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Voices from the Pulpit: Discourse on Racial Justice and Gun Violence from American Clergy

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ABSTRACT

Over the past years, many religious congregations have addressed issues of racial justice and gun violence following the killing of George Floyd and recent mass shootings in places like Uvalde, Texas, Atlanta, Georgia, and Monterey Park, California. However, existing work suggests that which places of worship respond and how they respond depends on congregational, denominational, and contextual factors. Most of this work relies on self-reports from congregants or clergy. We take a different approach by directly observing the messages religious individuals hear during worship. Using large language models (LLMs) to help identify which sermons included discussions of racial justice or gun violence, we analyzed close to 200,000 sermons across 2,863 U.S. congregations. We found that, even though discussions of racial issues and gun violence are relatively rare events in religious sermons, major tragic events like the killing of George Floyd and several mass shootings taking place between 2018 and 2023 increase the probability of congregation leaders addressing these topics. We also found that, in some cases, mainline Protestant sermons are more responsive to these tragic events compared to evangelical Protestant sermons.

KEYWORDS

Religion and politics; sermons; racial justice; gun violence

During and after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and recent mass shootings in places like Uvalde, Atlanta, and Monterey Park, many religious leaders and organizations issued calls for racial justice and an end to gun violence. The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are two examples of denominations advocating for racial justice and reconciliation (ELCA n. d.; The Episcopal Church 2024). The then-president, J.D. Greear, of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest evangelical denomination in the country, criticized the Black Lives Matter (BLM) "organization" but went on to say that "as a Gospel issue, black lives matter" (Blair 2020). Clergy from the United Methodist Church (UMC) have issued statements following mass shootings in their communities (Hahn 2023).

Pronouncements on these social issues do not stay at the denominational level but also appear in congregations as these issues have become sources of contention in many religious communities (Crary 2021; Winston 2021). While it is clear that, at the organizational level, religious groups publicly address racial justice and gun violence, there is less systematic research of when these issues are discussed as part of a religious service (but see Brown, Brown, and Wyatt 2023; Guhin et al. 2023; Kalinowski, Schneider, and Ecklund 2024). In this study, we focused on the messages religious Americans receive from the pulpit every week and assessed the extent to which religious leaders respond to tragic racial and gun-related events happening around the country. We sought to answer two questions. First, are clergy more likely to address issues of racial justice or gun violence following major events around those issues? Second, are clergy in some religious traditions more likely to broach these subjects with their congregants following a tragic event?

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While most speech in religious settings deals primarily with theological or religious matters, religious leaders sometimes find it appropriate or necessary to address political or social issues from the pulpit (Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen 2003). Although clergy must consider a variety of personal, congregational, denominational, and contextual factors when deciding when to speak out on political matters (Calfano 2009; Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Djupe and Gilbert 2008; Guth et al. 1997; Stark et al. 1971), some studies suggest that a vast majority of clergy have discussed politics in their public speech at least once (Boussalis, Coan, and Holman 2021; Djupe and Gilbert 2002, 2003). Of note for this study, civil rights issues are among the most common political topics discussed by clergy. Djupe and Gilbert (2009) showed that over 90 percent of mainline Protestant clergy reported addressing civil rights in the year prior to their study, with only issues like poverty and family being addressed by most clergy. By contrast, clergy appeared to address gun violence much less frequently, with 69 percent of clergy surveyed reporting speaking about it (Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Moving away from self-reports, Boussalis and colleagues (2021) analyzed the content of sermons from more than 5,500 Protestant clergy and found that over 20 percent of pastors talked about civil rights in at least one sermon. Although gun violence seems to be a less discussed topic, it is clear that clergy are no strangers to speaking about politics in general and about these issues more specifically.

Media coverage and recent studies show that religious leaders have talked about racial justice issues with their congregants in response to the 2020 BLM protests (Brown et al. 2023; Kalinowski et al. 2024). Some of these sources have focused on specific congregations, allowing for examination of the complex nature of clergy political speech in these congregations regarding when and how religious leaders approach the subject (Crary 2021; Kalinowski et al. 2024). A limitation with this data is that it focuses on the cases where religious congregations have addressed these issues. Other sources have shown that about 60 percent of religious leaders say their church made a public statement after George Floyd's murder; Brown and colleagues (2023) reported findings from a survey of white, Black, and Latino Americans where between 50 and 60 percent of respondents in each racial and ethnic group reported hearing a sermon on race relations. These data suggest discussion of racial justice is quite prevalent, but these findings are limited by reliance on self-reports by congregants and clergy who may misremember or misreport how much politics they hear or preach, respectively. Lastly, what we know about gun violence discussion in churches comes largely from media reports, and, to our knowledge, there is little systematic study of when and which religious congregations discuss this issue.

In this study, we used an original dataset of close to 200,000 weekly sermons from 2,863 U.S. congregations from 2016 to 2023 to examine which religious congregations address racial justice and gun violence in their weekly services and whether congregations respond to current events related to these topics. The majority of the congregations in our sample (95 percent) belonged to the Protestant tradition (mainline, evangelical, and Black Protestant), while a smaller sample was composed of Catholic (4 percent) and other religious traditions (Unitarian Universalist, Orthodox Christian, Mormon, and Jewish). We used tools from developments in text analysis and large language models (LLMs) to explore the content of sermons delivered in these congregations. Specifically, we used a combination of human and synthetic data annotation to fine-tune a generative LLM and annotate the sermons in our dataset. In doing so, we build on previous work using sermon data to uncover the messages religious individuals are receiving (Boussalis et al. 2021; Olson and Quezada-Llanes 2024; Woolfalk 2013).

We found that discussion of racial issues or gun violence is a rare event. Discussion of racial issues was present in about 2.5 percent of the sermons in our dataset, and less than 1 percent of sermons discussed gun violence. We also found that these discussions happened predominantly after major events. We tested this statistically with a two-way fixed effects model, finding that, indeed, the probability of sermonizing on racial issues increased in the period following the killing of George Floyd compared to the period prior. We found that congregations from mainline Protestant denominations were more responsive to these events relative to congregations belonging to the evangelical Protestant tradition.

Similarly, after subsetting the sermon dataset to include sermons one month prior to and one month after a mass shooting event, we found a statistically significant effect of different mass shooting events on the probability that a sermon contained discussion on gun violence. We found a positive significant effect after the shootings in Dayton and El Paso, Atlanta, Uvalde, and Monterey Park. There were differences by religious tradition as well. Our findings suggest that mainline Protestants, relative to evangelical Protestants, were more likely to address gun issues after the mass shootings in Dayton and El Paso, Atlanta, and Uvalde, but not after Monterey Park. Interestingly, we found that the Highland Park shooting led to a slight decrease in sermonizing on gun issues, and we surmise this might be due to its closeness to the Uvalde shooting, which led to increased discussion of gun violence.

Our study makes two primary contributions. Substantively, our work contributes to our understanding of how prevalent discussion of racial justice and gun violence are in American congregations. In terms of racial justice, we add a new data source—sermon texts—to the qualitative evidence and congregant self-reports. For church discussion on gun violence, we provide a first look at which congregations are more likely to address this topic. Methodologically, we show how LLMs can be applied in the social sciences to understand text—an endeavor that, prior to the advent of LLMs, would have required significantly more money, time, and expertise. Similarly, we show how LLMs can help scholars of religion and politics overcome some of the challenges of finding political content in sermons, "a needle in a haystack" that is nonetheless important to discover.

