Political Attitudes of Americans in Religious Spaces of Worship

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Introduction

- The separation of church and state is a coveted element of the United States Constitution. However, the attitudes and behaviors of religious (and non-religious) people towards politics – especially in their places of worship – is less studied.

- I chose to focus on this specific topic midway through the semester after my original research question consistently yielded predictable results.

Research Questions

- Original question: Is there a significant association between political interest and feelings of political representation?

- Updated question: Is political interest a strong predictor of one's inclination to discuss politics in a place of worship?

Methods

Sample

- Adults (age 18+) in the United States who took the Outlook on Life Surveys (OOL 2012).

- OOL is a nationally representative survey which has a target population of adult male and female African American and White US citizens for comparison.
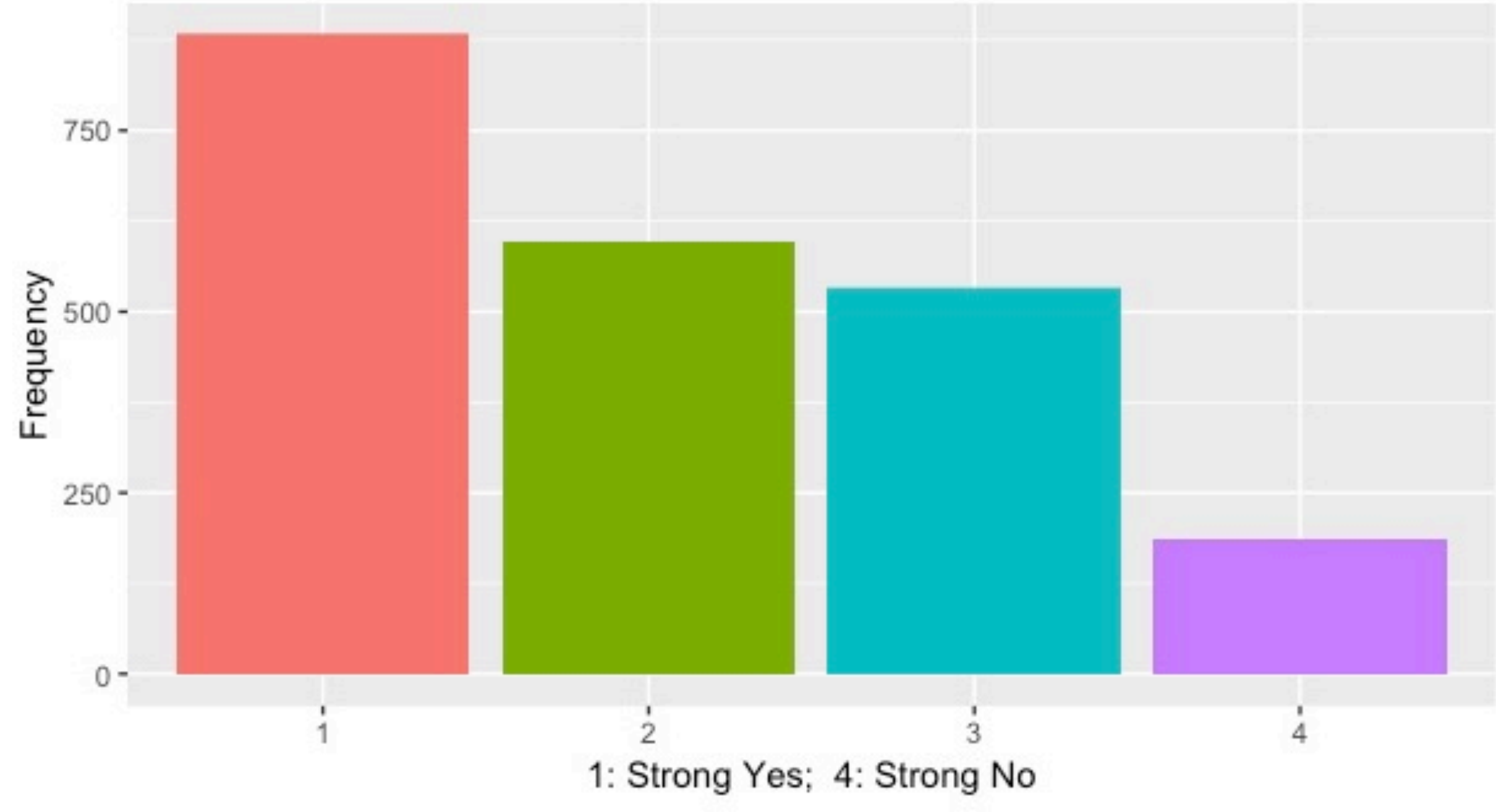
Measures

- Political interest is the explanatory variable, and 'church & politics' is the response variable. Political interest was measured on a scale of 1 to 5; 1 being no political interest, and 5 being extreme political interest.

