

Religious Government Interaction in Urban Settings

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Abstract : The United States' unique constitutional structure and religious roots have fostered the flourishing of local communities through the close interaction of church and state. Today, these local relationships play out in these circumstances, including increased religious diversity and changing jurisprudence to more accommodating church-state interaction. This project seeks to understand the meanings of church-state interaction among diverse religious leaders in a variety of local settings. Using data from interviews with over 200 religious leaders in six states in the US, we examine how religious groups interact with various non-elected and elected government officials. We have interviewed local religious actors in eight communities characterized by the difference in location and religious homogeneity. These include a small city within a major metropolitan area, several religiously diverse cities in various areas across the country, a small college town with religious diversity set in a religiously-homogenous rural area, and a small farming community with minimal religious diversity. We identified three types of religious actors in each of our geographic areas: congregations, religious non-profit organizations, and clergy coalitions. Given the well-known difficulties in identifying religious organizations, we used the following to construct a local population list from which to sample: the Association of Religion Data Archives ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer, Guidestar, and the Internal Revenue Service Exempt Business Master File. Our sample for selecting interviewees were stratified by three criteria: religious tradition (Christian v. non-Christian), sectarian orientation (Mainline/Catholic v. Evangelical Protestant), and organizational form (congregation vs. other). Each interview included the elicitation of local church-state interactions experienced by the organization and organizational members, the enumeration of information sources for navigating church-state interactions, and the personal and community background of interviewees. We coded interviews to identify the cognitive schema of "church" and "state," the models of legitimate relations between the two, and discretion rules for managing interaction and avoiding conflict. We also enumerate arenas in which and issues for which local state officials are engaged. In this paper, we focus on Korean religious groups and examine how their interactions differ from other congregations, including other immigrant congregations. These churches were particularly common in one large metropolitan area. We find that Korean churches are much more likely to be concerned about any governmental interactions and have fewer connections than non-Korean churches leading to more disconnection from their communities. We argue that due to their status as new immigrant churches without a lot of community ties for many members and being in a large city, Korean churches were particularly concerned about too much interaction with any type of government officials, even ones that could be potentially helpful. While other immigrant churches were somewhat willing to work with government groups, such as Latino-based Catholic groups, Korean churches were the least likely to want to create these connections. Understanding these churches and how immigrant church identity varies and creates different types of interaction is crucial to understanding how church/state interaction can be more meaningful over space and place.

Keywords : religion, congregations, government, politics

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