We hope this paper sparks further research on the causes of political speech in religious congregations as well as the consequences of such speech. As one of the largest civic associations in American society, congregations are uniquely placed to reinforce—and at times challenge—the political attitudes of their congregants (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Djupe and Gwiasda 2010; Margolis 2018; Robinson 2010; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988, 1990). Existing research demonstrates that religious speech can influence congregants' behaviors and attitudes (Brooke, Chouhoud, and Hoffman 2023; Butt 2016). Clergy messages have been shown to shape views on the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch 2004), immigration (Margolis 2018; Nteta and Wallsten 2012; Paterson 2018; Wallsten and Nteta 2016), environmental issues (Djupe and Hunt 2009), and political behavior (McClendon and Riedl 2015; Wald et al. 1988). Understanding when, where, and how clergy address racial issues and gun-related events may offer valuable insight into how such messages might impact community attitudes and actions on racial justice and gun control. Our paper takes the first step in exploring clergy speech effects by identifying the congregations and time in which these topics are discussed in religious settings. At a time of partisan entrenchment and the mobilization of Christian nationalistic views (Djupe, Lewis, and Sokhey 2023; Mason 2018), it is important to understand how congregations are engaging with two of the most pressing issues today.

POLITICAL SPEECH IN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

It may not be surprising to say that, although clergy seldom discuss or endorse specific candidates (Brewer et al. 2003; Djupe and Gilbert 2002), political topics are addressed in American churches, especially those relating to social justice and moral issues. Religious individuals have reported hearing their clergy discuss politics from the pulpit (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Nteta and Wallsten 2012), religious leaders have said they address political issues (Djupe and Gilbert 2003, 2009; Kalinowski et al. 2024), and studies have shown the presence of political topics in religious services (Boussalis et al. 2021; Brewer et al. 2003; Olson and Quezada-Llanes 2024). The most common political issues addressed by clergy include so-called moral issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and family; social justice issues like civil rights, the environment, and poverty; and other issues such as the economy and school prayer (Boussalis et al. 2021; Djupe and Gilbert 2002). From the available evidence, it appears that gun violence and gun control do not figure as prominently in religious services as the previously mentioned issues.

A sizable body of work has examined when, why, and how religious leaders speak out on political matters from the pulpit.[1] Clergy occupy a privileged position of leadership in their congregations and

have a platform to publicly broach all kinds of political issues with their members, but they also face important constraints if they wish to maintain their jobs. Previous research finds that clergy political speech and action are shaped not only by their own political interests (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008) but also by the degree of political homogeneity in the congregation (Calfano 2009; Djupe and Neiheisel 2008), the level of disagreement between the clergy and their parishioners (Calfano 2010; Calfano, Oldmixon, and Gray 2014), institutional cues (Holman and Shockley 2017), and the characteristics of the neighborhood where the congregation is located (Boussalis et al. 2021; Djupe and Gilbert 2002). Religious leaders may have more leeway to address potentially divisive political issues if they find support from denominational leaders (Calfano 2009) or if congregants are satisfied with the opportunities for spiritual development offered by the church (Djupe and Gilbert 2008). Other research finds that both Protestant and Catholic clergy censor their political speech and activity relating to issues such as immigration, abortion, and divestment from companies that support Israel in their treatment of Palestinians due to a fear of members leaving—and the subsequent drop in tithes and offerings that might put the financial health of a congregations in jeopardy (Calfano 2010; Calfano et al. 2014).

Notwithstanding these constraints to clergy political speech, religious leaders can be responsive to exogenous political events as they may feel a responsibility to be representatives of their religious communities to outside stakeholders (Djupe, Burge, and Calfano 2016). In their analysis of over 110,000 sermons, Boussalis et al. (2021) showed that the proportion of sermons discussing abortion increased during periods when courts were deciding major cases and that, overall, there was more discussion of politics during presidential election years. Examining the impact of the Trump era on American religion, Olson and Quezada-Llanes (2024) found that discussion of crime and welfare were more likely to appear in sermons after Donald Trump announced his presidential candidacy in 2015. Moreover, Djupe and Neiheisel (2008) reported that a vast majority of clergy in Columbus, Ohio, said they discussed gay marriage with their congregation in 2004 as a state ban on gay marriage was on the ballot that year. Clergy responsiveness to external political events is not surprising when taking into account that many congregants ask their religious leaders about political matters and that many of these religious leaders think their congregations perceive them as representatives of their communities (Djupe et al. 2016).

What we know about the presence of political discussions in religious congregations comes primarily from three sources: congregant self-reports, clergy self-reports, and transcripts of sermons. Many studies have relied on respondents' answers to whether their religious leaders have addressed a given political topic during a sermon or discussion (e.g., Brown et al. 2016; Brown et al. 2023; Nteta and Wallsten 2012; Scheitle and Cornell 2015). In some cases, researchers have been interested in examining how clergy shape congregants' political attitudes, and while it is useful to know what political cues religious individuals perceive or remember their clergy addressing, there are some important limitations to these self-reports. If an individual is interested in a particular political issue, they may be more likely to interpret an ambiguous message from their clergy as being political or may be more likely to remember an actual political cue (Scheitle and Cornell 2015). Thus, these congregant self-reports may underestimate or overestimate political cues from clergy. In fact, Djupe and Gilbert (2009) surveyed clergy and congregants in the same congregations and showed that congregants' self-reports of clergy political speech were much lower compared to the self-reports of clergy. A second set of studies examined political discussion in religious congregations through clergy reports (Calfano 2010; Calfano et al. 2014; Djupe and Gilbert 2003, 2008; Kalinowski et al. 2024). Similar to congregant reports of clergy political speech, these data were also limited by the fact that clergy may give ambiguous or subtle cues that congregants do not pick up on. Returning to the results reported by Djupe and Gilbert (2009), there were significant differences in the rates of clergy political speech reported by clergy and by congregants, and it is difficult to know where the accurate rate of political speech lies.

[1]For a comprehensive review see Djupe and Neiheisel (2022).

The final source of data to study the prevalence of political discussion in clergy speech are sermons themselves. Some studies have focused on relatively small samples of sermons from specific regions or denominations. The results from a study of 95 religious services from Catholic, Jewish, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant congregations (Brewer et al. 2003) suggest that the average service includes close to three political cues. More recently, Krull and Gilliland (2023) content analyzed around 450 sermons from congregations in the United Methodist Church (UMC) to examine how pastors responded to a decision by the general conference of the UMC to maintain their stance against gay marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ+ individuals. Over the past few years, scholars have taken advantage of the availability of sermons posted online to analyze significantly larger samples of sermons (Boussalis et al. 2021; Krull and Gilliland 2023; Olson and Quezada-Llanes 2024). Boussalis and colleagues (2021) and Guhin et al. (2023) collected over 110,000 sermons posted between 2000 and 2015 on an online repository of sermons called SermonCentral.com. These sermons come from clergy themselves, so they are susceptible to self-selection bias. That is, users may not submit sermons that might be perceived as too controversial or political. However, Boussalis and colleagues (2021) found that about a third of the sermons in their sample likely included a political topic and that 70 percent of clergy had at least one sermon with political content. Other scholars have analyzed sermons posted on YouTube, where an increasing number of congregations posts their services, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Holleman, Roso, and Chaves 2022). Olson and Quezada-Llanes (2024) used a sample of over 40,000 sermons from 357 congregations and found that the probability of a sermon including any type of political content is around 18 percent. All in all, the analysis of sermons themselves, whether through large or small samples, supports the idea that clergy discuss politics from the pulpit, although it may be less often than self-reports suggest.

