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**POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN AMERICAN  
SYNAGOGUES**

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# Political Activity in American Synagogues\*

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## Abstract

Scholarly research on U.S. religious congregations and political activity has tended to focus on Christian traditions and denominations. Yet from a comparative perspective, synagogues as institutional locations for political activity are an intriguing topic for investigation because the existing literature on American Jewish political behavior yields three competing hypotheses about the scope of political activity in synagogues relative to congregations from other religious traditions. This article utilizes the National Congregations Study cumulative data file, comprised of four cross-sectional survey waves, to test these hypotheses by comparing political activity in synagogues with political activity in evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant and Catholic churches as well as other non-Christian congregations. Factor analysis identifies three modes of political activity: electoral, nonelectoral and hosting speakers. ANOVA and post-hoc tests of homogenous subgroups, followed by generalized linear models that control for other factors predictive of political activity, show that the extent to which synagogues engage in politics relative to other religious congregations varies across different modes of political activity. Synagogues are neither consistently more likely to engage in political activity than other congregations, nor consistently less likely to do so. Instead, like other religious congregations, synagogues appear to emphasize some kinds of political activity and de-emphasize other types, thereby displaying varied patterns of political activity relative to other congregations. A discussion addresses the significance of the empirical findings for the comparative understanding of congregational political activity, before the paper concludes with implications of the findings for the sociology of American Jewry.

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## *INTRODUCTION*

Though not primarily constituted for political purposes, religious congregations can be deeply enmeshed in political activity. By sponsoring opportunities for political action, congregations provide institutional mechanisms for mobilizing congregants to political participation. Furthermore, by bringing individuals together in shared physical spaces, congregations provide efficient platforms for politicians and elected officials to reach constituents. As such, congregations are important civil society institutions that mediate between individuals on the one hand and political and governmental actors and institutions on the other (Djupe and Grant 2001; Wilcox and Sigelman 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Scholarly research on U.S. religious congregations and political activity, especially research using quantitative methods and comparative frameworks, has focused on Christian traditions and denominations, with synagogues receiving relatively little analytical attention (Chaves 2004; Chaves and Eagle 2015; Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Todd and Houston 2013; Brown 2006; Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz 2004; Fulton 2016; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Djupe and Neiheisel 2019). This is due, of course, to the preponderance of U.S. congregations affiliated with Christianity and, in contrast, the relatively small share of synagogues among the country's religious congregations.<sup>1</sup>

Yet from a comparative perspective, synagogues as institutional locations for political activity are a theoretically intriguing topic for investigation because a general reading of the existing literature on American Jewish political behavior yields three competing hypotheses about the scope of political activity in synagogues relative to congregations from other religious traditions. To begin, we might expect synagogues to outpace other religious congregations in their political activity. American Jews tend to participate in certain aspects of politics – voting, financial contributions and as members of the political elite – at higher rates than other Americans (Smith 2005; Greenberg and Wald 2001; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014; Wald 2016; Weisberg 2018). Furthermore, as a social and religious minority, American Jews have long recognized how the country's constitutional and governing arrangements provide opportunity structures for them to undertake political activity in defense of their rights and interests, and they have developed a political culture and elaborate communal infrastructure of politically-oriented organizations to do just that (Wald 2019; Elazar 1995; Chanes 2001; Lipset and

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<sup>1</sup> Even among scholars who have turned a more focused eye toward American Jewish politics, individual-level analyses predominate courtesy of specialized surveys of the Jewish population, while analyses of synagogues as the loci of political activity are rare. For exceptions, see Djupe and Sokhey (2003a, 2003b), Sokhey and Djupe (2006), Kotler-Berkowitz (1997) and Kelman and Baron (2019), though none of these addresses the central research questions in this article.

Raab 1995; more generally on political opportunity structures, see McAdam 1982, especially chapter 3). Together, these two factors – comparatively high rates of selective kinds of participation at the individual level among group members and a well-developed organizational orientation to politics – may conjoin to generate elevated levels of political activity in synagogues relative to other congregations.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, individual and organizational-level factors might lead us in the opposite direction. While Jews are more active than other Americans in certain aspects of politics, Wald (2016) argued they are less likely to partake in civic-oriented political activities – for example writing letters to public officials, serving on organizational committees, working for a political party, attending public meetings on town or school affairs, or supporting good government groups – that are distinct from voting, donations and political elite membership. At the same time, the abundance of Jewish organizations that are specifically devoted to political activity may crowd synagogues out of the political arena. These other sides of the coin, so to speak, might lead us to expect political activity in synagogues to be lower, not higher, than in other religious congregations.

A third hypothesis splits the difference between the first two, suggesting that political activity in synagogues is neither uniformly elevated nor uniformly depressed compared to other congregations. As Beyerlein and Chaves' (2003) have demonstrated, congregations from different religious traditions tend to focus on different modes of political activity, so that a congregational tradition may outpace others in certain kinds of political activity but trail them in other forms of political activity. For example, they found black Protestant churches are more likely than other congregations to distribute voter guides and organize voter registration drives, while Catholic churches are more likely than Protestant congregations to organize groups to demonstrate or march for or against a public issue or policy. Putnam and Campbell's (2010) findings suggest synagogues may also specialize in some forms of political activity and not others. Individual-level data from their Faith Matters Surveys shows Jews are more likely than others to report their congregations have politically-themed sermons and organize marches, but less likely than others to report their congregations distribute voter guides and help register people to vote.

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<sup>2</sup> I am using the individual-level political behavior of Jews as a general guide for developing hypotheses about political activity in synagogues, not for direct inference. At any given time, about two-thirds of Jews do *not* belong to a synagogue – roughly the same share of Christians who do belong to a church (Jones 2019) – and they are younger, less traditionally religious, less likely to be married to other Jews, and less affluent than the roughly one-third of U.S. Jews who are synagogue members. Jews who identify ethnically or culturally, rather than religiously, are especially likely to be absent from synagogues (Pew Research Center 2013). However, about two-thirds or more of American Jews belong to a synagogue at some point in their lives (Sheskin 2015), expanding over time the share of Jews who both influence and are influenced by synagogues, and strengthening the rationale for suggesting a link between individual and institutional-level political behavior.

