

The National Congregations Study:

Background, Methods, and Selected Results*

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ABSTRACT

The National Congregations Study (NCS) was conducted in conjunction with the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS). The 1998 GSS asked respondents who attend religious services to name their religious congregation, thus generating a nationally representative sample of religious congregations. Data about these congregations were collected via a one-hour interview with one key informant--a minister, priest, rabbi, or other staff person or leader--from 1236 congregations, a response rate of 80%. Information was gathered about multiple aspects of congregations' social composition, structure, activities, and programming. This paper describes NCS methodology and presents selected univariate results in four areas: denominational ties, size, political activities, and worship practices.

The National Congregations Study:

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Congregations--the relatively small-scale, local, collectivities and organizations in and through which people engage in religious activity--are a basic unit of American religious life. They are the primary site of religious ritual activity, they provide an organizational model followed even by religious groups new to this country, they provide sociability and community for many, they offer opportunities for political action and voluntarism, they foster religious identities through education and practice, and they engage in a variety of community and social service activities (Warner 1994; Wuthnow 1991; Verba et al. 1995; Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1992). This list does not exhaust either the kinds of activities conducted inside congregations or the ways in which congregations relate to communities. Perhaps it is sufficient, however, to make a *prima facie* case that congregations are a significant organizational population whose internal features and external relations warrant close attention in their own right. Congregations also represent rich social and organizational settings in which a wide array of sociological questions may fruitfully be addressed.

Sociologists have, of course, long recognized congregations' significance as an organizational population and their potential as a research site. Although the study of congregations as units of analysis began, in the remarkable work of H. Paul Douglass and Edmund deS. Brunner, by combining case studies with surveys of large numbers of congregations in a variety of denominations (see, for example, Douglass and deS. Brunner 1935; Morse and deS. Brunner 1923; deS. Brunner 1923a, 1923b), more recent work on congregations falls mainly into two groups. On the one hand, scholars and journalists have conducted case studies of small numbers of congregations--sometimes just one--to examine fundamentalism (Ammerman 1987), conflict (Becker et al. 1993; Zuckerman 1999), change over time

(Wind and Lewis 1994), adaptations to changing communities (Ammerman 1997), leadership (Freedman 1993), social networks (Olson 1987), and many other things (Williams 1984[1974]; Warner 1988; Wilkes 1994; Wineberg 1994).

On the other hand, sociologists have surveyed larger numbers of congregations. Previous surveys mainly were conducted within one denomination, within a small number of denominations, within a single locale, or, in a few instances, within several locales. Many such studies, but not all, selected congregations randomly. We have learned much from these studies on such subjects as growth and decline (Hoge and Roozen 1979; Roozen and Hadaway 1993), finances (Hoge et al. 1996; Pressley and Collier 1999), leadership dynamics (Wood 1981), social service activities (Salamon and Teitelbaum 1984; Wineberg 1990-91; Printz 1997; Jackson et al. 1997; Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1992), and more (Hall 1996; Chang et al. 1994; Leege and Welch 1989; Roozen and Carroll 1989; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Roozen et al. 1984).

Valuable as this work has been and continues to be, a major gap in the study of congregations has been the absence of a nationally representative sample of congregations. There is a good reason for this gap: there is no adequate sampling frame--no comprehensive list--from which to draw a nationally representative sample of congregations. Some denominations have nearly comprehensive lists of associated congregations, but many do not and, of course, no set of denominational lists will include congregations affiliated with no denomination. Telephone books also are problematic sampling frames for congregations. It appears that Yellow Page listings miss as many as 20% of existing congregations, and the subset of listed congregations is not, of course, a random one (Chaves 1998; cf. Kalleberg et al. 1990). Independent Sector's 1992 study represents the one major effort to draw a nationally representative sample of congregations using telephone books as the sampling frame. This is a laudable

effort, and there is much useful information in the Independent Sector data (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1992). At the same time, the combination of a telephone book sampling frame and low response rate (19%) makes this sample substantially biased towards large congregations.

The absence of a comprehensive national sample of congregations has meant that very basic facts about the population of congregations remain unknown. What proportion of congregations have no denominational ties? What is the size distribution of the national congregational population? Similarly, congregations are of interest from various theoretical perspectives, yet basic questions from these various perspectives remain unanswered. Regarding religion and politics, for example: To what extent do congregations engage in political activity? What proportion distribute voter guides? What proportion organize demonstrations, lobby elected officials, or have small groups devoted to political discussion? Regarding religion and culture, to take another example: What do worship services look like in American religion? How common is speaking in tongues? What proportion of worship services use soloists, drums, or other sorts of music? How common are applause, laughter, or overhead projectors in worship?

These questions only skim the surface of a sea of basic descriptive questions that a nationally representative sample of congregations could answer. Moreover, answering descriptive questions, however intrinsically interesting they might be, is not the only purpose to which a nationally representative sample of congregations might be put. Broader theoretical questions also could be explored in new ways. How do organizational and religious practices combine to produce tangible cultures in congregations? How is ritual activity shaped by social and institutional contexts? Under what conditions do congregations build social capital? And so on.

The National Congregations Study (NCS) used a relatively recent innovation in organizational sampling technology to generate a high-quality, nationally representative sample of congregations, and it collected data about congregations in this sample via a one-hour interview with a key informant from each congregation. The resultant dataset fills a void in the sociological study of congregations by providing, for the first time, data that can be used to draw a nationally aggregate picture of congregations, one that addresses the questions posed above, as well as many others.