The study of large samples of sermons represents an important development in the study of political communication in religious congregations, but it is not without its challenges and limitations. The biggest challenge scholars have found in studying political content in sermons is labeling each sermon as having a political discussion or not. This task is made even more challenging considering that sermons are not political in nature, and so finding political discussion is akin to looking for a needle in a haystack. Clearly, human coding of thousands of sermons is an expensive and time-consuming task, but unsupervised topic models are not an ideal tool for picking up subtle political content in largely nonpolitical texts. As a result, researchers have made use of supervised text models where a portion of the sermons are labeled and a model is trained on those sermons, which is then used to label the rest of the sample (Boussalis et al. 2021; Olson and Quezada-Llanes 2024). One way to assess how well these trained models are picking up political content is to look at the keywords the model associates with each topic. These models perform well when it comes to some issues such as abortion, associating keywords like "abort" and "womb." At the same time, they seem to perform less well when a topic may be political or religious. For example, a topic like crime can be associated with keywords (i.e., tokens) like "joseph" and "paul," both biblical characters who spent time in prison. As we describe in our methods section below, we sought to overcome this challenge by leveraging LLMs to classify a sample of over 200,000 sermons. Our fine-tuned model stacks up well against human coding in identifying discussions of racial justice and gun violence, even if they are only passing mentions. We believe these models hold promise for studying political content in documents that are not political in nature.

RACE, GUNS, AND RELIGION

There is no one way congregations approach social and political issues. Rather, different congregations engage with the world around them through a different religious lens. Some churches, like those in the evangelical Protestant tradition, tend to approach sociopolitical issues from an individualistic and interpersonal framework (Emerson and Smith 2000; Guth et al. 1997), which places them to the right of center on issues such as welfare and affirmative action as well as on so-called moral issues like abortion and gay marriage. Other clergy and congregations approach social issues through

a progressive lens following the social gospel, a religious movement advocating for public measures to address economic inequality, racial justice, and gender discrimination, among other issues. This perspective describes many mainline Protestant clergy (Guth et al. 1997; Wuthnow and Evans 2002). For their part, the Catholic Church's social teaching explains their support of immigrants and opposition to the death penalty, although they take similar stances on culture war issues as evangelicals (Leal 2010). For Black Protestants, the development of the Black Church and of liberation theology have been integral in motivating political activism to address racial injustice (Cone 2010; Harris 1994; McDaniel 2008).

In line with Kalinowski et al. (2024), we argue that some external events—such as the BLM protests and mass shootings—are powerful enough to shock the system and pressure or incentivize clergy to address them even if they would not have done so before. The case of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, is illustrative. In a Pew poll conducted about four months before George Floyd's killing, 29 percent of white mainline Protestants and 22 percent of evangelicals reported hearing a sermon on racial relations. It was 40 percent of Black Protestants, 31 percent of Hispanic Catholics, and 18 percent of white Catholics who reported hearing such a sermon (Mohamed and Cox 2020). However, *after* Floyd's murder and the subsequent series of protests across the country, the gap in discussions about race from the pulpit virtually disappeared. Data collected toward the end of 2020 shows that close to 60 percent of white and Black Americans—and 51 percent of Hispanics—said they heard a sermon about racial relations (Brown et al. 2023). As Kalinowski et al. (2024) argued, the months after Floyd's murder were an "unsettled time" where individuals and entities, including religious congregations, needed to make sense of what was going on. Similarly, when it comes to mass shootings, congregational leaders are increasingly finding it a theological and moral imperative to speak on the issue of gun violence (Winston 2021). Guns and Christianity are often connected in advertisements and several recent shootings have occurred inside places of worship (Lecaque 2022; Winston 2021). Combined with increased media attention, a mass shooting is likely to create an unsettled time for clergy and their congregation. Thus, our first set of expectations for this study were as follows:

H1a: The probability that a sermon includes discussion of *racial justice* will be higher after the murder of George Floyd.

H1b: The probability that a sermon includes discussion of *gun violence* will be higher after a mass shooting event.

While all congregations may be more likely to address these events, congregations from some traditions are more likely to discuss these issues than others. We expect clergy from Black and mainline Protestant congregations would be more likely to address racial justice and gun violence compared to evangelical clergy. Black and mainline Protestant clergy have historically been involved in social justice activism. The Black Church, and the denominations that conform to it, developed to respond to the particular needs of African Americans, first during slavery and through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the present day (Calhoun-Brown 2000). Interpreting Christianity through the African American experience, Black theology sees God as standing with and delivering the oppressed (Cone 2010), and this understanding undergirded the political activism of Black clergy in the civil rights movement. A similar approach is likely to continue as issues of racial discrimination plague the country. In fact, Kalinowski and colleagues (2024:14) reported that Black clergy felt there was no tension in addressing racial justice after George Floyd's murder and rather "expressed a continuation of ongoing discussions." Mainline Protestant clergy, for their part, have been politically active in antiwar movements and in support of civil rights, immigrant rights, and worker rights—all issues that fit a social justice agenda (Guth et al. 1997; Jenkins 2020). Further, the major mainline Protestant denominations have dedicated ministries to address racial justice.[2]

In the case of evangelical Protestantism, we expect lower responsiveness to George Floyd's murder and the BLM protests due to its racial history and its downstream effects on evangelicals' racial

attitudes. Not only did the largest evangelical denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, form to uphold slavery, but many evangelical leaders sought to maintain racial segregation in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision (Jones 2021; Tisby 2019). Private Christian schools, commonly called "segregation academies," were founded to keep white children out of integrated public schools, and a fundamentalist Christian university, Bob Jones University, did not admit Black students until 1971 (Associated Press 2008; Porter, Howell, and Hempel 2014). These institutional stances matter because clergy are more likely to talk about divisive issues when they agree with denominational leaders (Calfano 2009). Moreover, the history matters because, as Claassen (2018) shows, racial attitudes are an equal or better predictor of evangelicals' shift toward the Republican Party.

It is important to note that, while white evangelicals remain the most racially conservative, or racially resentful religious group in America (Jones 2021), it does not mean they outright deny the existence of racism. Namely, on matters of racial justice, in contrast to mainline Protestants who are more likely to adopt a racial justice lens, evangelicals adopt a framework of racial reconciliation (Edwards 2016; Kalinowski et al. 2024; Oyakawa 2019). Evangelicals see racial discrimination not as a systemic issue but as a "sin issue" that comes from broken interpersonal relationships (Emerson and Smith 2000). This view places responsibility on individuals rather than on systems. And thus, given that the BLM protests and the related calls for systemic solutions are at odds with the mainstream evangelical worldview, one can expect that evangelical clergy will be less likely to address racial issues in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the BLM protests. Given these historical and institutional differences, we further hypothesized:

H2a: Compared to sermons from evangelical congregations, sermons from mainline Protestant and Black Protestant congregations will be more responsive to external tragic events related to racial justice.