Congregational-level data may follow suit, revealing some forms of political activity where synagogues outpace other congregations and other types of political activity where they lag behind.

Of course, congregations are distinguished not just by their religious traditions, and religious traditions are not the sole theoretical link between congregations and political activity. A range of additional factors may also predict variations in levels and kinds of political activity within and across congregations, and these factors need to be accounted for in order to specify the independent effects of congregational religious traditions on political activity. Six alternative explanatory factors follow:

*Resources:* As Brown (2006) showed in applying resource mobilization theory to black and white churches, congregations with more resources, both human and financial, may be more likely to engage in political activity than those with fewer resources.

*Political orientation:* congregations that are politically conservative or politically liberal may be more likely to engage in political activity than congregations that are politically moderate. As at the individual level (van der Meer et al 2009; Putnam 2000; Pew Research Center 2014), congregations with more resolute ideological positions, on both the left and right, may step up their political activity because they are more motivated to change or maintain the status quo than centrist congregations are.

*Theological orientation:* contrary to popular perceptions, congregations that are theologically liberal or moderate may be more likely to engage in political activity than those with conservative theological orientations.<sup>3</sup> Liberal and moderate theological traditions have previously been tied to service provision and civic engagement broadly (Chaves 2004; Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz 2004; Fulton 2016), while Putnam and Campbell found that liberal clergy “bring more politics to their churches than do conservative pastors” (2010: 428).<sup>4</sup>

*Ties to other religious traditions:* congregations with more extensive ties to other religious traditions may be more likely to engage in political activity than congregations with fewer ties, just as at the individual level diverse social networks have been linked to greater information flows (Granovetter 1973) and thereby to increased political participation (Kotler-Berkowitz 2005). As congregations have more contact with other religious traditions, they are more likely to learn about opportunities for political activity and to become allies in political activities. In

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<sup>3</sup> Religious tradition and theological orientation are often associated with each other, but for decades scholars of religion have conceptualized them as distinct attributes (Leege and Kellstedt 1993).

<sup>4</sup> The conventional wisdom that theologically conservative churches are more heavily involved in politics may stem from the greater number of theologically conservative churches and media framing (Fulton 2016), as well as the centrality of their members to the Republican electoral base.

contrast, congregations with more insular networks are less exposed to broader information and political opportunities.

*Civic engagement:* congregations that are more civically engaged in general may be more likely to undertake political activity than congregations that are less civically engaged.<sup>5</sup> In this case, political activity may be a specific manifestation of a congregational culture of activity in the public square (Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz 2004) or part of a congregational effort to offer a wide variety of activities in order to attract and maintain members under conditions of religious marketplace competition (Djupe and Neiheisel 2019). In contrast, Glazier's (2020) findings suggest community engagement and political activity are distinct and unrelated dimensions of congregational life, though they come from a study in a specific locale, Little Rock, Arkansas, and may not be generalizable.

*Government funding:* congregations that receive government funding may be more likely to engage in political activity than congregations that do not, because incentives to promote their interests in the political arena – namely, monetary/budget self-interests and government dependence on nonprofits – outweigh disincentives to abstain from politics such as resource dependency on government sources and complex legal environments (Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz 2004).

Having established a range of hypotheses – including alternative directional hypotheses about the political activity of synagogues relative to other congregational traditions – the article proceeds in four further sections. The next section describes the data and dependent and independent variables used in the research; it also examines the distribution of Jewish denominations (or branches) within the synagogue subsample as well as the associations between religious traditions and the other predictors. The section following that presents the findings of the empirical analysis. It starts with analysis of variance and post-hoc tests of homogeneous subgroups, and then turns to generalized linear models that examine the relationship between congregational religious traditions and political activity while controlling for the other factors that may account for variations in political activity across congregations. A discussion section revisits the alternative directional hypotheses about political activity in synagogues and addresses the significance of the empirical findings for the comparative understanding of congregational political activity, before the paper concludes with implications of the findings for the sociology of American Jewry.

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<sup>5</sup> Civic engagement (or participation) is a broad concept that may or may not include explicitly political aspects. Wald's (2016) scale of civic participation contained items that were response options to a question referring specifically to government or politics. In contrast, as detailed below, my measure of civic engagement contains items that are not explicitly political in nature.

## *DATA AND MEASURES*

This analysis employs the cumulative data file of the National Congregations Study (Chaves et al. 2020), which combines four cross-sectional surveys of US religious congregations conducted in 1998, 2006-07, 2012 and 2018-19. Each NCS cross-section started with that year's respective General Social Survey respondents, who, if they reported they attended religious services at least once a year, were asked to report contact information for the congregation they attend. Subsequently, NCS interviews were conducted with clergy or other leaders at named congregations, yielding a representative sample of congregations.<sup>6</sup>

Weights on the data file allow researchers to analyze data at the congregational level (these weights adjust for differences in the probability of being in the sample due to congregation size) or at the individual congregant level. This analysis operates at the congregational level, and findings reported in the remainder of this article use a congregational-level weight. The total weighted number of congregations in the cumulative file is 5,333.<sup>7</sup> With the accumulation of four cross-sectional surveys, synagogues comprise a large enough subsample (unweighted N = 95; weighted N=94) for reliable analysis.

### *Dependent Variables*

The data file contains nine dichotomous measures of congregational political activity, all asked in each cross-sectional survey. Eight of the nine measures refer to activity in the year prior to the respective survey; the measure of voter guides, in contrast, had no time reference in the 1998 survey and a two-year reference in the other three surveys. The nine measures are as follows:

1. Voter guides distributed through the congregation.
2. Any groups, meetings, classes or events specifically to get out the vote during an election.
3. Any groups, meetings, classes or events specifically to get people registered to vote.
4. People at worship services told of opportunities for political activity, including petition campaigns, lobbying, or demonstrating.
5. Any groups, meetings, classes or events specifically to discuss politics.
6. Any groups, meetings, classes or events specifically to organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials of any sort.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Congregations Study cumulative data file and codebook were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com). Details of the sampling procedure, known as hyper-network sampling, and weights are provided in Chaves et al. (2020).