- The likelihood of discussing politics in a place of worship is measured on a scale of 1 to 4 in response to the question of whether religion and politics should be separate. 1 represents the strong feeling that 'church & politics' should be separate, and 5 represents the strong belief that 'church & politics' go together.

Results

Simple

- Political interest had a normal, bell-shaped distribution. The question of whether religion and politics should be separated had distribution overwhelmingly skewed right (Figure 1). Both were statistically significant.
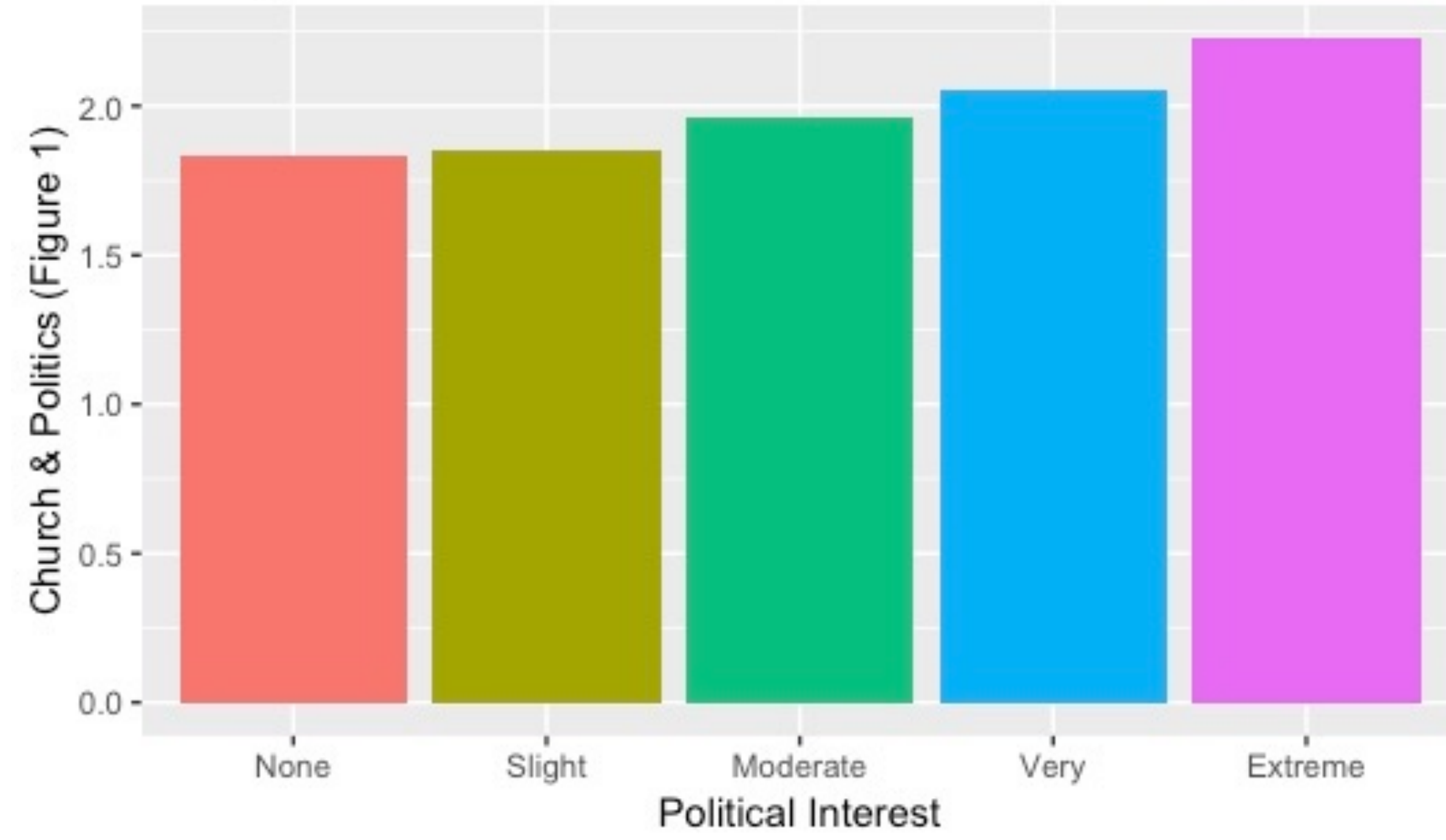
Figure 1: Should Religion and Politics Be Seperate?

1: Strong Yes; 4: Strong No

Bivariate

- The Pearson correlation test revealed a statistically significant, positive and weak correlation between increasing political interest and the belief of whether or not politics should be left out of religious places of worship (r = 0.124; p < .001).