Within the history of the Catholic Church in the United States there are prominent examples of both civil rights activism as well as strong resistance to racial equality among white Catholics. Through the decades prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church had been moving toward an official rejection of racial inequality and encouraged Catholics to accept desegregation in both religious and secular spaces (Newman 2022). However, the Church did not *order* local parishes to do this, and strong local opposition often meant little progress in terms of integration (Newman 2022). To avoid conflict with their parishioners or due to their own disagreement with leadership (Smith 2008), local priests do not always follow instructions from higher-ranking clergy (Holman and Shockley 2017). In addition to the differences between the Catholic hierarchy and the local parishes, there are also significant differences in racial attitudes between Hispanic and white Catholics. A 2021 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) showed that 57 percent of Hispanic Catholics believed racial inequality is a critical issue; only about a quarter of white Catholics agreed (Orcés 2021). Thus, lack of consensus among congregants and misalignment between leadership and local parishes make it challenging for one to have clear expectations about the behavior of Catholic clergy. Consequently, for our study, we did not have clear expectations on whether Catholic clergy would engage with discussion on racial issues more or less relative to the other traditions.

Debate on gun violence and the attitudes of religious Americans also varies across religious traditions. For example, in discussions of gun control, gun advocates argue that gun violence is due to the erosion of Christian values rather than ease of access to firearms (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018). This rhetoric is especially prevalent among evangelical Protestants, who emphasize "individual action and a greater presence of religion in schools" as a response to gun violence and mass shootings (Merino 2018:4). Studies have found that, compared to adherents of other religions, evangelical

[2]It is important to note that rank-and-file mainline Protestants do not lag far behind white evangelicals in their levels of racial resentment (Jones 2021), so these liberal orientations are more discernible at the elite level.

Protestants are also more likely to own a handgun (Stroope and Tom 2017; Yamane 2016), are more opposed to stricter gun control laws (Merino 2018), and find gun ownership to be important to their overall identity (Vegter and Den Dulk 2021). National surveys similarly find that the largest group of assault rifles proponents are white evangelical Republicans (Riess 2019). In contrast, mainline Protestants, who generally hold a more liberal moral and social outlook relative to evangelicals, and Catholics, whose pro-life ethic applies broadly to stricter gun laws and is institutionally supported by the Catholic church, are more likely to support stricter gun laws (Merino 2018). Of the main religious traditions, Black Protestant churches are those that are the most adamant proponents of gun laws and frequently engage in grassroots activism for gun control (Banks 2013).

Congregational leaders are increasingly finding it a theological and moral imperative to speak on the issue of gun violence (Winston 2021). Thus, in terms of clergy discourse on gun violence, the main divergence between religious traditions regards the position they take—-either calling for peace, unity, and common-sense gun laws or calling for their flocks to bring guns to church (Bailey 2017). Nonetheless, the broader commitment of Black Protestants and mainline Protestants to social justice and activism on the issue, as well as the Black Church's historical experience with violence (Merino 2018), suggests that these congregations may be more inclined to involve discussion on gun violence after tragic events like mass shootings than others. Moreover, while U.S. Catholic clergy are not always in agreement with the Catholic Church's official stances, Smith (2008) shows they are largely supportive of gun control measures (see also Reese 2022). In fact, following the Uvalde shooting in May 2022, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sent Congress a letter urging them to pass "incremental, but meaningful, improvements in the firearm background check process" (USCCB 2022): 4. For these reasons, in our study, we expected that clergy in these traditions would be more responsive in their speech relative to evangelical clergy. We hypothesized the second set of expectations as follows:

H2b: Compared to sermons from evangelical congregations, sermons from mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, and Catholic congregations will be more responsive to external tragic events related to gun violence.

In the next section, we present the data and methods we used to test these hypotheses.

DATA AND METHODS

The data we used came from an original dataset of online sermons collected from congregations across the United States. First, to construct a comprehensive sample of congregations, we selected 12 U.S. states that vary across political leanings (majority Democrat-leaning or "blue" states, majority Republican-leaning or "red" states, as well as "purple" states or those that have similar levels of support across the two major parties) according to the voting patterns in the 2020 presidential elections (MIT Election Data Science Lab 2020).[3] We utilized Google Places API and searched for congregations across each of the 12 states. Specifically, we searched for establishments listed on Google as "place of worship" or "church" in a random number of counties for each state. By including "place of worship" in addition to "church" as search terms, we aimed to collect information on any religious body with regularly scheduled worship services. However, it is possible that our choice of search terms biased the data toward congregations of the Protestant tradition, as 95 percent of our resulting sample are congregations in the Protestant religious tradition (evangelical, mainline, Black).

Using *R* packages (googleway, google_places, and google_place details), we geocoded close to 20,000 congregations and scraped their names, physical addresses, and websites as posted on Google. About 52 percent of these congregations have a website. We manually searched across the

[3]The 12 states were Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia.

websites of each congregation and identified those with online sermons posted. We note that posted online sermons took different formats—audio (mp3), embedded videos (mp4), or live streams and video shares via YouTube or Vimeo channels.

Next, we obtained transcriptions of sermons from the subset of congregations that posted their services on YouTube. We focused on the sermons posted on YouTube as the platform uses highly advanced speech recognition technology to caption videos. In fact, its automatic captioning has been found to be of high quality and accuracy, comparable to the "gold standard" of human transcription (Proksch, Wratil, and Wäckerle 2019). We used YouTube API to transcribe online sermons posted on congregations' YouTube channels. To ensure we transcribed sermons and not other posted content, we selected videos that were posted on a Sunday or had "Sunday" in the video title.

Our final sample included approximately 200,000 weekly sermons across 2,863 congregations. The time spanned from January 2016 to May 2023. To get a sense of the distribution of sermons across this period, we plotted the number of sermons by month in Figure 1. As expected, there was an increase in the number of sermons in the post-2019 period due to many congregations moving their services online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, reports show that, during the pandemic, 92 percent of congregations offered worship services on an online platform (Earles 2020) and 82 percent of monthly religious attendees reported partaking in online worship during the pandemic (Gecewicz 2020). Post-pandemic, congregations have maintained their online presence, and churchgoers have continued worshiping digitally despite the resumption of in-person services (Nortey and Rotolo 2023; Pfeiffer 2023). As Figure 1 shows, in our sample as well, the number of sermons did not drastically decline in the post-pandemic months.