<sup>7</sup> The cumulative file's unweighted N is also 5,333, meaning the congregation weights are balanced to the unweighted total.

7. Any groups, meetings, classes or events specifically to organize or participate in a demonstration or march, either in support of or opposition to some public issue or policy.
8. Anyone running for office visiting the congregation to give a talk at a meeting, event or worship service.
9. Any elected official visiting the congregation to give a talk at a meeting, event or worship service.

Because previous research (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003) has shown congregations tend to focus on some kinds of political activity and not others, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine if this set of nine activities has a clear, reduced structure. The analysis revealed three factors, and based on this underlying structure of political activities, three dependent variables were constructed by summing the dichotomous political activities that loaded on each factor. *Electoral activity* is a 0-3 scale that includes the distribution of voter guides, voter registration efforts, and get out the vote operations. *Nonelectoral activity* is a 0-4 scale that includes political discussions, lobbying, demonstrating or marching, and the announcement of political opportunities during religious services. *Speakers* is a 0-2 scale that includes two variables: elected officials or candidates for office addressing the congregation.<sup>8</sup> As Table 1 shows, the modal category on each dependent variable is zero activities, followed by a sharp drop-off to one activity and declining frequencies of additional activities.

### *Independent Variables*

Religious tradition is the primary independent variable of interest in this analysis. Its six categories are evangelical Protestant churches, mainline Protestant churches, Black Protestant churches, Roman Catholic churches, Jewish synagogues, and other non-Christian congregations (see Table 2 for the distributions of all independent variables).<sup>9</sup> Evangelical Protestant churches are the

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<sup>8</sup> Others have employed different measurement strategies for the NCS political activity items. Beyerlein and Chaves (2003), Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz (2004), Brown (2006) and Fulton (2016) examined the items separately as dichotomies without clarifying their inter-relationships through data reduction. Fulton (2016) also summed and then collapsed them into a single dichotomous variable contrasting no political activity versus one or more political activity, a measurement approach that forfeits some available information. Djupe and Neiheisel (2019) used a count variable of six of the measures that includes both nonelectoral and electoral activities, and also separately examined voter registration efforts; they did not utilize the measures of hosting public officials or candidates as speakers.

<sup>9</sup> NCS data file producers constructed a 5-category religious tradition variable in which Jewish synagogues were included in the other non-Christian category. I identified synagogues using the



**Table 1. Dependent variables**

<u>Electoral activities</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Nonelectoral activities</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Speakers</u>	<u>%</u>
0	68.3	0	71.8	0	90.8
1	17.8	1	16.9	1	6.2
2	9.4	2	7.2	2	2.9
3	4.5	3	2.6		
		4	1.6		

most common type of congregation, followed in order by mainline Protestant churches and black Protestant churches, Catholic churches and other non-Christian congregations. At 1.8%, synagogues are the least common type of congregation, reflecting the small share of the American adult population that is Jewish by religion, also estimated at about 1.8% (Pew Research Center 2013; another .5% of American adults identify as Jewish for ethnic, cultural or other reasons, but they are less likely to belong to synagogues than Jews who identify as Jewish by religion).

The analysis uses six other independent variables corresponding to the additional factors that may predict congregational political activity. All of these measures were also asked in each cross-sectional survey wave.

*Resources* are measured by the number of full-time staff in congregations, congregational income,<sup>10</sup> and the number of adults regularly involved in religious activities. Because the three measures are highly intercorrelated,<sup>11</sup> they were subject to a factor analysis that confirmed all three load on one factor. To avoid multicollinearity, the factor score is used in the multivariate models rather than the three separate variables.<sup>12</sup>

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file's religious denomination variable and added them as a sixth category on the religious tradition variable, removing them from the other non-Christian category.

<sup>10</sup> Nearly 22% of congregations did not provide an answer to their survey's question on income. Missing data was imputed through hot deck imputation (Myers 2011), which reduced the share of congregations with missing data to 1.4%.

<sup>11</sup> Spearman's rho is .53 between full-time staff and congregational income, .61 between regularly involved adults and congregational income, and .46 between full-time staff and regularly involved adults. All three correlations are significant at the .01 level.

<sup>12</sup> The three measures were also subject to a reliability analysis, which yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .81.

**Table 2. Independent variables**

<u>Variables</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Variables</u>	<u>%</u>
<b>Religious tradition</b>		<b>Political orientation</b>	
Evangelical Protestant	45.7	More on the conservative side	55.3
Mainline Protestant	21.7	Right in the middle	34.5
Black Protestant	20.6	More on the liberal side	10.2
Catholic	6.2	<b>Theological orientation</b>	
Jewish	1.8	More on the conservative side	60.1
Other non-Christian	4.0	Right in the middle	29.5
<b>Full-time staff</b>		More on the liberal side	10.4
0	36.7	<b>Ties to other traditions past year</b>	
1	36.6	Yes	24.1
2 or more	26.7	No	75.9
<b>Congregational income</b>		<b>Civic engagement past year</b>	
Less than \$50,000	32.5	Yes	51.7
\$50,000 to less than \$100,000	20.8	No	48.3
\$100,000 to less than \$200,000	21.6	<b>Government funding past year</b>	
\$200,000 or more	25.1	Yes	2.8
<b>Regularly participating adults</b>		No	97.2
Less than 50	47.6		
50 to less than 100	24.2		
100 to less than 200	15.1		
200 or more	13.0		

*Political orientations* of congregations are measured by the respondents' placement of their congregation's politics as more on the conservative side, right in the middle, or more on the liberal side. *Theological orientations*, as distinct from religious traditions, are measured by respondents' placement of their congregations' theology as more on the conservative side, right in the middle, or more on the liberal side. Political and theological orientations are also highly correlated (Spearman's  $\rho = .59$  at the .01 level). In order to avoid multicollinearity in this case, they are entered in separate multivariate models.

