if you don’t have anything nice to say about a person, don’t say anything at all.” My mom is not a Quaker, but she does seem to have grasped one of the singular pieces of Quaker wisdom: speak only if your words will improve the silence.

Now you might think – and you wouldn't be wrong – that this is a sermon particularly suited for a political season. I do, in fact, wish that I could share this message directly with Misters Romney and Obama and, especially, their surrogates and all the more so the partisan talking heads who fill the airwaves with wave after wave after wave of vitriolic, vituperative, and vicious broadsides.

But the truth is I'm a lot more concerned with what comes out of my own mouth than with what comes out of theirs. Moreover, I think we all share and bear responsibility for a culture in which we almost instantly and universally recognize Godwin's Law and understand the need for a rule of Internet Serenity.

So here's an invitation – one that will probably come as an incredibly difficult one to receive during a political season, but one that I know I need to heed. From now to mid-November, for a start, let's refrain from cynicism and hate-filled rhetoric, let's find gratitude in every possible moment, and let's keep silent unless our voice improves whatever context or conversation we find ourselves in.

As a first step in this practice, I invite you now to take a few moments in the silence and beauty of this time and place to think about things for which you are grateful. I invite you to think about gratitude on several levels: begin close in – family, friends, neighborhood, then expand your circles of gratitude to school, workplace, community, then expand those circles even more broadly, to the metro area, the region, the nation

and the world. For what are you grateful in those spheres of our lives? Keep the silence, and after a few minutes, I'll invite you out of it into a song of praise. Let us enter a time of silence." (<http://clarendonsermons.blogspot.com/2012/09/tongues-of-fire.html>)

- Tame Your Tongue: Rev. Kevin Voghts, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Dakota Dunes SD (LCMS)

“This time of year, lots of people can hardly bear to watch television. Because we live in or adjacent to a “swing state,” the airwaves are full of political commercials: charges, countercharges, half-truths, distortions, and outright lies. And actually, because of the important primary that takes place in our area every four years, it seems like the campaigning never really ends and we’ve assaulted with this onslaught for years. Of course, they always pledge to run a positive campaign, but without fail it quickly turns nasty and negative. The political experts say there’s a simple reason why there’s so much negative campaigning: even though we all claim to hate it, it works. The goal is to get elected, and time after time, election after election, the candidate who hits his opponent with the worst negative ads wins.

In the Large Catechism, in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor,” Martin Luther in his characteristically earthy way has some insights into why this negative campaigning works: “It is a common vice of human nature that everyone would rather hear evil instead of good about his neighbor. . . we relish and delight in evil things said about others, like pigs that roll in the mud and root around in it with their snouts.”

As much as we criticize the politicians and complain about their negative ads, we must confess that like them and their commercials we often act the same way in our own lives, in our relationships with others: charges, countercharges, half-truths, distortions, and outright lies. As Paul says in Ephesians, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God . . . get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. . . each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor.” Jesus explains the root cause of this wicked habit: “You belong to your father, the devil . . . for there is no truth in him . . . he is a liar and the father of lies.” In today’s Epistle Reading, James speaks to us very bluntly about this wicked habit we have, and admonishes us to “Tame Your Tongue!”

Over the next two months as you become weary of all the political commercials, with their charges, countercharges, half-truths, distortions, and outright lies, examine your own life, and “Tame Your Tongue!””

(<http://www.holycrossdakotadunes.org/sermons/2012/09-16-12.html>)

- The Cross of Careful Speech: Rev. Jean Hansen, Faith Lutheran Church, Akron OH (ELCA)

There has been a great deal of discussion recently about the character of the political debate, particularly concerning whether or not people are playing fast and loose with the truth. I came across a blog in which the writer noted that Christians of all political

persuasions have special responsibility in public discourse, a responsibility that remains unaltered by what others may say. We may have freedom of speech as Americans, with the ability to say what we want, but that's not true for us as followers of Jesus. ... The items I was reading offered four suggestions for Christians related to this topic. They are:

#1 – Tell the truth. Speak out in support of what you perceive to be right and in opposition to what you perceive to be wrong. Not to speak is to speak. BUT...

#2 – Tell nothing but the truth. Do not exaggerate. Do not make blanket statements. Do not say anything about “others” that you would not want said about yourself.

