Religious Homogeneity in Catholics' Friendships

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Abstract

The 1988 and 1998 General Social Surveys (GSS) asked respondents to state the religion of their close friends. These questions have been used infrequently by scholars. This paper provides a brief summary of results for Catholic respondents. The proportion of Catholics' friends who are also Catholic remained stable between 1988 and 1998 at 59 and 58 percent, respectively. Several demographic and religious characteristics are correlated with homogeneity in Catholics' friendships. Income and education are inversely correlated with the proportion of one's friends who are Catholic. This may reflect upward social mobility, which has probably tended to carry Catholics out of tight-knit ethnic sub-communities. Controlling for other factors, those who attend Mass infrequently report lower proportions of Catholic friends than those who attend frequently. To lay groundwork for future research, the paper discusses advantages and disadvantages of using the GSS friendship variables to operationalize "religious communalism."

In *The Religious Factor,* Lenski (1963: 21-2) distinguished two types of religious group membership: "association" and "communalism." Association is participation in a formal group, and Lenski operationalized it as church attendance. Communalism is membership in a network of primary social ties, which he operationalized as number of family members and close friends who share one's religious affiliation. Lenski found that these sometimes produced differing political outcomes. For example, frequent Mass attendance increased the likelihood that Catholics identified as and voted Republican while a greater number of fellow Catholics in their social networks increased the likelihood that they identified as and voted Democrat. In the many years that have passed since Lenski's classic study, church attendance has been used as an independent variable in countless academic studies. However, religious communalism has nearly been forgotten. Friendship variables in the General Social Surveys (GSS), generally neglected by scholars, offer an opportunity to operationalize and analyze communalism today.

Catholics' Friendships

In 1988 and 1998, the GSS asked: "Many people have some good friends they feel close to. Who are your good friends (other than your spouse)? Just tell me their first names." Respondents were allowed to name up to three friends in 1988 and up to five friends in 1998. Next, respondents were asked whether each named friend was a member of their congregation (if any). If not, they were asked the friend's religious identification.

The great majority of respondents provided the name of at least one friend (97 percent did so in the 1988 survey).[1] Among those naming at least one friend, the average number named was 2.7 in 1988 and 3.5 in 1998. Catholics placed themselves close to the overall mean in each year, naming an average of 2.7 friends in 1988 and 3.3 in 1998. Note that the 1988 and 1998 means are not comparable because respondents were allowed to name up to three friends in the former year and up to five in the latter. However, there is some evidence that number of friendships may have declined between the survey years. Seventy-eight percent of all respondents named three friends in 1988 while only 69 percent named three *or more* friends in 1998. For Catholics, the drop was even greater, from 79 to 62 percent. The overall decline may reflect a broader contraction of Americans' social networks since the 1980s (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006).

Catholic respondents in the GSS offer a unique opportunity for examining denominational homogeneity in friendship networks. First, because Catholicism is the largest U.S. denomination, there is an ample sample size for analysis. A total of 701 Catholics gave at least a minimal response of "don't know" regarding the religion of one or more friends (361 in 1988 and 340 in 1998). Second, it appears that many GSS respondents don't often know to which exact denomination their Protestant friends belong (Perl and Park 2000). For example, they may know that a friend is Baptist but not whether he or she is Southern Baptist or National Baptist. They are more likely to know with certainty that a friend is Catholic.

In 1988, the mean proportion of Catholics' friends who are also Catholic was 59 percent. In 1998, it was a nearly identical 58 percent.[2] Thus, even if the number of close friendships is

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[1] Due to use of a complex split ballot, it is more difficult to determine non-response in the 1998 survey.
[2] The proportion for 1998 remains 58 percent if limited to *the first three* named friends.

declining, the proportion who are Catholic is remaining stable. There is also little change within demographic subgroups of Catholics between 1988 and 1998. Because the 1988 and 1998 proportions are so similar, they are not distinguished in most analyses that follow.

Table 1 shows the mean percentage of Catholic respondents' friends in each of four religious groups. On average, Catholics report that 59 percent of their friends are Catholic, 18 percent are Protestant, 4 percent are members of other religions, and 6 percent have no religion. On average, Catholics also report that they don't know the religion of 14 percent of their friends. The results are generally consistent regardless of how many friends are reported.

[Table 1 About Here]

Table 2 presents the mean percentage of Catholics' friends who are also Catholic by a variety of background characteristics. Women have a greater proportion of fellow Catholics among their friends than do men (an average of 62 compared to 53 percent). Though not shown in Table 2, men are more likely than women to say they "don't know" the religion of their friends. Hispanics[3] report a higher proportion of Catholic friends than both Anglos or blacks, presumably reflecting intra-group friendships. Due to the relatively high rate of Catholicism among Hispanics (Perl, Greely, and Gray 2006), having a fellow Hispanic as a friend increases the odds of also having a fellow Catholic as a friend. In general, birth cohort is not strongly related to homogeneity in friendships, although those born prior to 1921 do report a higher proportion of Catholic friends than other respondents.