This paper is meant primarily as a description of NCS methodology, and the next section describes NCS sampling and data collection strategy. The point of the NCS, however, is, of course, to contribute interesting and useful knowledge about congregations, and so we also present selected descriptive results from the NCS. As foreshadowed by the questions listed above, we present results in four areas: denominational affiliation; size; participation in certain political activities; and worship practices. These results, which use only a few NCS items, are presented mainly to alert readers to the rich potential of NCS data.

NCS Sampling and Data Collection

Generating the NCS Sample

The key methodological innovation behind the NCS sampling strategy is the insight that organizations attached to a random sample of individuals constitute a random sample of organizations. It therefore is possible to generate a representative sample of organizations even in the absence of a sampling frame that comprehensively lists the units in the organizational population. One simply starts with a random sample of individuals and asks them to name the organization(s) to which they are attached. This procedure--called hypernetwork or multiplicity sampling--was described in McPherson

(1982), and it has been used to sample both employing organizations (Kalleberg et al. 1996; Bridges and Villemez 1994; Parcel et al. 1991) and voluntary associations (McPherson 1983). The NCS is the first study implementing hypernetwork sampling for congregations.

Generating a hypernetwork sample of organizations requires starting with a random sample of individuals. The NCS was conducted in conjunction with the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS)--an in-person interview with a representative sample of English-speaking adults in the United States. The 1998 GSS included a set of items asking respondents who say they attend religious services at least once a year to report the name and location of their religious congregation. Pretesting indicated that, as Spaeth and O'Rourke (1996:43) suggest, it would not have been worthwhile to allow respondents to name more than one congregation, nor to ask for the congregation of a respondent's spouse if he or she attended one different from that of the respondent. Very few pretest respondents attended regularly at more than one place, and very few had spouses who attended somewhere different. Moreover, when there was a spouse who attended a different congregation than did the respondent, there was a substantial drop-off in the quality of contact information that a respondent could provide about a spouse's congregation. Allowing multiple or spousal congregation nominations thus would have introduced considerable complexity in both data collection and sample properties without substantial gain in sample size.

Figure 1 depicts the process by which the NCS sample was generated by the GSS. Two-thirds of the 2862 respondents to the 1998 GSS attended religious services often enough to be asked to name a congregation.¹ The GSS is a cluster sample, which means that blocks are sampled and then up to ten

¹The number of GSS respondents--2862--is larger than the number of cases in the 1998 GSS

dataset because 30 GSS interviews were completed but never received by the National Opinion Research Center's central office. Congregations nominated by these respondents are retained in the NCS sample. The number of GSS respondents who attend at least once a year--1886--is smaller than the number in the 1998 GSS dataset because 3% of 1998 GSS respondents coded as attending religious services at least once a year backtracked on this response when asked to name the congregation they attended, and another 1% are incorrectly coded as attenders in the GSS public dataset because of data entry errors. Some of the backtracking respondents said that they attended only a wedding or a funeral; others admitted that, in fact, they had not attended at all. Such backtracking was much more common among those reporting very low levels of attendance than among those reporting higher levels of attendance. Three-quarters (46/62) of the respondents who qualified

individuals are sampled within those blocks. Some of these respondents attend the same congregation, and 16% of the congregations named by GSS respondents duplicated congregations already in the NCS sample. Overall, 52% of the 2862 GSS respondents named a unique congregation. We failed to obtain a congregational nomination from 6.7% of GSS respondents who attended religious services. The majority of these incorrect nonnominations were produced by interviewer or administrative error. Very few GSS respondents--2.7%--refused to name a congregation when asked to do so. As we show below, these nonnominations do not introduce discernible bias to the final sample. In the end, we attempted to collect data from 1480 congregations.

* * * * * FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE * * * * *

The Probability-Proportional-to-Size Feature of the NCS Sample

their initial response to the attendance question initially reported attending less than once a month.

The probability that a congregation will appear in this sample is proportional to its size. Because congregations are nominated by individuals attached to them, larger congregations are more likely to be in the sample than smaller congregations. Weighted only to account for duplicate nominations, univariate distributions from the NCS represent distributions of religious service attenders across congregations of different types. When the data are weighted inversely proportional to congregational size, univariate distributions represent distributions of congregations without respect to how many people are in them.² Both of these distributions often will be substantively interesting. The key point is that, although larger congregations are overrepresented in the NCS sample, they are overrepresented by a known degree, and that overrepresentation can therefore be undone with weights.

A contrived example may help clarify this feature of the NCS sample. Suppose that there are only two congregations in the universe, one with 1000 regular attenders and the other with 100 regular

²Weighting inversely proportional to congregational size means that a weight of 1/1000 is applied to a 1000-person congregation, a weight of 1/100 is applied to a 100-person congregation, and so on. These weights undo the over-representation of large congregations in this sample, and applying them enables description of the congregational population that treats each congregation, whatever its size, as one unit in that population.

attenders. Suppose further that the 1000-person congregation runs a child-care center and the 100-person congregation does not. We might express this reality in one of two ways. We might say that 91% of the people are in a congregation that provides child-care (1000/1100), or we might say that 50% of the congregations provide child-care (1/2). It should be clear that both of these are meaningful numbers, and both are numbers we might want to know. The NCS can provide both sorts of numbers. Weighted only to take account of duplicate nominations, a percentage or mean from the NCS will be analogous to the 91% in this example. Weighted inversely proportional to congregational size, NCS univariate statistics are analogous to the 50% in this example. When the first number is bigger than the second number, as in this example, larger congregations are more likely to have this characteristic. When the second number is bigger, smaller congregations are more likely to have the characteristic. When the two percentages are the same, the characteristic is unrelated to size.

