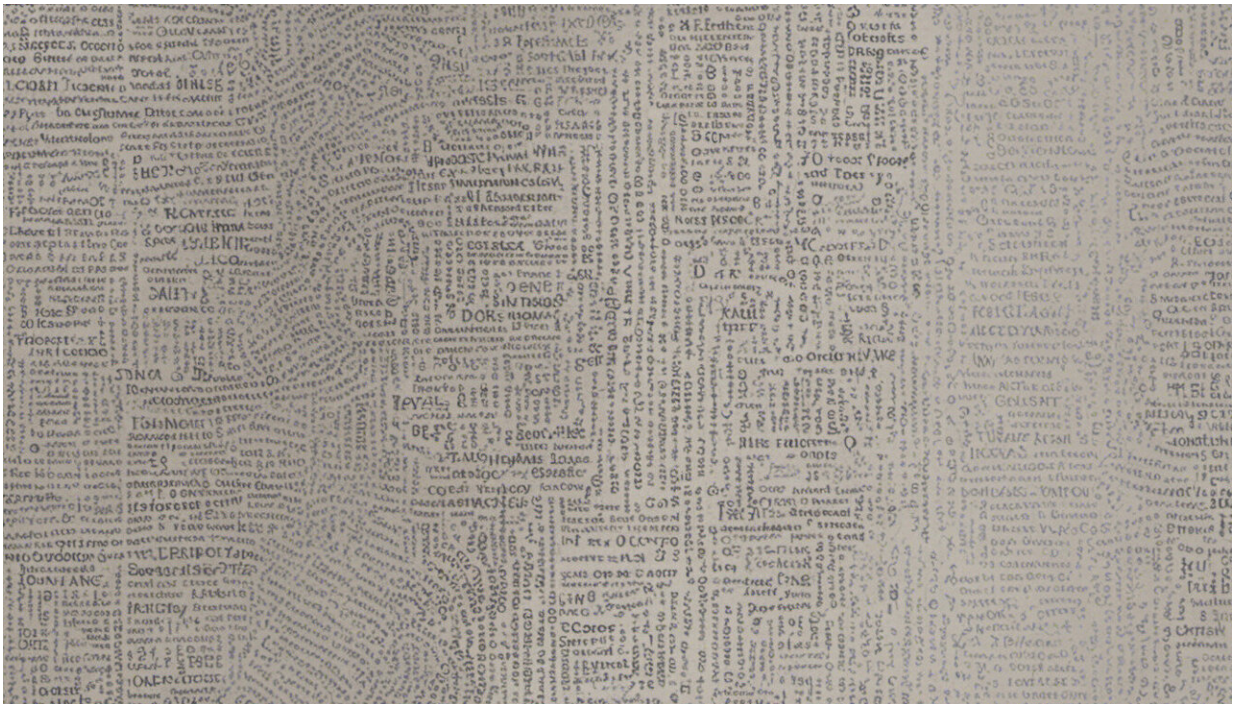


Sunday school teachers as 'culture warriors': Lay leaders wield political clout

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Volunteer lay leaders serve as political opinion leaders within churches, with considerable power to deepen—or bridge—gaps between religion and politics, according to a Baylor University study.

The study—"Sunday School Teacher, Culture Warrior: The Politics of

Lay Leaders in Three Religious Traditions"—is published in *Social Science Quarterly*.

"Within congregations, certain people's voices have more sway—'culture warriors,'" said researcher and co-author Brandon Martinez, a doctoral candidate in sociology in Baylor's College of Arts and Sciences. "The clergy may have the pulpit for captive audiences, but that's not the whole story. Lay leaders have a different and distinct influence from the clergy. People look to them for cues—which could either reinforce or challenge the stance of the clergy."

Evangelicals have a more unified base of lay leaders than Mainline Protestant and Catholics, so the rank-and-file Evangelical gets a more consistent message about how to link their [religious identity](#) and belief in politics, Martinez said.

"This helps complete the picture of how evangelicals are able to achieve greater levels of political conformity than Mainline and Catholic traditions," he said.

Since the 1960s, Mainline Protestants have declined in public influence because they lack a broad base of politically united lay leaders who can help link religious identity to policy attitudes, researchers wrote.

The study is based on analysis of data from the 2005 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey. The survey, conducted by the Gallup Organization, is a random national sample of 1,721 United States citizens.

The research shows that non-ordained leaders in all three traditions—Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants and Catholics—are not only the most engaged in church activities, but also the most politically engaged individuals in their congregations. They set the tone for small group interaction by teaching Sunday school, leading prayer groups,

chairing committees, hosting social gatherings and organizing community service.

There are distinct differences within lay leaders in the three religious traditions examined in the study. Political concerns, whether dealing with the economy, social justice, or the morality of abortion, cohabitation and stem-cell research, vary by tradition.

"If lay leaders signal certain political affiliations or attitudes, others in the congregation may be more likely to consider these attitudes as 'authentic' or 'essential' attributes of the group's religious identity," researchers wrote.

The study further found that:

- Evangelical lay leaders are more morally conservative in their attitudes and more politically active and informed than evangelicals in general; and more strongly identified with the Republican Party.
- Mainline leaders have a stronger commitment to social justice than their tradition, but this is not associated with particular policy attitudes or political party identification.
- Mainline lay leaders do not differ from their traditions on moral issues.
- Catholic lay leaders are more economically progressive than others in their tradition, but like Mainline Protestant leaders, they do not differ from the "rank and file" members on moral issues.

"Interestingly, regular Mass attendance is associated with a greater moral conservatism, but lay leaders are more likely to support economic redistribution," Martinez said. "Thus, Catholics receive contrasting political messages from leaders within their tradition that are not consistent with one political party's side of the Culture Wars."

Provided by Baylor University

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