Our next task was to determine whether each sermon in our corpus included mentions of racial issues or gun violence in its content. We took several steps to ensure we correctly identified sermons with the types of political discussion we were interested in. First, we used a subset of these sermons to serve as training data to fine-tune a classification model. To do this, we compiled a comprehensive list of words and phrases related to racial justice and gun violence. These keywords are included in Table A1 in the Appendix. We created a unified dictionary and searched for these words and phrases in the sermons, resulting in a subset of sermons that contain at least one of the keywords. In other words, these sermons *potentially* contained content on racial issues or gun violence. Approximately 18 percent

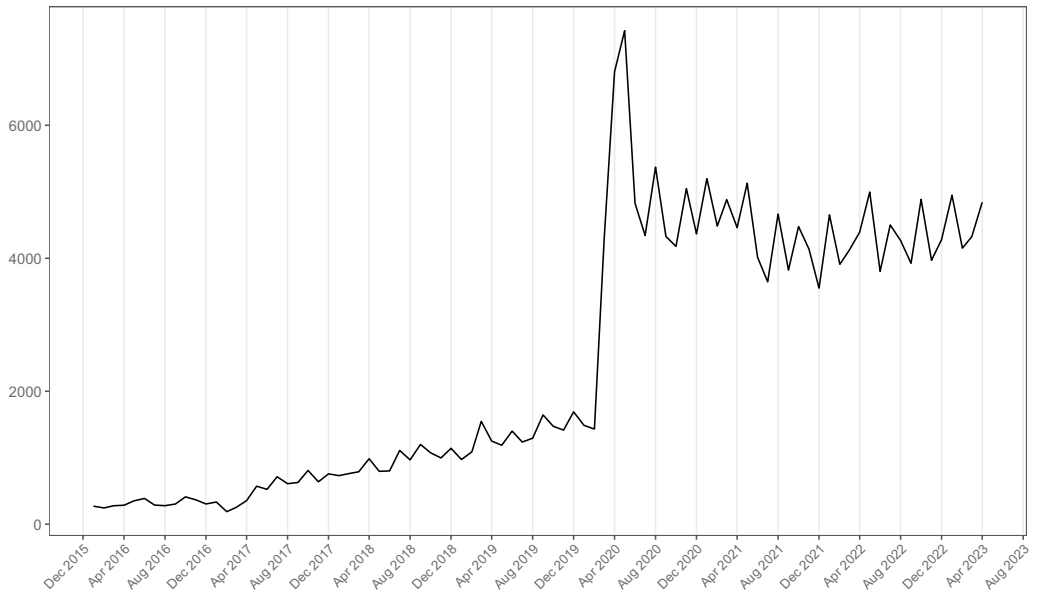

Figure 1. Time Trend of Online Sermons (2016–2023).

of the overall sample (40,095 sermons) contained keywords found in the dictionary related to racial issues, and about 7 percent (13,357 sermons) contained keywords found in the gun violence dictionary.

Second, to gain a better understanding of the political content of our sermon corpus, we read and manually annotated 1,000 random sermons from the subsample. Each sermon was coded as having *racial issues content* if they involved any discussion of racism, racial injustice, the civil rights movement, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, policy brutality, or any related topics. Similarly, for *gun violence content*, we labeled sermons as discussing gun violence if the content involved any gun violence or mass shooting locations like Atlanta, Boulder, Las Vegas, Orlando, and Uvalde, as well as any related topics.

As a third step, we turned to a relatively novel text annotation tool: large language models (LLMs). The high accuracy and relatively low cost have made the use of LLMs increasingly more common for tackling text annotation tasks in the social sciences (Gilardi, Alizadeh, and Kubli 2023; Zheng et al. 2023). LLMs are such effective tools because they are able to understand, classify, and generate text by considering the whole context of a given text. General purpose LLMs like GPT models have an impressive accuracy and are trained to tackle most general tasks. However, these large models are controlled by a few companies, and using their APIs to annotate large numbers of texts can be a costly endeavor. Moreover, even though these models are trained on large corpora, the nature of our task and data—political content in religious sermons—arguably required more specific understanding than any general text. For this reason, we followed recommendations in recent literature (Laurer 2024) and utilized both OpenAI's GPT models and fine-tuned open-source generative LLMs to annotate our corpus. Specifically, we first used OpenAI's GPT-4.0 model to annotate 40 percent of our subsample (the sermons that *potentially* contained content of interest as identified with the dictionary approach). Following guidance in recent literature on prompt engineering (Törnberg 2024), we constructed a prompt that provided brief context and clearly defined the coding task and the response format of the output. The prompt was almost identical to the instructions we used for human coding (see the Appendix Table A2). We prompted the model to read an excerpt from a religious sermon and label it with 1 if the sermon excerpt contained discussion on racial issues or gun violence or with 0 if it did not. We also provided a list of examples of racial issues or gun violence topics. We compared the annotation results from the GPT model with the manually coded data, and we found 86 percent agreement (balanced accuracy) between manual and GPT annotation. We then validated the data by comparing the LLM and human coder decisions for disagreements. Scholars have noted that even human data is a faulty gold standard (Hosking, Blunsom, and Bartolo 2023), and indeed, in the validation process, we found instances where we agreed with LLM decision over the human coders. After making these corrections, we achieved 89 percent agreement between the manual and GPT annotation. In the next step, we used 40 percent of the subsample, the "gold standard" data annotated by GPT and validated by human coders, as training data to fine-tune an open-source LLM, the T5 (Text-to-Text Transfer Transformer) model.

Fine-tuning is a process of taking a pre-trained model (like the T5) that has already been trained on a vast corpus and further training it on a smaller, task-specific dataset (Laurer et al. 2024). Given our data's religious content, we could improve the model's performance by training it on a dataset relevant to our task at hand. We used a 70–30 percent train-test data split to train the T5 model. While there are many generative open-source models to choose from, we chose text2text model T5 (encoder-decoder) because of its ability to analyze and understand text and superiority in classifying and summarizing text (Laurer 2023).[4] To fine-tune the T5 model, we provided the same instructions that we provided to the human coders and the GPT model, ensuring consistency across annotators. The fine-tuned T5 model achieved 91.9 percent balanced accuracy and 0.92 F1 macro for the task of annotating sermons for racial issues content, and 93.3 percent balanced accuracy and 0.93 F1 macro for the gun violence

[4]While Bert-NLI has also been recommended for simple tasks involving text classification (Laurer et al. 2024), for our task, the fine-tuned Bert-NLI performed worse than the fine-tuned T5 model relative to our "gold standard."

annotation. Given the high performance of the model, we used it to label the rest of the data. By doing this, we increased task performance, lowered annotation labor costs, and lowered the environmental impact of running inferences through an API for the whole dataset (Thompson et al. 2021).

With the whole dataset annotated for whether a weekly sermon contained topics related to racial issues or gun violence, we calculated the frequency of sermons that contained these topics in the overall sample. Discussion of race and gun violence in religious sermons was a rare event; only about 2.5 percent of the sermons mentioned race, and less than 0.5 percent mention gun violence or both in the period under examination.

Since we were also interested in studying whether certain religious traditions are more responsive to major events related to racial justice and gun violence, we grouped each congregation into a religious tradition according to their denomination (ARDA 2020; Steensland et al. 2000). We found the denomination and religious tradition of 75 percent of the congregations in our dataset. Out of these, about 69 percent of the congregations were classified as evangelical Protestant, 26 percent as mainline Protestant, 4 percent as Catholic, 0.3 percent as Black Protestant, and 0.4 percent as other (Unitarian Universalist, Orthodox Christian, Mormon, and Jewish).

To test our hypotheses, we estimated a two-way fixed effects model, where our dependent variable was a binary dependent variable (0/1) indicating if a sermon contained discussion on racial issues or gun violence. Our explanatory variables were binary indicators for whether the sermon was delivered prior to or after a major tragic event. In our models investigating probability of sermons on racial issues, we used the killing of George Floyd as the event of interest. For our models on gun violence, we included five events for which we had sufficient data of a month's worth of sermons prior to and after the event. These included the Dayton and El Paso shootings in August 2019, Atlanta in March 2021, Uvalde in May 2022, Highland Park in July 2022, and Monterey Park in January 2023. We used fixed effects for state and year in all models to control for unobserved group-level differences.