For *connections to other religious traditions*, a proxy measure identifying congregations that met in the past year to learn about another tradition is used, under the assumption that learning about another tradition likely entails some contact with a congregation or representative of that tradition.<sup>13</sup> *Civic engagement* is a dichotomous measure of whether or not congregations participated in or supported social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects in the past year. *Government funding* is a dichotomous measure of whether or not congregations received local, state or federal funds to support congregation-sponsored social or human service programs in the past year.<sup>14</sup>

### *Controls*

Several demographic and geographic controls are also used in the analysis. The demographic controls include three separate measures of the composition of congregants: the percentages who are female, over age 60, and Latino. The geographic controls are region of the country (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) and the urban, suburban or rural location of the congregation.

### *The Synagogue Subsample*

Before proceeding to the main analysis of political activities, it is instructive to examine the NCS subsample of synagogues, both internally and in comparison to the other religious congregations across the additional independent variables.

Internally, the Jewish denominational affiliation of the synagogues follows the same descending order as the denominational identity of individual Jews, though with discrepancies in the actual percentages. Reform synagogues are almost half the synagogue sample (47%), followed by Conservative synagogues (16%) and then Orthodox (5%). Among Jewish synagogue members in the 2013 Pew Research Center survey of U.S. Jews, 39% identify as Reform, 29% as

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<sup>13</sup> No direct measure of connections to other religious traditions was asked in all four NCS cross-sections.

<sup>14</sup> There are no multicollinearity concerns with connections to other religious traditions, civic engagement and government funding, nor with the demographic and geographic controls.

Conservative and 22% as Orthodox.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it seems fair to say that the NCS over-represents Reform synagogues and under-represents both Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, relative to the populations they serve, and this needs to be kept in mind as results are interpreted.

Furthermore, while 10% of Jewish synagogues members in the Pew Research Center study identified their denominational affiliation as other or none,<sup>16</sup> the denominational affiliation of more than a quarter of the synagogues in the NCS data file (29%) was reported as other, unspecified or none.<sup>17</sup> Keeping in mind the small size of the synagogue subsample, the Jewish congregations without denominational affiliations are more likely to have no full-time staff, fewer regularly participating members and far less congregational income than synagogues with denominational affiliations (data not displayed). This, in turn, suggests that many of them may be smaller, lay-lead groups that gather for religious services and other social purposes (sometimes referred to as independent *minyanim*; see Kaunfer 2010) rather than traditional brick-and-mortar synagogues.

Looking comparatively, the synagogue subsample as a whole is distinct from the congregations of other religious traditions on numerous variables (Table 3). Relative to all other congregations, synagogues are more likely to be politically and theologically liberal, to have ties to other traditions, and to be civically engaged. With the exception of Roman Catholic churches, synagogues tend to have more resources than other congregations, especially at the high ends of the resource measures.<sup>18</sup> Synagogues are also more likely than other congregations to be located in urban areas (except other non-Christian congregations) and the Northeast, and they have more members who are age 60 and older (control variable comparisons not displayed in table).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Author's calculations from the data file of the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews, available from the Pew Research Center at <https://www.pewforum.org/datasets/2013/>. For data file details, see Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life Project (2014), which accompanies the data file.

<sup>16</sup> Author's calculations from the data file of the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews.

<sup>17</sup> A further 3% of synagogues in the NCS sample were coded as missing on the denominational affiliation variable.

<sup>18</sup> The resources factor score ranges from -1.24 to 1.82 with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. The mean score for Jewish congregations is .29, significantly lower than Roman Catholic churches (.89), statistically no different than mainline Protestant churches (.11), and significantly higher than evangelical Protestant churches (-.01), black Protestant churches (-.35) and other non-Christian congregations (-.27).

<sup>19</sup> In all crosstabulations of religious tradition and the other independent and control, chi-square statistics are significant at <.001.

**Table 3. Characteristics of congregations by religious traditions (percentage)**

	<b>Jewish</b>	<b>Evangelical Protestant</b>	<b>Mainline Protestant</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Black Protestant</b>	<b>Other non-Christian</b>
<b>Full-time staff</b>						
0	43.6	35.2	33.9	18.1	46.9	43.2
1	11.7	39.3	43.6	20.8	31.6	28.6
2 or more	44.7	25.5	22.6	61.0	21.5	28.1
<b>Congregational Income</b>						
Less than \$50,000	28.7	28.6	24.3	22.6	48.8	58.0
\$50,000 to less than \$100,000	0.0	24.9	17.9	8.0	22.8	10.5
\$100,000 to less than \$200,000	16.0	22.3	29.0	15.6	14.9	15.5
\$200,000 or more	55.3	24.2	28.8	53.8	13.5	16.0
<b>Regularly participating adults</b>						
Less than 50	46.8	47.0	41.4	18.7	61.5	62.8
50 to less than 100	21.3	26.5	26.9	9.3	22.1	19.5
100 to less than 200	12.8	16.5	17.5	14.5	10.8	10.2
200 or more	19.1	9.9	14.2	57.5	5.6	7.4
<b>Political orientation</b>						
More on the conservative side	19.6	78.1	41.1	41.7	34.5	14.9
Right in the middle	19.6	20.1	41.7	49.8	52.3	51.1
More on the liberal side	60.9	1.8	17.1	8.5	13.2	34.0
<b>Theological orientation</b>						
More on the conservative side	11.7	84.2	38.2	45.5	45.3	26.7
Right in the middle	29.8	14.5	39.0	46.7	45.9	37.1
More on the liberal side	58.5	1.3	22.8	7.7	8.8	36.2
<b>Ties to other traditions past year</b>	66.3	22.7	31.1	21.0	17.1	22.3
<b>Civic engagement</b>	77.2	43.4	70.9	60.1	47.5	47.5
<b>Government funding</b>	2.1	1.4	4.0	5.7	4.1	0.0