[Table 2 About Here]

Catholic friendships are more prevalent in the Northeast than other regions of the country. This almost certainly reflects the relatively high proportion of Catholics in the general population of many New England states (Jones et al. 2002). All else being equal, the religion of one's friends tends to reflect the predominate religion of the area in which one resides (Blum 1985; Olson 1998). Similarly, those living in central cities have relatively high proportions of Catholic friends while those living in rural counties have relatively low proportions. This likely reflects the historical and current concentration of Catholics in more urban areas. Geographic mobility has been previously shown to reduce social ties that reinforce one's religiosity (e.g., Welch and Baltzell 1984). However, in the GSS data, those who reside in the same city where they lived at age 16 have only a slightly higher proportion of Catholic friends than those who have moved within the same state, within the same region, or across regions. Note that those who have moved to the United States since age 16 have the highest proportion of Catholic friends. However, this is attributable to the fact that 42 percent of these individuals are Hispanic.

The religious homogeneity of Catholics' friends is strongly related to socioeconomic status; those with higher levels of education and higher incomes tend to report *lower* percentages

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[3] Defined as respondent reporting any ancestry of Mexico, Puerto Rico, or "other Spanish"—or as reporting Spain as the first ancestry or the one with which the respondent most strongly identifies. This definition best approximates self-identification as "Hispanic" in the 2000 and 2004 GSS years. Note that the GSS does not provide Spanish-language interviewing. See Perl, Greely, and Gray (2006) for a more thorough discussion of the problems of using the GSS to examine Hispanic Catholics.

of friends who are fellow Catholics. They are more likely than those with lower socioeconomic status to have Protestant friends. Though it remains uncertain why this is the case, the most likely explanation is that upward social mobility has historically tended to carry Catholics out of tight-knit immigrant sub-communities. Regardless, the results are interesting because few aspects of Catholics' religiosity are so strongly correlated with income. For example, the correlation between family income[4] and frequency of church attendance is 0.09. In comparison, the correlation between family income and percentage of one's friends who are Catholic is -0.21.

Those who were not raised Catholic and later joined the Church have a lower percentage of Catholic friends than do cradle Catholics. This likely reflects the fact that many of their social networks were established prior to converting. Similarly, those married to a non-Catholic have fewer Catholic friends than those married to a Catholic, presumably because some of their friendships are formed through the networks of their spouses.

Finally, the more frequently one attends Mass, the more likely that his or her friends are fellow Catholics. A seemingly reasonable inference is that attending Mass more frequently increases the likelihood of forming friendships at one's parish. However, a closer look at the data casts initial doubt on such an interpretation. Table 3 suggests that those who attend Mass infrequently are simply more likely to say they "don't know" the religion of their friends. It is possible that infrequent attenders are generally indifferent to the topic of religion and don't discuss it often enough to learn the religious identities of all their friends.

[Table 3 About Here]

Table 4 presents Ordinary Least Squares [OLS] regressions that examine simultaneous effects of many predictor variables on the proportion of one's friends who are Catholic. The final model reveals that a few of the correlations evident in Table 2 are non-significant at the multivariate level. Net of effects of other predictor variables, women do not differ from men, those born prior to 1921 do not differ from those born later, and widows do not differ from other respondents. Most of the remaining correlations evident in Table 2 do persist at the multivariate level. Those who attend Mass less frequently report fewer Catholic friends, as do those who were not raised Catholic. Those living in the Northeast and more urban areas have more Catholic friends than those residing in other regions and rural areas. Those with higher levels of income and education have fewer Catholic friends. And Hispanics have more Catholic friends than those of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

[Table 4 About Here]

One of the more interesting findings in Table 4 is that the effect of church attendance becomes stronger as additional predictor variables are added to the model. (Compare the size of the standardized coefficient for attendance across the three models). That is, other demographic variables suppress the effect of attendance. Exploratory analyses (not shown) suggest that this reflect, in part, lower rates of Mass attendance in the Northeast and more urban areas. In other words, it partly reflects the well-known phenomenon that religious commitment tends to be

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[4] The variables INCOME86 and INCOME98, each standardized and then combined into a single variable.

lower in areas where there are higher proportions of co-religionists (e.g., Perl and Olson 2000). It also appears to reflect lower rates of attendance among Hispanics. The existence of these suppressor effects implies that there is a direct relationship between Mass attendance and proportion of one's friends who are Catholic that is not evident at the univariate level in Table 3. Exploratory analyses (results not shown) confirm this. When friends of unknown religion are coded as missing and excluded from calculations, the univariate correlation between attendance and the proportion of one's friends who are Catholic is small non-significant. However in regressions paralleling those in Table 4, the relationship grows in size and becomes significant as demographic variables are added to the model. Thus, the initial inference that frequent Mass attenders may form friendships at their parishes (or through other religious activities) seems reasonable after all.