Collecting NCS Data

Once the congregational sample was generated, nominated congregations were located and approached. The GSS is a face-to-face interview conducted by experienced and well-trained interviewers who were instructed to glean from respondents as much locational information about their congregations as possible. NCS data were collected using the same interviewers who collected data from GSS respondents. This meant that, when turning to collection of the congregational data, the interviewer was on site and was better able to locate the congregations named by GSS respondents, identify an informed leader to interview, and follow-up with an in-person visit if telephone contact failed to yield a completed questionnaire. Using the same field staff also permitted recontacting GSS respondents in cases where additional locational information about congregations was needed. We

attribute much of the success of NCS data collection to this administrative integration of the individual- and organization-level data collection efforts, and we strongly endorse Spaeth and O'Rourke's (1996:42-43) recommendation to conduct hypernetwork studies in such an integrated fashion.

The NCS gathered congregational data using a one-hour interview with one key informant--a minister, priest, rabbi, or other staff person or leader--from each nominated congregation. Three-quarters of NCS interviews were with clergy; 91% were with staff of some sort; the remaining 9% were with non-staff congregational leaders. Every effort was made to conduct these interviews by telephone, but we followed-up with face-to-face visits if telephone contact was difficult. Ninety-two percent of the interviews were completed by phone. The NCS response rate is 80%; we have complete data on 1236 cases.³

³The 80% response rate for the NCS is calculated using the conservative "RR3" method recommended by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (1998:18-19). This rate

includes in the denominator the number of congregations of unknown sample eligibility that we estimate would have been eligible for sample inclusion if we had complete information. If we assume that *all* congregations of unknown eligibility would be eligible for sample inclusion, and therefore include all of the (126) eligibility-unknown congregations in the denominator of the response rate, the NCS response rate still would be 77%. (This is the "minimum response rate" as defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research.) Our cooperation rate--the percentage of congregations contacted who participated in the NCS--was 85%.

Even with a response rate as high as 80%, it is worthwhile to assess whether nonresponse has biased the sample in any discernible way. We were able to assess response bias for two important variables: religious tradition and region. Tables 1 and 2 present two different distributions for each of these variables. The first column of each table shows the distribution of these variables for the 1236 congregations for which we have complete data. The second column of each table shows the distribution of these variables for these 1236 congregations *plus* the 244 nominated congregations for which we did not complete an interview *and* the 126 congregations that were not nominated but should have been. We coded religious tradition and region from the names and locations for the 244 congregations that were nominated but did not cooperate. We did not have congregation names, of course, for the 126 GSS respondents who did not nominate a congregation. We used GSS information about these respondents' region and religious tradition to impute values to these phantom congregations. Thus, these tables assess the aggregate effect of three distinct sources of possible sampling bias: bias arising from GSS respondent refusal to name a congregation; bias arising from interviewer/administrative error in seeking or processing nominations; and bias arising from noncooperation on the part of nominated congregations.

* * * * * TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE * * * * *

Tables 1 and 2 show that there is no discernible bias in the NCS sample with respect to religious tradition or region. The NCS distributions of religious tradition and region would not look importantly different than they do now even if both response rate and cooperation rate were 100% at both the nominating and data collecting stages. This evidence of nonbias is not surprising given the 80% response rate, and we conclude that the representativeness of the NCS sample is very high.

The most important general methodological issue confronted in constructing the NCS questionnaire involved the validity and reliability consequences of relying on a single key informant to report a congregation's characteristics. What congregational characteristics is it reasonable to expect a single organizational informant to report validly and reliably? What congregational characteristics is it best to avoid trying to measure by this method? We were guided in this matter by three general research findings. First, social psychologists consistently find that people are biased reporters of the beliefs and attitudes of other individuals in that they systematically over-estimate the extent to which other individuals share the informant's own views (Ross, Greene, and House 1976; Marks and Miller 1987). This "false consensus effect" persists even when people are given objective information about the attitudes and beliefs of the group about which they are asked to report (Krueger and Clement 1994) and, important for relating this research tradition to reporting about congregations, the bias is *stronger* when individuals are asked to report about groups or aggregates with which they identify or of which they are a part (Mullen, Dovidio, Johnson, and Copper 1992). The false consensus bias is evident even when informants report about their friends' beliefs or attitudes (Marks and Miller 1987:76).⁴

Second, organizational sociology has shown that organizations do not always have unified and cohesive goals, identities, missions, or cultures (Scott 1992, Chapter 11). Different subsets of employees or members, different cliques, and people involved in different parts of the organization may have different, sometimes conflicting, goals, and different subsets of people within the same organization may see the organization's mission in very different ways. There might, of course, be official and formal goals or missions, and a key informant would be in a position to report the content of such official goals,

⁴Thanks to Lynn Smith-Lovin for alerting us to this literature.

but the likelihood of variation inside organizations regarding goals, missions, and identities makes it problematic to seek a key informant's judgment about organizational goals or missions other than formal and official ones. Questions about organizational goals or missions assume the existence of clear goals, missions, or collective identities, and such an assumption may or may not be justified. In a situation where goals are ambiguous or contested or variable, an informant's judgment about an organization's goals or mission is likely to represent the informant's interpretation of a complex reality rather than a more or less publicly available cultural fact about the congregation.