Figure 2: The association between political interest and feelings of whether 'Church & Politics' should be seperate
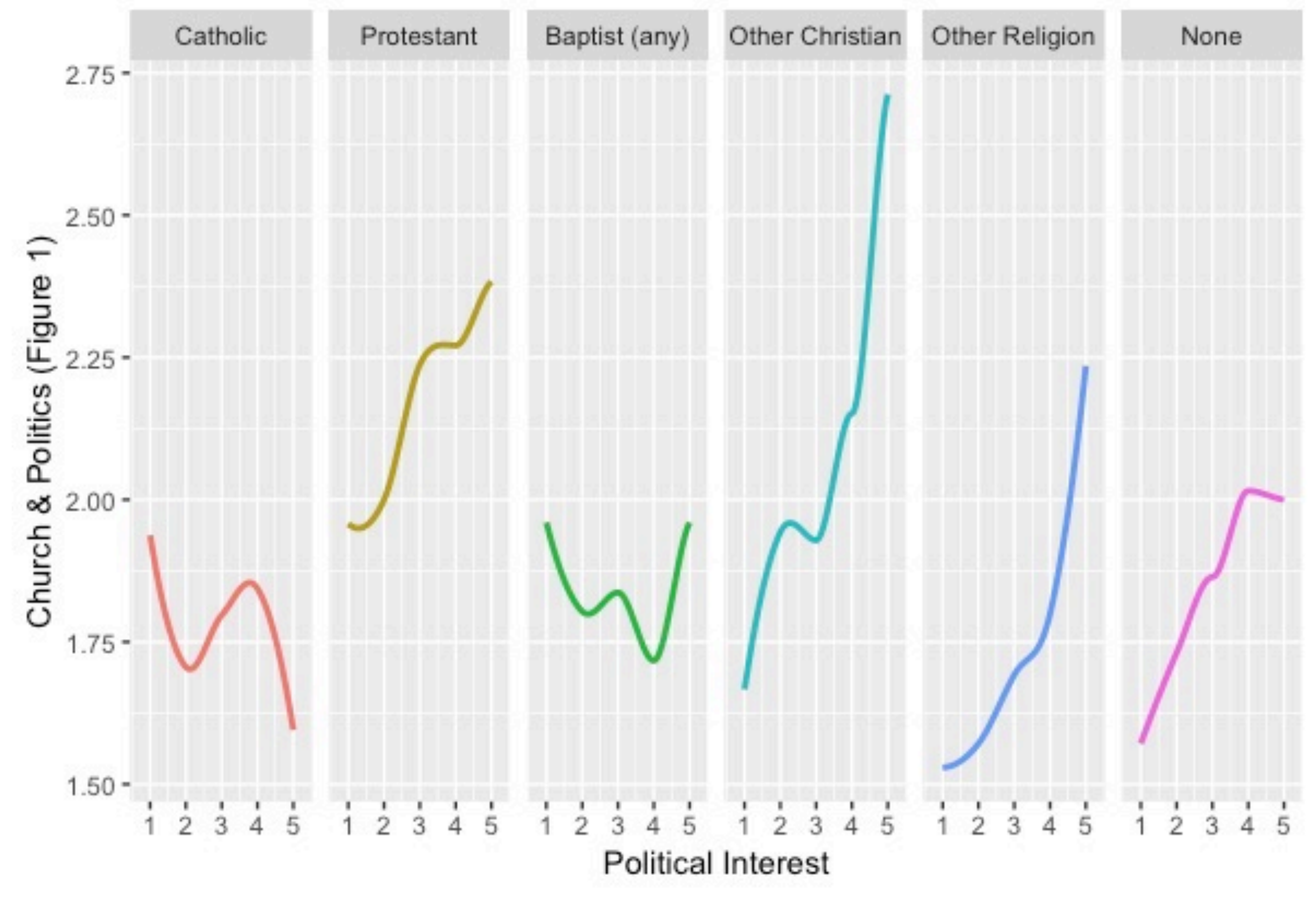
Multivariate

- Religious identity was added as a variable, aggregated into groups of similar sizes. A multiple regression test was run to specify the data by religion ('None' was set as the reference category).

- The results showed a statistically significant relationship for each specific religion except for Catholicism (p > .05). Results for the other religions generally revealed positive and weak to moderate correlations which were statistically significant.

Figure 3: Adding Religious Identity

Catholic | Protestant | Baptist (any) | Other Christian | Other Religion | None

Discussion

- Different religious identities evoke surprisingly various relationships with politics. However, the nature of the OOL sample limits our ability to specifically analyze religions other than Christianity.

- For Protestants, other Christians, and people of other religions, as political interest increases, so does their openness to political discourse in places of worship.

- Baptists seem to have a relatively consistent view that politics and religion should be more separate than not.

- It is unclear why Catholics were the only group not to have a statistically significant association; this suggests that political interest is not seen as relevant to the Catholic church.

- More research needs to be done to understand the politico-religious beliefs of normal Catholic Americans.

References

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