RESULTS

We begin by showing the proportion of sermons discussing racial justice and gun violence between 2016 and 2023. The top panel in Figure 2 shows these proportions for discussions of racial issues with a dashed vertical line indicating May 25, 2020, the day of George Floyd's killing. Of note is the spike in the discourse of racial issues during, what appears to be, major political events like the 2016 presidential elections and murder of George Floyd in 2020. Similarly, the bottom panel in Figure 2 shows the proportion of sermons discussing gun violence as well as vertical lines for several mass shooting events that occurred during this time. The proportion of sermons discussing gun violence increased following tragic events like the shootings in Orlando, Las Vegas, Sutherland, Parkland, Dayton and El Paso, Atlanta, Uvalde, Highland Park, and Monterey Park. Visual inspection suggests that discussions of racial justice and gun violence increase after one of these tragic events.

To assess whether the increases in political discussions in Figure 2 are statistically significant, we turn to the results from our statistical models shown in Table 1. The first column shows a model that includes only our explanatory variable. Relative to the period prior to the killing of George Floyd, congregations' probability of sermonizing on racial issues increases by 5 percentage points ($\beta = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$). This result supports our first hypothesis (H1a). The second column of Table 1 helps us assess our second hypothesis (H2a). The model includes an interaction between our explanatory variable and dummy variables for each religious tradition. In line with our second hypothesis, we find that the effect of Floyd's murder on discussion of racial justice is larger for congregations belonging to a mainline Protestant denomination relative to evangelical Protestant congregations ($\beta = 0.011$, $p < 0.01$). However, contrary to our hypothesis, we do not find an interactive effect for Black Protestant congregations. Overall, congregations were more likely to address racial justice issues in their sermons post-Floyd, but mainline Protestant congregations appear to have been particularly responsive to this tragic event.

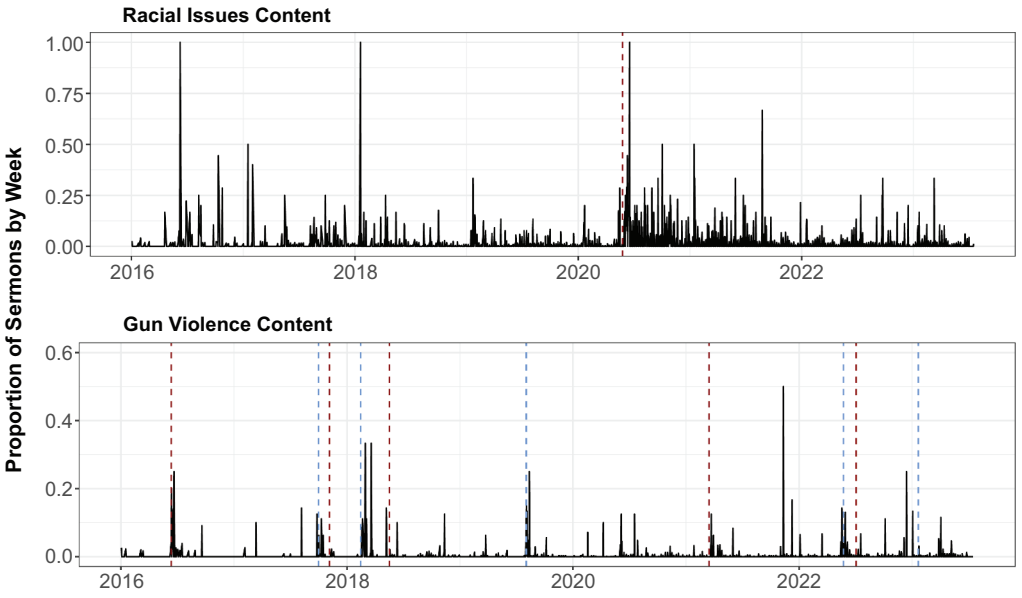

Figure 2. Proportion of Weekly Sermons Discussing Racial Issues and Gun Violence over Time (2016–2023).

Table 1. Probability on Sermonizing on Racial Issues

	DV: Racial Issues Content	
	(1)	(2)
Post-Floyd	0.050***	0.045***
	(0.002)	(0.003)
Post-Floyd* Black Protestant		0.002
		(0.054)
Post-Floyd*Catholic		−0.002
		(0.008)
Post-Floyd*Mainline Protestant		0.011***
		(0.004)
Post-Floyd*Other		0.052
		(0.033)
Black Protestant		0.049
		(0.045)
Catholic		0.002
		(0.006)
Mainline Protestant		0.013***
		(0.002)
Other		0.026**
		(0.012)
State FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Cluster Std. Errors	By Cong.	By Cong.
N	198,725	152,612
R^2	0.011	0.015

Notes. DV = Dependent Variable; FE = Fixed Effects.
$^{*}p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$.

Figure 3 presents the predicted probabilities by religious tradition based on the tabular results in the second column of Table 1. Across all religious traditions, the probability of discussing racial justice increases post-Floyd. We note the smallest increase among Catholic congregations (1.2 percentage points), followed by evangelical Protestant (1.3 percentage points), Black Protestant (1.9 percentage points), mainline Protestant (2.3 percentage points), and other religious traditions (6.8 percentage points), albeit the statistical significance varies.

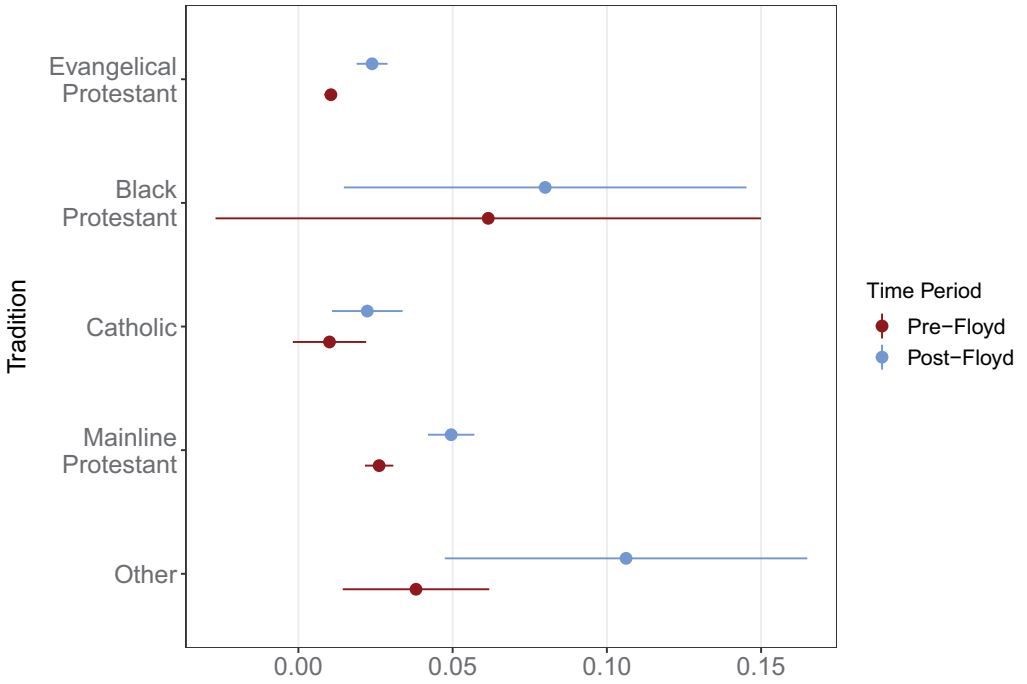

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities of Discussing Racial Issues by Religious Tradition.