#3 – Tell the whole truth. Provide the full story, not just a “sound bite” that is taken out of context. Do not misconstrue another's intentions, words or actions so that a mistake or fault is aggravated.

#4 – Trust in God. Act according to God's word and will and leave the ultimate results in god's hands.

I tried to think what these four suggestions meant for me. I think it boils down to this. As a Christian, I can say what candidate I support and I can say why that's the case in terms of who that candidate is and what he or she has done. In fact, if I am confident about my candidate and his or her abilities, there should be no reason to focus on the other candidate. In fact, I'm treading on shaky ground if I talk about the other candidate. If I do, I must be sure that what I'm saying does not exaggerate the negative or misconstrue that person's actions. Within those parameters, I should only comment

on that person's decisions and why I disagree with them, and never make negative comments about the individual.

Now...that's no small order; it's possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit, I'm sure.

But, can you imagine how differently we all would feel about elections if that was the case, and how much more well thought out people's decision would be?

In this...and all things...our sacrifice in terms of what we say would produce a greater good. So it is when we take up the cross. AMEN"

<http://www.faithlutheranchurch.org/faith/index.cfm/sermons/the-cross-of-careful-speech/>

It is worth considering how these clergy members might have interpreted the scripture text from James in a non-election year. The text appears in the lectionary every three years, so a future study might compare the sermon texts of these clergy members based for the 18th Sunday of Pentecost C from previous years. Another study might focus on the sermons of other clergy members who used the lectionary for scripture text selection for September 16 or September 30, 2012, but did not have a political message within the sermon text. Did they choose one of the other three scripture text options? What was their perception of the political environment of their local congregation? What was the nature of the relationship between the clergy member and the congregation?

The significance of political messages with a common theme based on a common scripture text and delivered on the same day provides an opportunity to study the potential cumulative impact made on society at large by the communication of a particular message. This is a message not broadcast to a national audience, but is included in a large number of messages

narrowly cast to local congregations. For example, was there a noticeable drop in emotional, inflammatory speech on Facebook, in letters to local newspapers, in online political forums in the days following September 16, 2012? Continued research in this area might prove very beneficial in the study of the social construction of knowledge.

Conclusions

The findings from the current research project support at least five conclusions. First, Protestant clergy members frequently gave political messages in their sermons in the three months leading up to the 2012 Presidential Election. The distribution of these political messages differed significantly from those discovered in Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen's (2003) study, with the majority of political messages in the current study falling into the brief and bland category. The majority of messages in the Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen study fell into Category 2, as they were more extensive messages. It is worth asking if the contextual differences of the current study occurring during a Presidential election year might account for this difference. Were clergy members less inclined to give extensive political messages during the volatility of an election year?

Second, the gender of the clergy member had very little to do with the likelihood of political messages in sermons. Previous studies had not distinguished between clergy member gender and the occurrence of political messages in sermons. The current study found that while male clergy members were more likely to give political messages, female clergy members were more likely to give extensive political messages.

Third, political messages were more likely to be given by clergy members serving congregations located in so called Blue States—or states that voted for candidate Obama—and least likely to be given by clergy members serving congregations located in so called Red States,

or states that voted for candidate Romney. However, the more extensive political messages, especially those that called for direct action on the part of the listener, were more likely delivered by clergy members serving congregations located in so called Swing States, which were considered too close to call prior to the election.

Fourth, the content of political messages in the sermon texts of the current study did not conform to the social justice and personal morality categories devised by previous studies. Clergy members in the current study were more likely to speak against the prevailing political environment perceived as divisive, polarizing, negative, and attack oriented and called upon their listeners to act in such a way as to minimize and eliminate the influence of such destructive forces in their personal and social lives. Political messages with this kind of content were more likely to be given by clergy members serving congregations in the Swing States where the election campaigning was the heaviest and, presumably, emotions were running the highest.

Finally, political messages in sermons from different clergy members of different denominations—located in different states yet delivered on the same day—often shared a common theme related to the selection of the same scripture text for the sermon. In each case the clergy members were using scripture texts pre-selected for the particular Sunday in the liturgical church calendar, e.g., James 3:1-12 for September 16, 2012, and Mark 9:38-50 for September 30, 2012. These examples of serendipitous juxtaposition between scripture text and current event provided clergy members with an opportunity to give a political message that they may well never have otherwise given.

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