Third, in one of the few attempts to compare different methods of measuring characteristics of voluntary associations, McPherson and Rotolo (1995) measured four different characteristics (size, sex composition, age composition, and educational composition) by three different methods (reports from a group official, reports from a randomly chosen respondent to a survey, and direct observation of a group meeting). They found very high correlations (between .8 and .9) among all three logged measures of size and sex composition, and only slightly smaller correlations between the leader report and direct observation for age and educational composition (.73 and .77, respectively). They conclude that, for these four variables, "reports from an officer are just as reliable as direct-canvass measures and could reasonably be substituted for the latter" (McPherson and Rotolo 1995:1114).

Since half of the GSS respondents who named a congregation were asked, "About how many members does this congregation have?", we are able to replicate part of the McPherson and Rotolo results regarding size. When both the GSS respondent's size report and the NCS informant's size report are logged, the two reports correlate at about .7.⁵

⁵A constant, say, 10% discrepancy between two reports implies a much bigger discrepancy in

absolute value among larger congregations (where one report might say 1000 people and another 1100 people) than among smaller congregations (where one report might say 100 people and another 110 people). Logging the size estimates treats the percentage difference between the two estimates as more important than the absolute value difference. NCS size measures are described below.

NCS questionnaire construction was informed by three lessons emerging from this literature. From the false-consensus literature we conclude that key informants will not be very good at validly reporting the values, opinions, and beliefs of congregants. From the sociological literature on organizational goals we conclude that informants also will be unreliable reporters of a congregation's aggregate or overall goal or mission. On the positive side, from the McPherson and Rotolo research we conclude that key informants will be very good at reporting more or less directly observable features of the congregation and its people. Hence, we included very few items, common in other key informant surveys of congregations, that asked the informant to report on congregants' goals, beliefs, values, or other aspects of their internal lives.⁶ Nor did we include many items that asked informants to describe, without tangible referents, general congregational goals or identities or missions.⁷ Instead, almost all NCS items ask the informant to report on more or less directly observable aspects of a congregation. Of course, restricting NCS questionnaire content largely to reports of more or less directly observable characteristics does not eliminate all threats to measurement validity and reliability. We believe,

⁶We did not, for example, include items of the form, "How true is it that members/participants of your congregation are very excited and enthusiastic about the congregation's future?" or "How true is it that your congregation feels like one large, close-knit family?"

⁷We did not, for example, include items of the form, "How important is it to your congregation's sense of mission that you provide a close, family-like atmosphere?" or "How important is it to your congregation's sense of mission that you help the poor and those in need?"

however, that this restriction greatly reduced certain kinds of known threats to validity and reliability. In a context where we had many more items to include than time to include them, this restriction seemed a sensible one to invoke.

Having few items in which a key informant was asked to describe congregants' goals, beliefs, or values, or offer an interpretation of a congregation's identity or mission, emphatically does *not* mean we have no measures of congregational "culture." Our approach was to measure congregational culture with items that asked about the tangible practices that constitute several important aspects of congregational cultures. Many important dimensions of congregational culture have consequences for congregational structure, programming, worship practices, etcetera. We focused our questionnaire on concrete practices because we know that key informants are better able to validly and reliably report on tangible organizational characteristics than on the central tendencies of distributions of congregants' attitudes or opinions. From this perspective, we would argue that identifying behavioral manifestations is in fact a better way to measure many aspects of a congregation's goals and missions than asking a key informant to provide his or her own subjective assessment.

For example, if there is reason to measure the extent to which helping the poor is an important part of a congregation's mission, we would rather array congregations according to the relative prominence of tangible programs, services, and activities for the poor than array them according to how a key informant responded when asked how important is "helping the poor" to the congregation's mission. We avoid certain kinds of questions typically included in key informant congregational surveys,

not because we eschew measuring aspects of congregational culture, but because we believe it is better to measure aspects of congregational cultures by focusing on tangible traces of cultural variation.⁸

Selected Results

⁸Our most important concession to the tradition in congregational studies of asking informants to subjectively assess aspects of a congregation's culture was an item that asked, "Theologically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?" and another item that asked the same question, except beginning, "Politically speaking" We included these two items on the grounds that, at this historical moment, the meaning of the liberal/conservative boundary is sufficiently standardized that a key informant's response here is more like a report of tangible cultural fact than a guess about the internal lives of congregants or a private and possibly idiosyncratic interpretation of a congregation's set of activities.

Methodological innovations and subtleties are for nought if they do not yield substantive contributions to knowledge. As a survey of a nationally representative sample of religious congregations, one of the most obvious contributions the NCS might make is to enable description of basic features of this organizational population in ways that were not heretofore possible. From this perspective, many of the univariate distributions in NCS data are themselves of considerable substantive interest. In this section, we present four sets of univariate distributions: one on the basic subjects of denominational affiliation and congregational size; one on political activity in congregations; and one on congregations' worship activities. We do not have the space to go into detail on any of these topics. In the context of a paper whose main purpose is to describe NCS methodology, however, we hope that these basic results make sufficiently clear the potential of these data to contribute to social scientific knowledge about religion in the United States.

Denominational Affiliation

Table 3 presents the denominational breakdown in the NCS. The first row of this table illustrates well the two different kinds of numbers that can be generated with these data. On the one hand, 28.6% of religious service attenders in the U.S. attend Catholic congregations; on the other hand, only 6% of U.S. congregations are Catholic. The difference between these two numbers reflects the fact that Catholic congregations are much larger, on average, than Protestant congregations.

* * * * * TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE * * * * *

Beyond the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Methodist Church, sample sizes within any one denomination are small. In NCS analyses incorporating denomination or religious tradition, meaningful aggregations of denominational categories would almost

always be the sensible strategy to pursue, as is true of virtually all individual-level datasets. A more complete denominational breakdown is provided here, however, so that specialists can see the full denominational composition of the NCS sample. Perhaps the most substantively interesting finding here is that 19% of congregations, containing about 11% of those who attend religious services, are not affiliated with a denomination. If these congregations were all in one denomination, they would constitute the third largest denomination in number of participants and the largest in number of congregations.

Size Distributions

David Horton Smith (1997) argued that much research using samples of nonprofit organizations provides a skewed picture of the relevant organizational populations because list-based sampling in this sector substantially over-represents larger, older, and more established organizations. He further noted that hypernetwork sampling is a tool that can reveal some of the “dark matter” in the organizational universe: organizations not visible through more conventional lenses but whose inclusion in analysis can substantially alter the picture. This point applies to congregations, and an important feature of the NCS is that its sample is comprehensively representative in a way that would be not possible if denominational lists or telephone books were used as a sampling frame, or if its response rate were lower and consequently biased. This is most clear with respect to the size distribution of U.S. congregations.

There are, of course, various ways to define congregational "participants" or "members." The Independent Sector questionnaire, for example, asked for the "number of members, that is, people on your membership rolls or who have made a formal commitment to belong," and it also asked for the "number of nonmembers that attended services or participated in your congregation's activities"

(Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1992:123). The NCS asked each congregational informant for three numbers: the total number of adults and children associated *in any way* with the religious life of the congregation; the total number of adults and children who *regularly participate* in the religious life of the congregation; and the total number of *adults* who regularly participate in the religious life of the congregation.

Aggregating responses from the two Independent Sector (IS) items, that sample--drawn from telephone book listings and obtained with only a 19% response rate--implies that only 20% of U.S. congregations have fewer than 100 members or nonmember participants (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1993:7). The second of the three NCS size measures listed above--the number of regularly participating adults and children, whether or not they are officially members of the congregation--probably is most comparable to the IS size operationalization. Using that measure, the NCS finds that *59% of U.S. congregations have fewer than 100 regular participants*. Even if we use the first, most inclusive, NCS size measure--the number of persons associated in any way with the religious life of the congregation--the contrast with the IS sample still is sharp: 36% percent of congregations have fewer than 100 people associated in any way with the religious life of the congregation. Perhaps most striking, 71% of U.S. congregations have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults. It appears that the NCS's hypernetwork sampling strategy and high response rate generated a sample that contains more of the dark matter of the congregational universe. On subjects for which conventional wisdom is based on samples that under-represent small congregations, analyses using NCS data are likely to provide an important corrective.⁹

⁹Previous research, for example, has found upwards of 90% of congregations participating in

more or less formalized social service activities or programs ((Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1993:19; Printz 1998:1; Cnaan 1997:10). NCS data, by contrast, suggest that only about 60% of congregations, containing about 75% of religious service attenders, have projects of this sort.

Table 4 and Figure 2 provide more complete information about the size distribution of U.S. congregations. The third column of table 4 tracks the distribution of congregations, the middle column tracks the distribution of people in congregations. The most striking result here is that, although most congregations are small, most people are in congregations that are large. The median congregation has only 75 regular participants, but the median person is in a congregation with 400 regular participants. From another angle, only 10% of American congregations have more than 350 regular participants, but those congregations contain almost half of the religious service attenders in the country.

* * * * * TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE * * * * *

Figure 2 displays graphically this double aspect of the congregational size distribution. The vertical axis represents the cumulative percentage of persons who attend religious services, ordering them from those who attend the smallest congregations to those who attend the largest congregations. The horizontal axis represents the cumulative percentage of congregations, ordering them from the smallest to the largest congregations. The dashed diagonal line shows what would obtain if all congregations were the same size, implying that 10% of the people were in 10% of the congregations, 50% of the people were in 50% of the congregations, and so on. The concave line gives the actual distribution of people across congregations. It shows, for example, that, if we lined up congregations from the smallest to the largest and walked up this line until we counted off half of all congregations, this smaller half of all congregations would have only 11% of religious service attenders in them. The area between the curved line and the diagonal represents the basic point we have been emphasizing about congregations and size: most congregations are small, but most people are associated with medium-to-large congregations.

* * * * * FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE * * * * *

This basic fact about how people are distributed across congregations underlines the importance of the probability-proportional-to-size feature of the NCS sample. For some purposes, we will want to know about characteristics of congregations without taking congregational size into account; for other purposes, we will want to know about the opportunities and experiences to which people in congregations are exposed. We noted earlier that NCS data permit analysis from both perspectives. The skewed nature of congregational size distributions described in this section makes it clear that these two perspectives could present very different views of congregational life.

Congregations' Political Activity

Shifting to more substantive findings, the NCS enables us to examine the extent to which congregations engage in politics. This is, of course, a subject of enduring concern to social scientists, who have focused both on the potential influence of religion on politics (Leege and Kellstedt 1993) and, more recently, on religious congregations as places where people learn and practice political and civic skills (Verba et al. 1995). NCS data can contribute to both of these agendas, and Table 5 presents some relevant univariate results.

***** TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE *****

This table lists political activities from the most to the least practiced by American congregations. By far the most common forms of political activity measured by the NCS are telling people at worship services about political opportunities, and distributing voter guides.¹⁰ In about one-

¹⁰The relevant items here are: "Within the past 12 months, have people at worship services been told of opportunities for political activity, including petition campaigns, lobbying, or demonstrating?"

quarter of American congregations people are told at worship services about opportunities for political activity, and 17% have distributed voter guides. Perhaps more importantly, about one quarter of religious service attenders in the U.S. are in congregations that have distributed voter guides, and more than one third are in congregations in which political activity is sometimes mentioned during worship. No other measured political activity is engaged in by more than 10% of congregations, although one-fifth of religious service attenders are in congregations that have organized or participated in a demonstration or march within the past twelve months.

Are the numbers in table 5 large or small? From one perspective, the level of congregation-based political activity seems rather low. Fifty-six percent of congregations (containing 38% of religious service attenders) engage in *none* of these activities, and only a small minority engage in any one of them. At a time when politically active congregations and congregation-based political mobilizing receive quite a lot of media attention (for example, Niebuhr 1996; Goodstein 1998), and social scientists are *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics* (Leege and Kellstedt 1993), these results show that the majority of American congregations do not engage in politics qua congregations. From another perspective, however, it is noteworthy that a majority (62%) of religious service attenders are in congregations that engaged in at least one of these activities. Furthermore, we wonder if there is another population of organizations whose primary purpose is *not* political action but wherein as many as 44% of the organizations engage in political activity. From this perspective, these numbers seem impressively large.

And: "Have voter guides ever been distributed to people through your congregation?"

Not incidentally, it appears that fewer than half the congregations distributing voter guides used guides produced by organizations identified with the religious right. Informants who reported that their congregations had distributed voter guides were asked, "Who wrote or produced the voter guide that was distributed?" One-third did not know the source of the voter guide; of those who knew, 39% named an organization associated with the religious right. This means that only about 7% of congregations distributed voter guides produced by the religious right, and only about 10% of the American churchgoing public has been exposed to these guides through their congregations.

Worship

Religious congregations, whatever else they do, produce culture in the form of their collective religious expressions--their worship services. Understanding the nature of religious ritual is, of course, a longstanding agenda for the social scientific study of religion, and case studies of congregations often include descriptions of worship. In addition to the suspicion that ritual is fundamental to the very nature of religion, worship is the most visible and available part of congregations' activities, and religious worship services are, for many, the primary place in which collectively produced culture of any sort is experienced and "consumed."

The NCS enables the sociological examination of religious collective expression--worship--in a new way. Each informant was asked a series of questions about the congregation's most recent main worship service. Consequently, a representative sample of worship events is embedded in the NCS dataset, and the NCS contains data on 29 worship elements. Table 6 lists these elements, the percentage of religious service attenders who experience each element at worship, and the percentage

of congregations having services containing each element. We can think of these elements as the cultural repertoire out of which actual worship services are constructed.

* * * * * TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE * * * * *

The worship elements in table 6 are listed from the most commonly occurring to the least commonly occurring. Note that two of these elements--singing by the congregation and a sermon or speech--are essentially universal. No other element (except using a musical instrument of any sort, something closely associated with congregational singing) turned up in more than 80% of services, but virtually all services have both a speech and collective singing. This suggests that a reasonable operational definition of a religious ritual event--at least in the United States--is that it contains these two things. This operational definition would generate a few false positives (some birthday parties and some political rallies contain both these elements) and a few false negatives (Muslim services are less likely to have singing and Buddhist services are less likely to have a speech) but not too many. Empirically, producing religion in the United States at this historical moment means getting people together to sing and listen to somebody talk.

There is much more that could be said about the numbers in this table, but we will restrict ourselves to one general observation. Actual worship services clearly are not random subsets of these elements. There is structure in the process by which subsets of these elements are assembled to construct actual worship events, and a promising line of investigation using NCS data is to try to understand exactly what governs that process. To what extent is there elective affinity between a congregation's worship style, on the one hand, and its ethnic, social class, or age composition, on the other hand? Are newer congregations characterized by distinctive cultural styles? Are there systematic

patterns to the cultural innovation of new religious movements and religious entrepreneurs? NCS data on worship services will help to answer questions like these.

Conclusion

There is much more in the NCS data than we are able to discuss here. Beyond questions about denominational affiliation, size, political activity, and worship, the NCS also gathered information about each congregation's social composition, small groups, social service activities, connections with other congregations, connections with other organizations, recruitment activities, use of services provided by denominations and other organizations, finances, organizational structure, and behavioral rules. Some data--for example, the purpose of small groups and the nature of social service activities--were collected in open-ended fashion.

NCS data will be useful for many descriptive and theoretical purposes. We conclude by mentioning three possible extensions of these data, extensions that will expand the NCS's analytical range. First, because we know the location of each sampled congregation, data describing geographical units can be appended. We currently are in the process of appending census tract data, but data from other units--counties or zip codes, for example--also could be used. This kind of extension will make it possible to connect variation in congregational characteristics to variation in neighborhood characteristics.

Second, because NCS congregations were nominated by respondents to the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS), it also is possible to link individual-level data in the GSS to data about each individual's congregation. Such a linked dataset, this time with congregations treated as context rather than as the focal unit, can be used to investigate whether or not what happens in congregations

discernibly influences individuals. One obvious question to pursue here is whether or not congregations' political activities influence the political attitudes or behavior of individuals in those congregations. This is not the only subject for which the linked GSS/NCS data might be relevant.