Black Protestant congregations have the largest probability of sermonizing on racial issues before Floyd's murder (pre-Floyd), and the second largest probability post-Floyd. Although the estimate is imprecise due to the limited number of Black Protestant congregations in the sample, there is the possibility that Black Protestant churches did not speak about racial justice more often after the killing of George Floyd as concerns about racial injustice have been a mainstay in Black Protestant churches (Cone 2010; Harris 1994; Kalinowski et al. 2024). Put differently, it is possible that the level of discussion of racial justice was already high so there was less room to increase how often it was talked about.

Moving on to our findings for discussions of gun violence, Table 2 shows the results from our five models, where the predictor of interest in each model is one of the mass shootings. Broadly in support of our first hypothesis (H1b), we note a statistically significant increase in the probability of sermonizing on gun violence following the mass shootings in Dayton and El Paso ($\beta = 0.047$, $p < 0.01$), Atlanta ($\beta = 0.012$, $p < 0.01$), Uvalde ($\beta = 0.026$, $p < 0.01$), and Monterey Park ($\beta = 0.003$, $p < 0.1$). Contrary to our expectations, the probability of a sermon including a discussion of gun violence decreases after the Highland Park shooting ($\beta = -0.014$, $p < 0.01$). We believe this may be due to the proximity of the Uvalde and Highland Park shootings, which took place about a month apart. It is possible that churches were discussing the Uvalde tragedy in the month prior and so churches may not have increased their speech on the issue or may have experienced some level of burnout in addressing gun violence.

In terms of differences in response to these tragedies by religious tradition, we ran each model with an interaction between the mass shooting event and dummy variables for each religious tradition (see the Appendix Table A3). Results from the interaction models reveal mixed effects. Relative to evangelical Protestant congregations, mainline Protestant congregations were more likely to address gun violence after the shootings in Dayton/El Paso, Atlanta, and Uvalde but less so after Highland Park, providing partial support for our second hypothesis (H2b). However, we find no interaction effects between the Catholic indicator and any of the mass shootings, and the only effect of note for

Table 2. Probability on Sermonizing on Gun Issues

	DV: Gun Content				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dayton/El Paso	0.047***				
	(0.006)				
Atlanta		0.012***			
		(0.002)			
Uvalde			0.026***		
			(0.003)		
Highland Park				−0.014***	
				(0.003)	
Monterey Park					0.003*
					(0.002)
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cluster Std. Errors	By Cong.	By Cong.	By Cong.	By Cong.	By Cong.
N	2,594	8,288	7,397	4,262	8,587
R^2	0.022	0.009	0.010	0.004	0.003

Notes. DV = Dependent Variable; FE = Fixed Effects.
$^{*}p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$.

Black Protestant congregations is that they seemed to sermonize less on gun violence, relative to evangelical Protestants, after the Atlanta shooting. Unfortunately, the sample of Black Protestant congregations is too small in these subsets of sermons, and we cannot draw any conclusion with certainty based on the results. Lastly, other religious traditions (Unitarian Universalist, Orthodox Christian, Mormon, and Jewish) also spoke more on gun violence after Dayton/El Paso and Uvalde but had no effect after any other shooting event. In sum, the weekly sermons in congregations are more likely to contain discussions of gun violence after a mass shooting, and slightly more so in mainline Protestant sermons.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, a robust content exploration of weekly sermons reveals that discussion of racial justice and gun violence is not as frequent in American congregations as previous studies may suggest. Less than 3 percent of a corpus of approximately 200,000 sermons spanning the period between 2016 and 2023 is related to these issues. Nonetheless, we consistently find that congregations are more likely to discuss racial justice and gun violence following major events around these issues. Using the killing of George Floyd in the first set of model specifications and five mass shootings in the second set of model specifications, we note an increase in the probability that a sermon contains discussions related to these subjects after the tragic event ensues. As expected, in almost all models, we also find that mainline Protestants speak on racial and gun violence issues more relative to evangelical Protestants. While we find that the probability of Black Protestant congregations speaking on racial issues is the highest among all religious traditions (before and after George Floyd's murder), the effect is imprecise due to sample size. Future work should include a larger sample of Black Protestant congregations to estimate their effect more confidently.

The questions we pose in this paper require nuanced answers. The findings we present are only a first look at when and where two important social and moral issues are discussed in American congregations. Given the importance of these two issues, one might expect that clergy, who are perceived as legitimate sources of moral guidance by their congregants, address these tragic events at similar rates. Yet, we find that some congregations are willing to broach these topics with their congregants at a higher rate than others: mainline Protestant clergy are more responsive to these external shocks than evangelical pastors. That said, evangelical churches have also increased their discussion of these topics. These changes in the prevalence of discussion of race in congregations

among elites like clergy point to the power of traumatic events to change the status quo and even impact political behavior (Marsh 2023). Further, these changes might have downstream effects as clergy engage their congregations in discussion around these issues. While the evidence of direct clergy influence on their congregants' political attitudes is mixed (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Smith 2008), some studies have shown that clergy can affect attitudes on issues like immigration (Margolis 2018) and the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch 2004) and even impact political behavior more broadly (McClendon and Riedl 2015). Even if clergy do not directly persuade their congregants to think a certain way, raising these issues may expose members to their coreligionists' attitudes and create norms for the group (Wald et al. 1988, 1990).

In this paper, we find that congregations are more likely to discuss racial justice and gun violence following a tragic event; however, we are not able to examine *how* congregations address them. This is an important next step as previous research suggests different religious traditions employ different frameworks to interpret sociopolitical issues (Edwards 2016; Emerson and Smith 2000; Guhin et al. 2023; Kalinowski et al. 2024; Oyakawa 2019). As Guhin et al. (2023) argue, solely examining the frequency of content on racial issues in clergy speech is not sufficient to understand the efforts and effects of clergy preaching on racial issues. When it comes to racial justice, evangelicals are more likely to adopt a frame of racial reconciliation, minimizing or negating the existence of systemic discrimination, or talking about it as a spiritual issue Edwards (2016); Emerson and Smith (2000); Oyakawa (2019). Guhin et al. (2023) found that when evangelicals, and particularly white evangelicals, sermonize on racial justice, they do so in ways that emphasize individualism, colorblind racism, and the difference between undeserving and deserving poor, which perpetuates white-centric racial ideology. Thus, analyzing the components of racial content in sermons can provide a clearer connection between clergy speech and effects, relative to the presence of racial content alone. On the topic of gun violence, both evangelical Protestant congregations and Black Protestants congregations may be addressing the issue, but while evangelicals may be preaching on the God given right to bear arms and attribute gun violence to individual or relational issues, Black Protestant congregations may address this issue by discussing systemic issues as a cause and call for social reforms (Merino 2018). Moreover, as often is the case, mass shooting events are intertwined with racial dynamics, which may incite some congregations to speak more on some gun-related events than others. Future work should further investigate the content of sermons for the ideology surrounding these issues, and whether the racial dimensions of a given event make it more likely for certain religious traditions to get involved than others.