Using the GSS Friendship Variables to Operationalize Communalism

The GSS friendship variables have been used infrequently by scholars, mostly in unpublished research (e.g., Olson 1998; Sherkat, Ellison, and Moulton 2002). This section of the paper lays groundwork for future research by discussing first disadvantages and then advantages of the measure described above—the proportion of one's friends who are fellow Catholics—for operationalizing Lenski's concept of religious communalism.

A possible disadvantage is greater measurement error for respondents who named fewer friends. For those naming just one friend, the measure takes on just two values, which fall at the extremes (0 and 100 percent). In contrast, for those naming five friends, it can take on six values (0, 20, 40, 60, 80, and 100 percent). However as seen earlier, the proportion of one's friends who are fellow Catholics remains relatively constant regardless of how many friends a respondent names (see Table 1). So even if there is greater measurement error for a given respondent who names just one friend, aggregate level correlations will be reasonably similar for those who named one and five friends. For example, the correlation between family income and percentage of friends who are Catholic is -.21 for those who named one friend and -.17 for those who named five.

Another disadvantage is the lack of information about other characteristics of one's friends. In 1998 (but not 1988) respondents were asked the race or ethnicity of each of their named friends. Beyond this, no information was collected about the friends. Their gender, age, education, etc. remains unknown. The lack of such potential control variables makes it impossible to know with certainty whether effects of communalism reflect the religion one's friends rather than something else about them. However at the present stage, this is a minor disadvantage. There has been little or no research into effects of religious communalism in years. Simply demonstrating that communalism predicts outcome variables constitutes an advance in knowledge. Later research can seek to determine whether any relationships are spurious.

A series of discussion network questions asked by the GSS in 1985 and 2004 provide more extensive control variables. Respondents were asked: "From time to time, most people discuss important matters with other people. Looking back over the last six months who are the

people with whom you discussed matters important to you?" They were allowed to name up to six individuals. Then they were asked several follow-up questions about the first five of these individuals. In addition to religion, information was gathered on the respondent's closeness with each person; the amount of time the respondent has known each; and each person's age, gender, and education (not an exhaustive list). See Marsden 1987 for more information on the network variables.

However, the friendship variables provide a significant practical advantage over the 1985 and 2004 discussion network questions. Recall that just 3 percent of respondents in 1988 failed to name any friends. In comparison, 10 percent of respondents in 1985 and 27 percent in 2004 reported that they do not discuss important matters with any anybody. This may provide important information about the limits of Americans' discussion networks (McPherson et al 2006), but it creates difficulty in transforming the data into an independent variable. It is not clear what to do with the individuals who report no discussion networks, other than to code them as missing. Perhaps this is why the discussion network variables have rarely if ever been used as independent variables.

Another advantage of the friendships variables is that they are clearly focused on one type of social contact. In comparison, the 1985 and 2004 discussion network questions encompass all types of social relationships. An average of 57 percent of discussants named in response to these questions are relatives (not surprisingly, since they are people with whom respondents discuss important matters). Among respondents who named just one individual, the average is even higher—73 percent. This is not inherently a problem. After all, Lenski's concept of communalism includes social ties with family as well as close friends. However, one-third of respondents in 1985 and 2004 named *only* family members and one-fifth named *no* family members. It becomes difficult to treat such respondents equally. For Catholic respondents who named no relatives, the average proportion of fellow Catholics in their discussion network is 48 percent. For those who named only relatives, the average is 82 percent.

The friendship questions allow researchers to uniformly measure social ties with coreligionists beyond immediate kin. The exclusion of relatives is hardly a disadvantage. GSS questions about the religion of one's spouse and the religion in which one was raised offer ample opportunity to examine effects of religious homogeneity within families. And unlike the discussion network questions, they do so directly and uniformly. In fact, a good deal of research has already examined effects of having a spouse who shares one's religion (with regard to Catholicism, see for example Davidson et al. 1997). The 1988 and 1998 friendship questions allow research to move beyond this and examine effects of being immersed in a broader community of fellow Catholics.