## *FINDINGS*

With religious tradition as the independent factor, tests of one-way ANOVA are significant at  $p < .001$  for each of the three dependent variables, indicating at least some congregational traditions have mean differences on each mode of political activity. Post-hoc tests of homogeneous subgroups clarify where mean differences exist and reveal in particular where synagogues differ from other congregations (Table 4). Synagogues have the highest mean on nonelectoral activities (1.61), and the post-hoc test shows they are significantly different than all other congregational traditions on this mode of political activity. Synagogues' mean score on hosting elected officials and candidates as speakers is not significantly different than black Protestant churches (.22 and .32, respectively), with the post-hoc test showing these two congregational traditions form a separate group with the highest level of activity. On electoral activities, though, synagogues are not at the top. Instead, their mean score is significantly lower than black Protestant and Catholic churches, and they are in two homogenous subgroups, statistically indistinguishable from evangelical and mainline Protestant churches and other non-Christian congregations.

Because the three dependent variables effectively measure successes out of trials, generalized linear models specifying a binomial distribution and binary logistic link function are appropriate for multivariate modeling (Tables 5-7). For each dependent variable, congregational religious traditions are entered first in a preliminary model, followed by two full models. In order to address multicollinearity between political and theological orientations, each of the full models contains one of them as a predictor while excluding the other. Both full models contain the other theoretically-relevant independent variables and the demographic and geographic controls.

In all models, synagogues are the reference category for congregational religious traditions, in order to make comparisons between them and each of the other traditions. Statistically significant negative coefficients for the other religious traditions indicate they are less likely to undertake political activity than synagogues, or conversely, synagogues are more likely to undertake that activity. Statistically significant positive coefficients for the other religious traditions indicate the opposite, that they are more likely to undertake political activity than synagogues, or conversely, synagogues are less likely to undertake that activity. The coefficients' accompanying odds ratios are also reported. For the religious traditions, odds ratios are the factor by which the odds of a congregational tradition engaging in any of the dichotomous items that are summed to comprise the dependent variable increase (odds ratios above 1) or decrease (odds ratios less than one) relative to the odds of synagogues engaging in any of the dichotomous items

**Table 4. Mean scores on political activity:  
homogeneous subgroups of religious traditions**

		<b>Nonelectoral activities (0-4)</b>			
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
<b>Religious tradition</b>					
	Evangelical Protestant	0.23			
	Other non-Christian		0.51		
	Mainline Protestant		0.56		
	Black Protestant		0.57		
	Catholic			1.00	
	Jewish				1.61
		<b>Speakers (0-2)</b>			
		Group 1	Group 2		
<b>Religious tradition</b>					
	Evangelical Protestant	0.05			
	Mainline Protestant	0.08			
	Catholic	0.09			
	Other non-Christian	0.09			
	Jewish		0.22		
	Black Protestant		0.32		
		<b>Electoral activities (0-3)</b>			
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
<b>Religious tradition</b>					
	Mainline Protestant	0.22			
	Other non-Christian	0.30	0.30		
	Jewish	0.38	0.38		
	Evangelical Protestant		0.40		
	Catholic			0.67	
	Black Protestant				1.01

that are summed to comprise the dependent variable.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the estimated marginal mean (EMM) is reported for each of the congregational religious traditions, including Jewish synagogues. EMMs are the model probability<sup>21</sup> that a congregational religious tradition will undertake any of the dichotomous items that are summed to comprise the dependent variable, accounting for the effects of other independent variables and controls (collectively, the covariates) that are entered in the model.<sup>22</sup>

The GLMs largely confirm what the initial examination of mean differences suggested, though in some cases they refine the difference of means analysis. When the religious traditions are entered alone in the preliminary model for nonelectoral activities, the statistically significant negative coefficients indicate synagogues are more likely to take part than each of the other religious traditions' congregations (Table 5). The odds ratios range from just .09 for evangelical Protestant churches to .37 for Catholic churches.<sup>23</sup> The EMMs show the probability that synagogues will engage in any one of the four nonelectoral activities is .40, but the probability ranges from just .05 to .20 for the other traditions. In the full models, when the covariates are entered, synagogues remain more likely to undertake nonelectoral activities than all other congregations, though the coefficients are reduced in size and the corresponding odds ratios increase, ranging from .18 for evangelical Protestant churches in each full model to .51 and .54 for Catholic churches. For synagogues, the EMMs are reduced to .24 and .23 with the covariates in the full models, still higher than the EMMs of the other religious traditions (ranging from .01 to .14) but with smaller differences than in the preliminary model.

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<sup>20</sup> More generally, the odds ratio is the factor by which the odds of a dependent variable's event happening increase or decrease as the values of any independent variable change one continuous, ordinal or nominal unit. Odds themselves are based on probabilities,  $p$ , and are defined as  $(p/1-p)$ . As the name implies, odds ratios are the ratio of two odds. For example, if the probability of a dependent event for one category or value of an independent variable is 75%, the odds are 3. If the probability of the same dependent event for a second category or value of an independent variable is 25%, the odds are  $1/3$ . The odds ratio in moving from the first to the second category of the independent value is  $(1/3)/3 = 1/9$ , or .11. The equivalent odds ratio in moving from the second category of the independent variable to the first is the inverse,  $3/(1/3) = 9$ .

<sup>21</sup> Because each item in the dependent variables is a dichotomy, the mean of any particular item is equivalent to a probability. EMMs are different than the congregation's mean score on the dependent variable featured in the ANOVA and post-hoc tests of homogeneous subgroups.

<sup>22</sup> The GLM procedure does not calculate EMMs for independent variables specified as covariates.

<sup>23</sup> In these two cases, the odds ratios mean that the odds of evangelical Protestant churches undertaking a nonelectoral political activity are just .08 of the odds of synagogues doing so, while the odds of Catholic churches undertaking a nonelectoral political activity are .37 of the odds of synagogues doing so.