Finally, research has shown that clergy are highly responsive to the context and the communities in which they exist (Calfano and Djupe 2009; Djupe and Gilbert 2008; Holman and Shockley 2017). They act as "street-level bureaucrats" who, motivated by the need to maintain membership and sustain their institutions, cater to the evolving needs and demands of their congregations (Djupe 2022; Iannaccone 1992). Following the killing of George Floyd, many cities experienced mass protests as part of the BLM movement. These events happened in local communities. Similarly, while mass shootings make national news, they happen in local communities. Are congregations located in the areas where these events happen more likely to speak out on these issues? There is some evidence that this is the case. Sokhey (2007) used the 2001 killing of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed African American youth, to explore how religious interests come together to address racial unrest. He found that, while many religious leaders played prominent roles in promoting racial reconciliation, this engagement decreased as the distance to the center of the riots increased. Sokhey's (2007) finding is in line with Winter's (1966) broader argument that, as churches follow families' migration to suburbs, they become more in tune with the social needs of suburban families relative to the broader community outreach and engagement with pressing social issues. Relatedly, Guhin et al. (2023) found that, as communities become more white, mainline pastors, relative to evangelical pastors, are less likely to discuss issues on civil rights, pointing to the possibility of an interaction between a religious tradition and the racial composition of the community. Similarly, two papers included in this special issue find that congregations are sensitive to the experiences of their immediate communities. Djupe and Neiheisel (2025) found that environmental issues in the community increase the probability that clergy discuss climate issues with their congregation, although the effects are modest, and Holleman, Johnston,

and Mischke (2025) found high levels of engagement with racial issues after George Floyd protests, though the content of their reactions depends heavily on the (likely) reactions of the congregation. All these studies point to a potential explanation for the differences we find in the frequency of race discussions in sermons across congregations *and* religious traditions. Indeed, the location and the immediate needs, experiences, and composition of surrounding communities may offer further explanation for the differences we find. Future work should investigate further how the location and characteristics of surrounding communities of the congregations drive race- and gun-related content in the sermons.

Our sample allows us to contribute to our understanding of political speech in congregations. By using a novel dataset of online sermons across random congregations in the United States, we could minimize the selection bias present in previous studies on these topics. In contrast to congregant and clergy self-reports and centralized depositories of sermons used in previous research, the data in this paper provides a perhaps more realistic snapshot of what congregants hear in their pews. Nonetheless, some limitations in our approach are worth noting. It is possible that the accessibility of online worship by audiences beyond the walls of their congregations may make clergy more cognizant of what they say publicly. Thus, this may impact the clergy's likelihood to engage with political discourse. While this presents a limitation to studies of this nature, it is also a noteworthy point that online worship could arguably amplify the impact of religious messages. Therefore, despite this limitation, the implications of such religious messages warrant thorough investigation, underscoring the importance of this study.

In conclusion, while our study reveals that discussions of racial justice and gun violence remain infrequent in American congregations, it also highlights the responsiveness of clergy to significant societal events. The variations in discourse among different religious traditions suggest a complex landscape where some congregations engage more deeply with these issues than others. This study opens the door for further exploration into how context and community dynamics shape religious dialogue, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the moral frameworks that guide clergy responses. Ultimately, a closer examination of sermon content and its implications can shed light on the evolving role of faith communities in addressing pressing social concerns.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Dictionary Words and Phrases for Selecting Sermons

Topic	Words & Phrases
Racial Justice	"black lives," "blue lives," "blm," "crt," "critical race theory," "race," "racism," "discrimination," "slavery," "equality," "african american," "mlk," "doctor king," "martin luther king," "civil rights," "underground railroad," "george floyd," "breonna taylor," "ahmaud arbery," "michael brown," "freddie gray," "trayvon martin," "george zimmerman," "protest," "police," "police brutality"
Gun Violence	"gun control," "mass shooting," "shooting," "AR-15," "rifle," "background check," "semi automatic," "manifesto," "white supremacy," "second amendment," "self defense," "overreach," "columbine," "aurora," "parkland," "el paso," "atlanta," "massage parlor," "boulder," "orlando," "pulse," "nightclub," "uvalde"

Table A2. Prompts to Human Annotators and LLMs (GPT & T5)

Annotator	Prompt
Human Coders	Read the "text" cell for each observation and determine whether it mentions any discussion on racial issues or gun violence. The discussion on racial issues could involve topics like racism, racial injustice, civil rights movement, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, police brutality, etc. Gun violence topics could include mass shootings (e.g., Atlanta, Parkland, Boulder, Las Vegas, Orlando). Choose from: 1) mentions racial issues, 2) mentions gun violence, 3) mentions both, 4) mentions none. Please read the following excerpt from a religious sermon.
GPT	question <- "You are provided with an excerpt from a religious sermon. It may or may not discuss racial issues in the U.S. Racial issues could involve topics like racism, racial injustice, civil rights, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, police brutality. Respond with '1' for racial issues, or "0' if none. Here's the text:'"question <- "You are provided with an excerpt from a religious sermon. It may or may not discuss gun violence in the U.S. Gun violence could involve topics like mass shootings in Atlanta, Parkland, Boulder, Las Vegas, Orlando. Respond with '1' for gun violence, or "0' if none. Here's the text:'"
T5 Generative Model	instruction = "Which category fits the religious sermon excerpt? 1: Gun Violence: Discussion on gun violence in the U.S. (e.g., mass shootings in Atlanta, Parkland, Boulder, Las Vegas, Orlando). 0: No Gun Violence. Only answer '0' or "1'. Answer: '" instruction = "Which category fits the religious sermon excerpt? 1: Racial Issues: Discussion on racial issues (e.g., racism, racial injustice, civil rights, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, police brutality). 0: No Racial Issues. Only answer '0' or "1'. Answer: '"

Table A3. Additional Results for Gun Violence Analysis

DV: Gun Content					
	(Dayton)	(Atlanta)	(Uvalde)	(Highland)	(Monterey)
Shooting	0.034***	0.007***	0.013***	−0.009***	0.001
	(0.007)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.001)
Black Protestant		−0.001	−0.008	0.139	−0.001
		(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.125)	(0.003)
Catholic	0.010	0.001	−0.007**	−0.005*	−0.001
	(0.010)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Mainline Protestant	−0.004	0.0005	0.005	0.016***	0.006*
	(0.005)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.003)
Other	0.019***	−0.005	−0.012**	−0.009*	−0.007
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Shooting*Black Protestant		−0.007***	0.110		−0.002
		(0.002)	(0.109)	(0.000)	(0.003)
Shooting*Catholic	0.057	−0.001	−0.003	0.005	−0.002
	(0.097)	(0.006)	(0.010)	(0.003)	(0.001)
Shooting*Mainline Protestant	0.035*	0.020***	0.033***	−0.016***	0.008
	(0.020)	(0.006)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Shooting*Other	0.133***	−0.006	0.154**	0.005	−0.004
	(0.007)	(0.004)	(0.062)	(0.007)	(0.003)
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cluster Std. Errors	By Cong.	By Cong.	By Cong.	By Cong.	By Cong.
N	1,868	6,490	5,630	3,249	6,397
R^2	0.030	0.017	0.018	0.013	0.010

Notes: DV = Dependent Variable; FE = Fixed Effects.
$^{*}p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$.