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Table 1
Mean Percentage of Catholics' Friends Identifying with Each Religion
by Number of Friends Named

	All Catholic Respondents	Number of Friends Named				
		One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Religion of Friends						
Catholic	59	63%	60%	57%	51%	60%
Protestant	18	9	17	21	21	15
Other Religion	4	6	4	4	6	3
No Religion	6	9	2	6	6	6
Don't Know	14	13	17	13	17	16
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	701	86	122	335	26	132

Table 2
Mean Percentage of Catholics' Friends who are also Catholic
by Selected Background Characteristics

	Percentage Catholic	N
All Catholic Respondents	59%	701
Gender		
Male	53%	286
Female	62	415
Race or Ethnicity		
Anglo[a]	55%	521
Hispanic	69	129
Black, not Hispanic	56	22
Birth Cohort		
1920 or Earlier	74%	78
1921-1930	64	57
1931-1940	52	73
1941-1950	54	124
1951-1960	54	153
1961-1970	57	156
1971-1980	64	60
Major Census Region		
Northeast	67%	233
Midwest	52	189
South	57	153
West	55	126
Rural-Urban Location		
Central City of 100 Largest SMSAs	67	160
Suburb of 100 Largest SMSAs	56	249
Other Urban County	58	248
Rural County	43	44
Geographic Mobility Since Age 16		
Lives in Same City	60%	309
Different City in Same State	56	159
Different State in Same Major Census Region	50	62
Different Major Census Region	53	102
Moved from Outside U.S. to U.S.	74	65

Percentage of Catholics' Friends who are also Catholic
by Selected Background Characteristics

	Percentage Catholic	N
Highest Degree		
Less than High School	67%	146
High School	59	386
Junior College	59	40
Bachelor's	52	87
Graduate	36	39
Family Income (in Approximate Quartiles)[b]		
Lowest	69%	156
Second	56	162
Third	57	144
Highest	47	166
Religion at Age Sixteen		
Catholicism	60%	630
Other Religion or None	42	71
Marital Status		
Never Married	59%	169
Married to a Catholic[c]	62	146
Married to a non-Catholic[c]	46	46
Separated or Divorced	56	111
Widowed	74	76
Church Attendance		
Never or Less than Yearly	50%	146
Once or Several Times Yearly	54	172
At Least Monthly, Not Weekly	60	166
Weekly	66	217

[a]Race is white and respondent is not Hispanic; in addition, primary ancestry is not Native American, Asian, or Pacific Islander.
[b]The variables INCOME86 and INCOME98. To control for inflation between 1988 and 1998, quartiles are calculated within-year.
[c]Religion of spouses is available for 1988 only. Percentages for the other marital subgroups reflect both years.

Table 3
Mean Percentage of Catholics' Friends Identifying with Each Religion
by Church Attendance

| | All Catholic Respondents | Frequency of Church Attendance | | | |
		Never or Less than Yearly	Once or Several Times Yearly	At Least Monthly, Not Weekly	Weekly
Religion of Friends					
Catholic	59%	50%	54%	60%	66%
Protestant	18	13	18	17	20
Other Religion	4	5	7	3	2
No Religion	6	10	5	4	5
Don't Know	14	23	16	15	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	701	146	172	166	217

Table 4
OLS Regressions of Percentage of Catholics' Friends who are also Catholic
on Selected Background Characteristics

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients		
Religious Characteristics			
Church Attendance	0.17*	0.20*	0.23*
Not Raised Catholic	-0.15*	-0.13*	-0.10*
Census Region[a]			
Midwest		-0.16*	-0.14*
South		-0.09*	-0.10*
West		-0.10*	-0.11*
Urban-Rural Location[b]			
Central City		0.23*	0.22*
Suburb		0.13	0.18*
Other Urban County		0.16*	0.16*
Basic Demographics			
Female			0.06
Widowed			0.05
Family Income[c]			-0.10*
Highest Degree[d]			-0.12*
Birth Cohort[e]			
1920 or Earlier			-0.01
1921-1930			-0.03
1931-1940			-0.06
1941-1950			-0.08
1951-1960			-0.06
1961-1970			-0.05
Race and Ethnicity			
Hispanic, Resided in U.S. at Age 16			0.08*
Hispanic, Resided outside U.S. at Age 16			0.11*
Black			-0.03
R^2	0.05	0.10	0.18

N=701
*$p<.05$
[a]The suppressed reference category is Northeast.
[b]The suppressed reference category is Rural County.
[c]Missing values have been imputed using information on age, race, and occupation.
[d]The variables INCOME86 and INCOME98, standardized within year and combined. Missing values have been imputed using regression techniques.
[e]The suppressed reference category is 1971-1980.