Table 5. Generalized linear models: nonelectoral activities

	Preliminary model			Full Model 1			Full Model 2		
	B	odds ratio	EMM	B	odds ratio	EMM	B	odds ratio	EMM
<b>Religious tradition</b>									
Jewish (reference)			0.40			0.24			0.23
Evangelical Protestant	-2.46***	0.09	0.05	-1.74***	0.18	0.05	-1.72***	0.18	0.05
Mainline Protestant	-1.44***	0.24	0.14	-1.15**	0.32	0.09	-1.11**	0.33	0.09
Catholic	-0.99**	0.37	0.20	-0.67**	0.51	0.14	-0.62**	0.54	0.14
Black Protestant	-1.41***	0.24	0.14	-0.82**	0.44	0.12	-0.67**	0.51	0.13
Other non-Christian	-1.44***	0.24	0.14	-1.18**	0.31	0.09	-1.04**	0.35	0.10
<b>Resources</b>				0.25**	1.28		0.23**	1.26	
<b>Political orientation</b>									
Conservative				0.11	1.11				
Liberal				1.17***	3.22				
<b>Theological orientation</b>									
Moderate							-0.18*	0.84	
Liberal							0.74***	2.09	
<b>Ties to other religious traditions</b>				0.77***	2.17		0.83***	2.28	
<b>Civic engagement</b>				0.02	1.02		0.10	1.11	
<b>Government funding past year</b>				0.31*	1.36		0.37**	1.45	
<b>Demographic controls</b>									
% members female				0.03	1.03		0.04	1.04	
% members age 60 or older				-0.06	0.95		-0.03	0.97	
% members Latino				0.15**	1.16		0.19**	1.21	
<b>Geographic controls</b>									
Suburban				-0.18*	0.84		-0.20*	0.82	
Urban				-0.24*	0.79		-0.20**	0.82	
Midwest				0.05	1.05		0.09	1.10	
South				-0.22*	0.80		-0.20*	0.82	
West				0.09	1.09		0.00	1.00	

\*\*\* p = .000    \*\* .000 < p ≤ .01    \* .01 < p ≤ .05

Synagogues are also more likely than four of five other congregational traditions to host elected officials or candidates as speakers in the preliminary model (Table 6), with odds ratios ranging from .21 for evangelical Protestant churches to .48 for other non-Christian congregations. The exception in the preliminary model is black Protestant churches, which are more likely than synagogues to host elected officials or candidates as speakers (odds ratio = 1.70). Correspondingly, the EMM for black Protestant churches, .15, is 1.5 times higher than for synagogues, .10, while the EMMs for the other traditions range from .02 to .05. Once the other independent factors are accounted for in the full models, synagogues (EMMs = .04 and .06) remain more likely to host speakers than evangelical Protestant churches (odds ratios = .42 and .26, EMMs = .02) and mainline Protestant churches (odds ratio = .41 and .31, EMMs = .02) in both full models, and Catholic churches in full model 2 (odds ratio = .39, EMM = .03) but not full model 1. Other non-Christian congregations are not significantly different from synagogues in the either full model, though their coefficients remain negative. Black Protestant churches are the only congregations in the full models that are more likely than synagogues to host speakers. In fact, their coefficients and odds ratios (3.03 and 2.51) are larger than in the preliminary model, and their EMMs (.12 and .14) are more than twice the EMMs of synagogues.

The GLMs for electoral activity (Table 7) reveal quite different patterns. In the preliminary model, synagogues (EMM = .11) are more likely to engage in electoral activity than mainline Protestant churches only (odds ratio = .62, EMM = .07), do not differ from evangelical Protestant and other non-Christian congregations, and are less likely to engage in electoral activity than black Protestant churches (odds ratio = 4.16, EMM = .34) and Catholic churches (odds ratio = 1.96, EMM = .19). Accounting for the other independent factors modifies some of these results. In the full models, mainline Protestant churches and non-Christian congregations do not differ from synagogues. Evangelical Protestant congregations are more likely to engage in electoral activities in full model 1 (odds ratio = 2.05, EMM = .11) but not full model 2. In turn, Catholic churches (odds ratios = 2.26 and 2.06, EMMs = .12) and black Protestant churches (odds ratios = 6.90 and 6.52, EMMs = .30 and .31) remain more likely than synagogues (EMMs = .06) to engage in electoral activities. These are the only full models where synagogues are no more likely to engage in political activity than at least one other congregational tradition.

The models support many, but not all, of the expected relationships between the other theoretically-relevant predictors and political activity. As hypothesized, human and financial resources, liberal political orientations (relative to moderate orientations) and ties to other congregations are consistently and positively related to all three forms of political activity across all models. Findings for two other

**Table 6. Generalized linear models: hosting elected officials or candidates as speakers**

	Preliminary model			Full Model 1			Full Model 2		
	B	odds ratio	EMM	B	odds ratio	EMM	B	odds ratio	EMM
<b>Religious tradition</b>									
Jewish (reference)			0.10			0.04			0.06
Evangelical Protestant	-1.55**	0.21	0.02	-0.86*	0.42	0.02	-1.36**	0.26	0.02
Mainline Protestant	-1.11**	0.33	0.03	-0.89*	0.41	0.02	-1.17**	0.31	0.02
Catholic	-1.11**	0.33	0.03	-0.61	0.54	0.02	-0.94*	0.39	0.03
Black Protestant	0.53*	1.70	0.15	1.11**	3.03	0.12	0.92*	2.51	0.14
Other non-Christian	-0.73*	0.48	0.05	-0.86	0.42	0.02	-0.90	0.41	0.03
<b>Resources</b>									
<b>Political orientation</b>									
Conservative				-0.48**	0.62				
Liberal				0.51**	1.68				
<b>Theological orientation</b>									
Moderate							0.15	1.16	
Liberal							-0.05	0.95	
<b>Ties to other religious traditions</b>									
				0.71**	2.03		0.81**	2.24	
<b>Civic engagement</b>									
				0.47**	1.60		0.56**	1.76	
<b>Government funding past year</b>									
				-0.54	0.58		-0.51	0.60	
<b>Demographic controls</b>									
% members female				-0.27**	0.76		-0.28**	0.75	
% members age 60 or older				0.19**	1.21		0.22**	1.25	
% members Latino				-0.03	0.97		0.01	1.01	
<b>Geographic controls</b>									
Suburban				0.03	1.03		0.04	1.04	
Urban				0.12	1.13		0.13	1.14	
Midwest				0.75**	2.11		0.74**	2.10	
South				1.07**	2.91		1.07**	2.91	
West				0.23	1.26		0.20	1.23	