Third, the existence of the NCS sample presents the opportunity to return to these congregations in the future to see how they have changed. The potential learning to be gained from transforming the cross-sectional NCS into Wave One of a panel survey does not require spelling out.

A survey of a nationally representative sample of congregations is not the proper tool for every purpose. It is, however, the only way to get valid and reliable estimates of basic parameters describing the population of congregations in the United States. In this paper we have presented the methodology employed by the NCS, and we have reported four sets of univariate results. We hope that the methodological discussion inspires other researchers to consider hypernetwork techniques for sampling congregations, and we hope the illustrative descriptive results sufficiently demonstrate the potential of NCS data to serve as a valuable resource in the ongoing social scientific study of religion.

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Table 1

Assessing Response Bias in the NCS: Religious Tradition

| Religious Tradition ^a | Percent Distribution in NCS Sample | Percent Distribution in NCS Sample Plus Non-cooperating and Non-nominated Congregations |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Roman Catholic | 23.9 | 23.7 |
| Anglican | 18.5 | 20.2 |
| Methodist | 9.3 | 9.2 |
| Presbyterian | 5.6 | 5.0 |
| Episcopalian | 4.3 | 4.3 |
| Evangelical | 3.1 | 3.2 |
| Other Protestant | 2.8 | 2.6 |
| United Church of Christ | 2.2 | 1.7 |
| Other Mainline/Liberal Protestant | 5.5 | 4.3 |
| Other Evangelical/Conservative Protestant | 7.8 | 7.7 |
| Other Christian Denomination | 2.5 | 3.0 |
| Christian, but No Discernible Tradition | 11.1 | 11.5 |
| Non-Christian | 3.5 | 3.6 |
| N | 1236 | 1605 ^b |

^aThis list combines formal affiliations with denominations and informal affiliations with religious traditions. "Mainline/Liberal Protestant" and "Evangelical/Conservative Protestant" means affiliated with a denomination we classify in one or the other of these categories. "Other Christian Denomination" means affiliated with a denomination that we are not able to classify as either liberal or conservative. "Christian, but No Discernible Tradition" means congregations which seem not to have a formal tie to a denomination and which we also cannot place in one of the religious families in this list.

^bThis number is 1605 rather than 1606 because one relevant GSS respondent was among the 30 cases lost in the mail. This was the only case for which a value for religious tradition was neither identifiable nor imputable.

Table 2

Assessing Response Bias in the NCS: Region

| Region | Percent Distribution in NCS Sample | Percent Distribution in NCS Sample Plus Non-cooperating and Non-nominated Congregations |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| West England | 4.6 | 4.2 |
| Mid-Atlantic | 13.8 | 13.8 |
| West North Central | 16.0 | 17.7 |
| East North Central | 7.4 | 7.5 |
| South Atlantic | 19.6 | 20.3 |
| West South Central | 8.3 | 7.2 |
| East South Central | 12.4 | 11.8 |
| Mountain | 6.0 | 5.9 |
| Pacific | 11.8 | 11.5 |
| N | 1236 | 1605 ^b |

^bThis number is 1605 rather than 1606 because one relevant GSS respondent was among the 30 cases lost in the mail. This was the only case for which a value for region was neither identifiable nor imputable.

Table 3

Denominational Distribution of U.S. Congregations

| Denominational Affiliation ^a | Percent of Attenders in Congregations with Listed Affiliation ^b | Percent of Congregations with Listed Affiliation ^c | Unweighted N |
|---|--|---|-----------------|
| Roman Catholic | 28.6 | 6.1 | 296 |
| Southern Baptist Convention | 11.2 | 16.1 | 144 |
| None | 10.7 | 19.0 | 137 |
| United Methodist Church | 9.0 | 12.0 | 115 |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in America | 4.4 | 3.1 | 53 |
| Three Black Baptist Conventions | 3.2 | 4.2 | 45 |
| Other Baptist Denominations | 3.0 | 4.1 | 40 |
| Presbyterian Church, USA | 3.0 | 2.3 | 38 |
| Episcopal Church | 2.5 | 3.2 | 34 |
| United Church of Christ | 2.0 | 1.9 | 27 |
| Other Pentecostal Denominations | 1.9 | 2.3 | 25 |
| Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod | 1.9 | 1.5 | 24 |
| Non-Christian and Non-Jewish | 1.5 | 2.6 | 23 |
| Assemblies of God | 1.5 | 1.9 | 22 |
| Jewish | 1.6 | 1.0 | 20 |
| Church of God (Various Denominations) | 1.0 | 1.3 | 15 |
| Jehovah's Witnesses | 1.0 | 1.6 | 14 |
| American Baptist Churches | 0.9 | 0.9 | 13 |
| Other or Unknown Lutheran Denomination | 1.3 | 0.9 | 13 |
| Three Black Methodist Denominations | 0.9 | 1.2 | 13 |
| Church of the Nazarene | 0.8 | 1.3 | 10 |
| Latter Day Saints | 0.7 | 1.0 | 10 |
| Eastern Orthodox Denominations | 0.7 | 0.5 | 9 |

| | | | |
|---------------------|-----|-----|---|
| Disciples of Christ | 0.7 | 0.5 | 9 |
|---------------------|-----|-----|---|

Table 3 (cont.)