\*\*\* p = .000    \*\* .000 < p ≤ .01    \* .01 < p ≤ .05

Table 7. Generalized linear models: electoral activities

	Preliminary model			Full Model 2			Full Model 2		
	B	odds ratio	EMM	B	odds ratio	EMM	B	odds ratio	EMM
<b>Religious tradition</b>									
Jewish (reference)			0.11			0.06			0.06
Evangelical Protestant	0.20	1.22	0.13	0.72*	2.05	0.11	0.58	1.80	0.11
Mainline Protestant	-0.48*	0.62	0.07	-0.25	0.78	0.05	-0.33	0.72	0.05
Catholic	0.67**	1.96	0.19	0.81*	2.26	0.12	0.72*	2.06	0.12
Black Protestant	1.43**	4.16	0.34	1.93**	6.90	0.30	1.88**	6.52	0.31
Other non-Christian	-0.12	0.89	0.10	0.12	1.13	0.07	0.12	1.13	0.07
<b>Resources</b>				0.32***	1.38		0.32***	1.38	
<b>Political orientation</b>									
Conservative				0.04	1.04				
Liberal				0.6**	1.82				
<b>Theological orientation</b>									
Moderate							-0.15*	0.86	
Liberal							0.24*	1.27	
<b>Ties to other religious traditions</b>				0.46**	1.58		0.50**	1.64	
<b>Civic engagement</b>				0.12*	1.13		0.16**	1.17	
<b>Government funding past year</b>				-0.57**	0.57		-0.49**	0.61	
<b>Demographic controls</b>									
% members female				0.10**	1.11		0.11**	1.12	
% members age 60 or older				0.04	1.04		0.05	1.05	
% members Latino				0.18**	1.20		0.2**	1.22	
<b>Geographic controls</b>									
Suburban				0.07	1.07		0.06	1.06	
Urban				0.01	1.01		0.01	1.01	
Midwest				0.39**	1.48		0.39**	1.48	
South				0.24*	1.27		0.24*	1.27	
West				0.36**	1.43		0.33**	1.39	

\*\*\* p = .000    \*\* .000 < p ≤ .01    \* .01 < p ≤ .05

predictors are in the expected direction when statistically significant, but they are not uniformly significant. Specifically, liberal theological orientations (relative to conservative orientations) are positively related to nonelectoral and electoral activities, but not related to hosting speakers. Similarly, civic engagement is positively related to electoral activity and having elected officials and candidates as speakers, but it is not related to nonelectoral activity.

In contrast, the models offer no support to the hypothesized relationships of either conservative political orientations (relative to moderate political orientations) or moderate theological stances (relative to conservative theological stances) to political activity. Contrary to expectations, conservative political orientations are negatively related to hosting speakers and unrelated to electoral and nonelectoral activity, while moderate theological stances are negatively related to nonelectoral and electoral activities and unrelated to having elected officials and candidates as speakers.

The final theoretically-relevant factor, government funding, is perhaps the least consistent empirical predictor of political activity. It is positively related to nonelectoral activity, negatively related to electoral activities, and not significantly related to hosting speakers, leaving its general theoretical relationship to political activity unsettled.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the demographic and geographic controls demonstrate varied effects, with none consistently significant in the same direction across all three forms of political activity.

## *DISCUSSION*

Like other religious congregations, synagogues bring congregants together not only for their primary purpose, religious worship and community, but also for political activity, thereby serving as important linkages between their members and political actors and institutions. The extent to which synagogues in the NCS sample – which may over-represent Reform synagogues and under-represent Conservative and Orthodox synagogues – engage in politics relative to other religious congregations varies across different modes of political activity. Synagogues are neither consistently more likely to engage in political activity than other

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<sup>24</sup> The negative relationship between government funding and electoral activities contradicts, in part, the analysis of Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz (2004). Using the first wave of NCS and binary logistic regression models, they found no negative relationships between government funding and eight dichotomous measures of political activity. More specifically, they found a positive, statistically significant relationship between government funding and voter registration drives and no significant relationship (though in a positive direction) between government funding and distribution of voter guides. They did not include get-out-the-vote operations as a dependent variable. Discrepancies between their results and mine might be due to the different ways electoral activities were operationalized as dependent variables and the different survey waves that were available for analysis.

congregations, nor consistently less likely to do so. Instead, they appear to emphasize some kinds of political activity and de-emphasize other types, and thereby display varied patterns of activity relative to other congregations.

Specifically, synagogues are more likely to engage in nonelectoral activities – lobbying, marching, demonstrating, petitioning and discussing politics – than all of the other five religious traditions examined here, even after accounting for a range of other factors that predict congregational political activity. Synagogues are also more likely to host elected officials and candidates as speakers than evangelical and mainline Protestant churches, and seemingly Catholic churches as well, also after controlling for other predictors.<sup>25</sup> For these modes of political activity, then, the findings are consistent with the idea that American Jews' long-standing culture of political activity has permeated their synagogues as well, and they mirror at the institutional level the sometimes heightened political activity among American Jews at the individual level. American Jews bring their political participation into their synagogues; synagogues, in turn, serve to mobilize them for lobbying, demonstrating, marching, discussing politics and connecting to governmental and political actors more than other congregations do for their members.

However, comparatively elevated political activity in synagogues is not uniformly the case. Evangelical and black Protestant congregations and Catholic churches are more likely than synagogues to engage in electoral activity. Indeed, electoral activity is the only mode of politics examined here in which synagogues are not more likely to participate than at least one other congregational tradition. Black Protestant churches are also more likely than synagogues to host elected officials and candidates as speakers. Moreover, synagogues are indistinguishable from mainline Protestants regarding electoral activity and from other non-Christian congregations with respect to hosting speakers and electoral activity. In all these cases, the findings align with Wald's (2016) claim that there are limits to the conventional wisdom that Jews, both individually and in their group political culture, are politically hyperactive.

Most importantly from a comparative perspective, these evident variations in synagogues' political activity align with and provide additional support to Beyerlein and Chaves' (2003) finding that American religious congregations tend to specialize in different modes of political activity. Relative to other congregations, synagogues primarily specialize in nonelectoral political activity and secondarily in hosting elected officials and candidates as speakers, while comparatively downplaying electoral activity. More specifically, variations in synagogues' political activity are consistent with Putnam and Campbell's (2010)

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<sup>25</sup> Though there is no direct evidence, the higher likelihood of hosting public official and candidates as speakers in their synagogues, relative to some but not all other traditions, may reflect the legacy of vertical alliances that Jewish communities historically forged with European political rulers and authorities (Yerushalmi 2005; Dubin 2014; Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1984).

individual-level empirical evidence about the types of congregational political activity Jews were more likely (politically-themed sermons and organizing marches) and less likely (voter guides and registration) than others to report.

Why might synagogues focus on nonelectoral activities and connections with elected officials and candidates, rather than electoral activity? Though further research, most likely of a qualitative nature, is needed to address this question, one hypothesis revolves around marginal increases in political influence that each kind of activity provides. American Jews are registered to vote at relatively high rates (Pew Research Center 2013; Smith 2005) and, simultaneously, their electoral leverage is constrained by the fact that they typically comprise a very small share of the electorate, except in selected local areas.<sup>26</sup> There is little additional room for American Jews to exert electoral influence. As a result, synagogues (and possibly other Jewish organizations) may not want to expend scarce resources to promote electoral activity among their members. In contrast, nonelectoral activities – lobbying, marching, demonstrating, petitioning – and hosting speakers provide political opportunity structures (Wald 2019; McAdam 1982) for synagogues and their congregants to expand their political impact. Working through the power of organization, collective action and strategic pressure on political institutions and actors, these forms of political activity can concentrate and magnify a small group’s political influence beyond its share of the electorate and population. Consequently, synagogues may choose to emphasize nonelectoral politics and speaking directly with elected officials and candidates, raising the likelihood of engaging in these modes relative to larger religious groups and their congregations.

### *CONCLUDING IMPLICATIONS*

While the findings about political activity within synagogues have significance for the comparative understanding of religious traditions and their congregations, they also have important implications for the sociology of American Jewry, in particular for patterns of cohesion and assimilation among Jews. In the social scientific study of American Jewry, an assimilationist view has generally held sway (Gans 1979; Liebman 1987; Cohen 2018). Over time, this school of thought argues, Jewish cohesion gives way to assimilation. Increasingly removed from the immigrant experience, Jews adapt to American society and culture, take advantage of opportunities for social and geographic mobility, develop social networks with those who are not Jewish, keep only a thin veneer of their cultural distinctiveness, and feel increasingly distant from other Jews and the Jewish group.

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<sup>26</sup> Jews are more than 5% of the population in only two states – New York and New Jersey – and in Washington, D.C. (Sheskin and Dashefsky 2018), and they are more than 10% of the electorate in only 18 of the 435 congressional districts across the country (Brandeis University 2020).

As a consequence of the assimilation process, Jews reduce their political activity *qua* Jews, even as they continue to participate in politics as individuals.

An alternative, transformational perspective argues otherwise (Goldscheider and Zuckerman 1984; Goldscheider 1989; Kotler-Berkowitz 2015, 2019).<sup>27</sup> Assimilation occurs, of course, but not uniformly or linearly. American Jews also have multiple and varying bases of cohesion. Some of these bases of cohesion are traditional; others are contemporary, emergent and innovative. Some are related specifically to Judaism and Jewish culture; others are tied to structural factors such as education, the economy, geography and social networks; and still others are built on social-psychological connections among Jews. In the transformational view, cohesion and assimilation exist simultaneously, at varying levels across different structural, cultural and social-psychological bases, and in tension with each other.

Importantly, politics and political activity serve as bases of Jewish cohesion in the United States (Zuckerman 1990, 1999; Sternberg 1992). When Jews share general political orientations, hold similar political attitudes and positions, and vote for candidates from the same political party, and when these patterns are different than other groups and from Americans generally, Jewish cohesion is sustained. More specific to the analysis here, when Jews engage in political activity together, and especially when they do so within or under the auspices of Jewish institutions, Jewish cohesion is especially strengthened.

From a transformational perspective, synagogues primarily bolster Jewish cohesion by bringing Jews together for religious purposes such as prayer, holiday observances, text study and life-cycle events. But the role of synagogues in fostering Jewish cohesion is not restricted to religious domains. As a byproduct of their primary religious purposes, synagogues further enhance Jewish cohesion by providing an institutional platform for Jews to act politically *qua* Jews. The empirical findings documented here imply this is especially the case with nonelectoral activity, which synagogues facilitate among their members at especially high levels compared to other congregations, and also with hosting speakers, though to a somewhat lesser extent comparatively. And, though they do not specialize in electoral activity, synagogues nonetheless support electoral activity among their congregants. Synagogues contribute to Jewish cohesion not only by sustaining a distinctive Jewish presence in the American religious landscape, but also by mobilizing Jews for shared participation in the American polity.

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<sup>27</sup> See also Sasson (2013). Though he does not locate his work in the transformational literature, his argument that American Jews have moved from a mobilization to an engagement model of connections to Israel, rather than distancing themselves from the Jewish state, is consistent with a transformational perspective.



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