Denominational Distribution of U.S. Congregations

| Denominational Affiliation ^a | Percent of Attenders in Congregations with Listed Affiliation ^b | Percent of Congregations with Listed Affiliation ^c | Unweighted N |
|--|--|---|-----------------|
| Unitarian Universalist Association | 0.5 | 0.9 | 8 |
| Church of God in Christ | 0.5 | 1.4 | 7 |
| Church of the Brethren | 0.5 | 0.8 | 7 |
| Evangelical Church | 0.5 | 0.3 | 7 |
| Seventh-Day Adventist | 0.5 | 0.7 | 7 |
| Two Mennonite Denominations | 0.3 | 0.4 | 5 |
| Reformed Church in America | 0.3 | 0.4 | 5 |
| Christian and Missionary Alliance | 0.3 | 0.8 | 4 |
| Church/Churches of Christ | 0.3 | 0.4 | 4 |
| Other Methodist Denominations | 0.3 | 0.5 | 4 |
| Other Presbyterian Denominations | 0.3 | 0.4 | 4 |
| Other Christian Denominations ^d | 2.0 | 2.5 | 25 |

Notes:

^aThese distributions represent congregations with formal ties to a denomination. Except for the final "Other Christian" category, they are listed from the most to least numerous categories in the NCS sample.

^bThese percentages use data weighted to take account of duplicate congregational nominations.

^cThese percentages use data weighted inversely proportional to congregational size to take account of the probability-proportional-to-size feature of the NCS sample.

^dThis category includes congregations affiliated with denominations but not elsewhere classified in this table. No denomination in this residual category has more than three congregations in the NCS sample.

Table 4

Congregational Size Distribution^a

| Percentile | People Who Attend Religious Services are in Congregations of Indicated Size or Smaller at Stated Percentile of Distribution | Congregations of Indicated Size or Smaller at Stated Percentile of Distribution |
|------------|---|---|
| 10 | 75 | 20 |
| 20 | 125 | 30 |
| 30 | 180 | 40 |
| 40 | 275 | 55 |
| 50 | 400 ^b | 75 ^c |
| 60 | 600 | 100 |
| 70 | 1000 | 140 |
| 80 | 1700 | 200 |
| 90 | 3000 | 350 |
| 93 | -- | 450 |
| 95 | -- | 550 |
| 97 | -- | 800 |

Notes:

^aThese size distributions are based on the number of regularly participating individuals, counting both adults and children.

^bThis number, the median, means that 50 percent of religious service attenders attend congregations with 400 or fewer regularly participating individuals.

^cThis number, the median, means that 50 percent of congregations have 75 or fewer regularly participating individuals.

Table 5
 Congregations and Political Activity

| | Percent of Attenders in Congregations that: | Percent of Congregations that: | Unweighted N |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Told people at worship services about opportunities for political activity (within the past 12 months) | 37 | 26 | 1224 |
| Have ever distributed voter guides | 27 | 17 | 1225 |
| Have had a group, meeting, class, or event within the past 12 months to: | | | |
| organize or participate in a demonstration or march in support of or opposition to some public issue or policy | 21 | 9 | 1228 |
| get people registered to vote | 12 | 8 | 1230 |
| discuss politics | 12 | 7 | 1231 |
| organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials of any sort | 12 | 4 | 1229 |
| Have had an elected government official as a visiting speaker within the past 12 months | 12 | 6 | 1211 |
| Percent that have had someone running for office as a visiting speaker | 6 | 4 | 1210 |

Table 6
Frequency of Worship Elements

| Worship Elements | Percent of Attenders at Worship Services with Element | Percent of Congregations whose Services have Element | Unweighted N |
|---|---|---|-----------------|
| singing by congregation | 98 | 96 | 1236 |
| sermon/speech | 97 | 95 | 1233 |
| musical instrument of any sort | 91 | 84 | 1215 |
| people greet each other | 84 | 79 | 1235 |
| written program | 84 | 71 | 1236 |
| silent prayer/meditation | 81 | 74 | 1233 |
| people speak/read/recite together | 75 | 63 | 1234 |
| laughter | 74 | 74 | 1230 |
| singing by choir | 72 | 52 | 1235 |
| people testify/speak about religious experience | 72 | 78 | 1234 |
| prayer | 70 | 53 | 1216 |
| skit or play performed by teens or adults | 70 | 62 | 1232 |
| prayer | 68 | 69 | 1210 |
| prayer | 59 | 55 | 1232 |
| people call out "amen" | 53 | 63 | 1235 |
| singing by soloist | 50 | 41 | 1233 |
| performance by paid singers or other performers | 51 | 35 | 1232 |
| nothing specifically directed at children | 48 | 48 | 1234 |
| people other than leader raise hands in praise | 48 | 45 | 1226 |
| communion | 48 | 29 | 1236 |
| children speak/read/perform | 46 | 40 | 1234 |
| people told of opportunities for political activity | 37 | 26 | 1224 |

| | | | |
|--|----|----|------|
| electric guitar | 30 | 22 | 1182 |
| musical performance by teens or adults | 29 | 17 | 1231 |

Table 6 (cont.)
Frequency of Worship Elements

| Worship Elements | Percent of Attenders at Worship Services with Element | Percent of Congregations whose Services have Element | Unweighted N |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|-----------------|
| Drums | 25 | 20 | 1179 |
| ^a People speak in tongues | 19 | 24 | 1235 |
| Visual projection equipment | 15 | 22 | 1234 |
| Adults jump/shout/dance spontaneously | 13 | 19 | 1233 |
| Incense | 7 | 4 | 1231 |

Note:

^aIndicates the percentage of congregations having a service with that feature at any time within the past year. For other elements, the percentage indicates the percent of congregations whose most recent service included that element.