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The Impact of Political Polarization on Church Life in the Upper Midwest

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Recommended Citation

Bramsen, Andrew, "The Impact of Political Polarization on Church Life in the Upper Midwest" (2023). *Day of Scholarship*. 26.

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The Impact of Political Polarization on Church Life and Spiritual Formation

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Abstract

Political polarization in the USA has been rapidly increasing since the 1990s. During that same time period, demographic data has shown both a growing population of religious “nones” who no longer identify with a faith tradition and a declining influence for churches and church leaders as the political identities of American Christians becomes more and more central to who they are.

This presentation explores this dynamic, examining how rising polarization is impacting church life by drawing on twenty-six interviews with upper Midwest pastors that the author conducted during his 2021 sabbatical. Across denominational lines and urban, rural and suburban contexts, pastors expressed deep concern about the impact of political polarization on their churches and gave specific examples of the challenges this is creating. The interviews suggested that the particular challenges polarization created for church life varied based primarily on geographic location, not denominational difference.

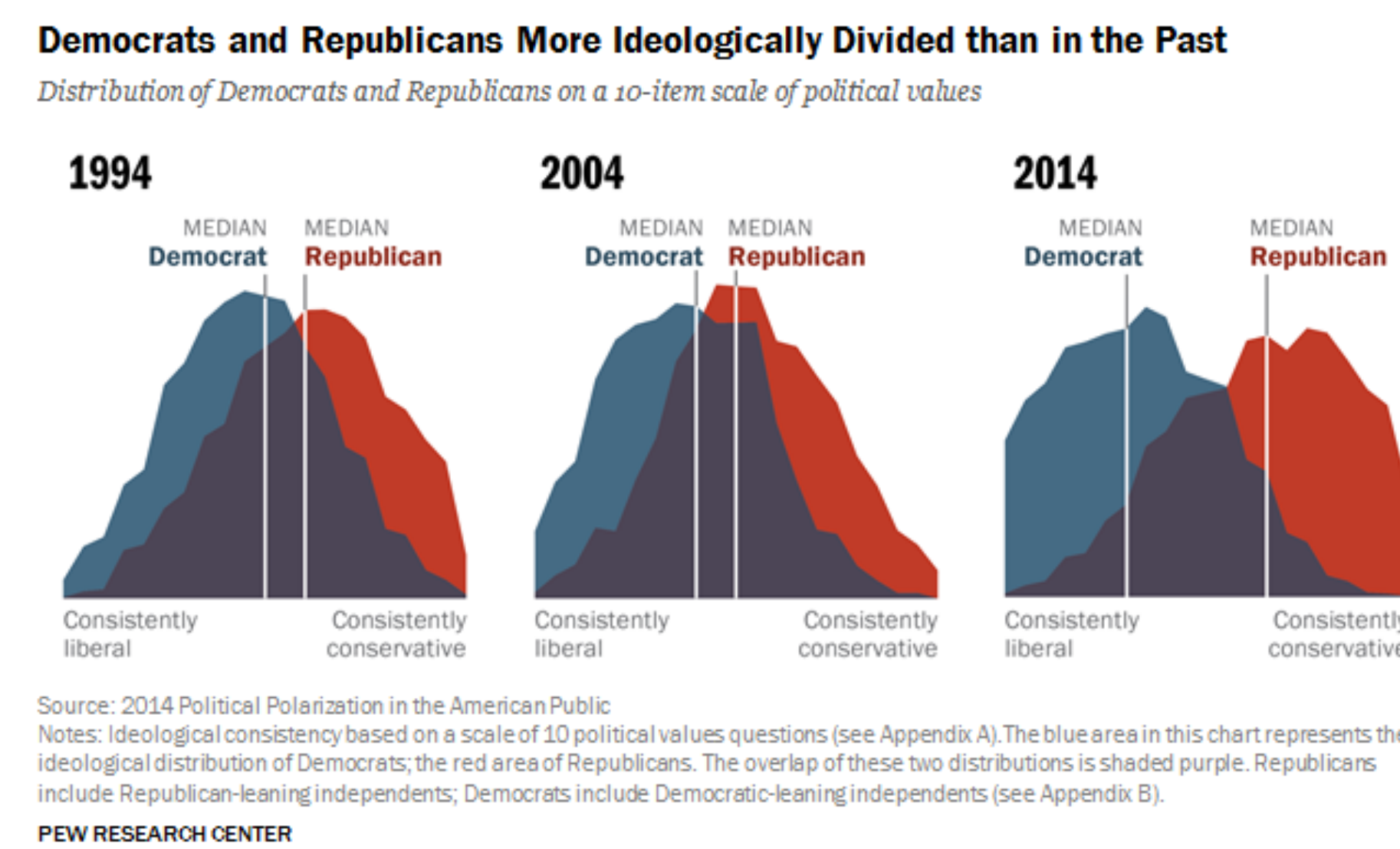
References

- Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone” (1995)
 - Decline of civic connection
- Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace* (2010)
 - American Grace = “web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths” (p. 550)
- Liliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (2018)
 - Tribalism triumphant
- Michele Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews* (2018)
 - Politics driving religious identity and practice
- Shadi Hamid, “America Without God,” *The Atlantic* (April 2021)
 - “As religious faith has declined, ideological intensity has risen. Will the quest for secular redemption through politics doom the American idea?”
- Timothy Dalrymple, “The Splintering of the Evangelical Soul,” *Christianity Today* (April 16, 2021)
 - Vulnerability on “information,” crisis of authority, and loss of community

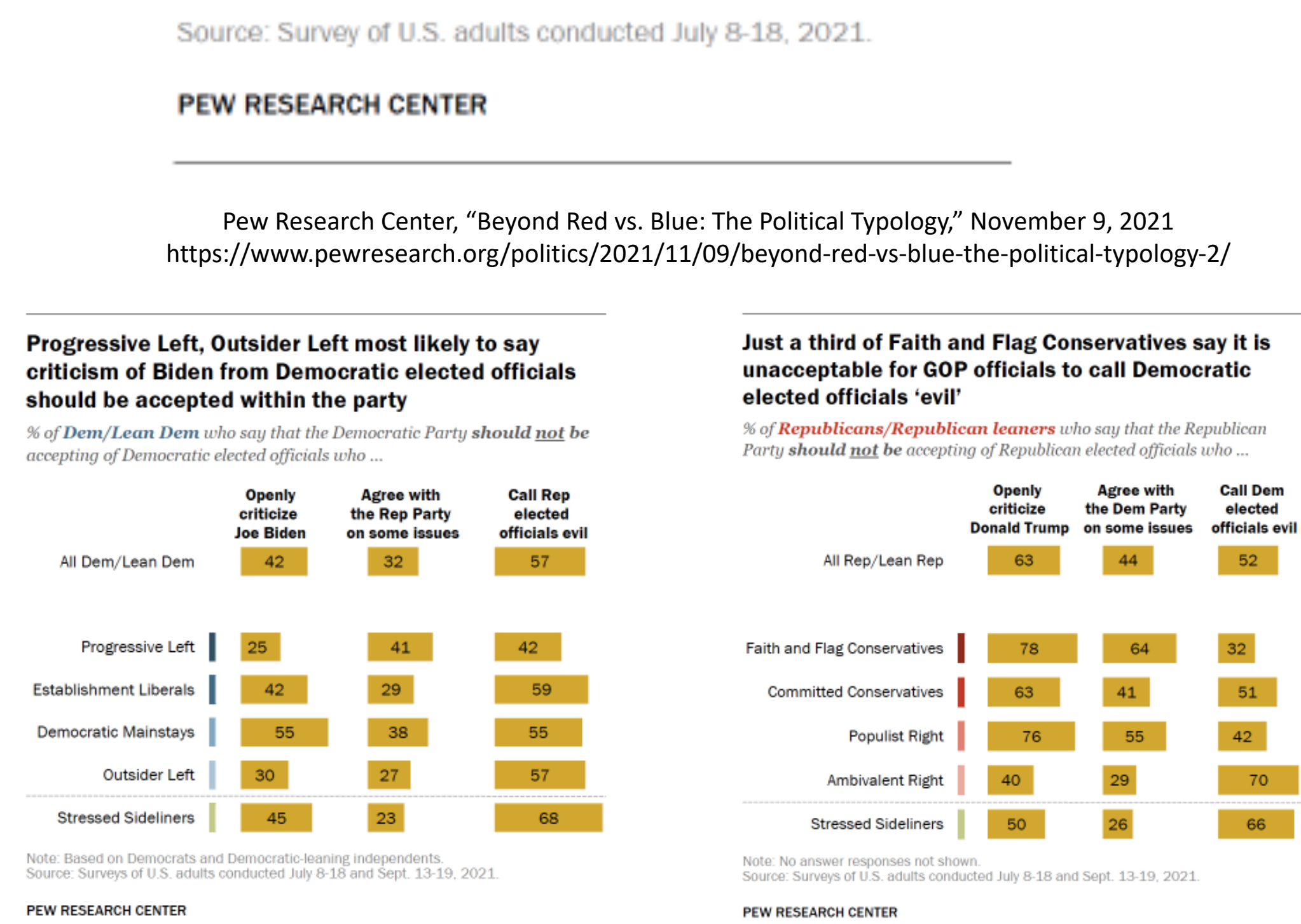
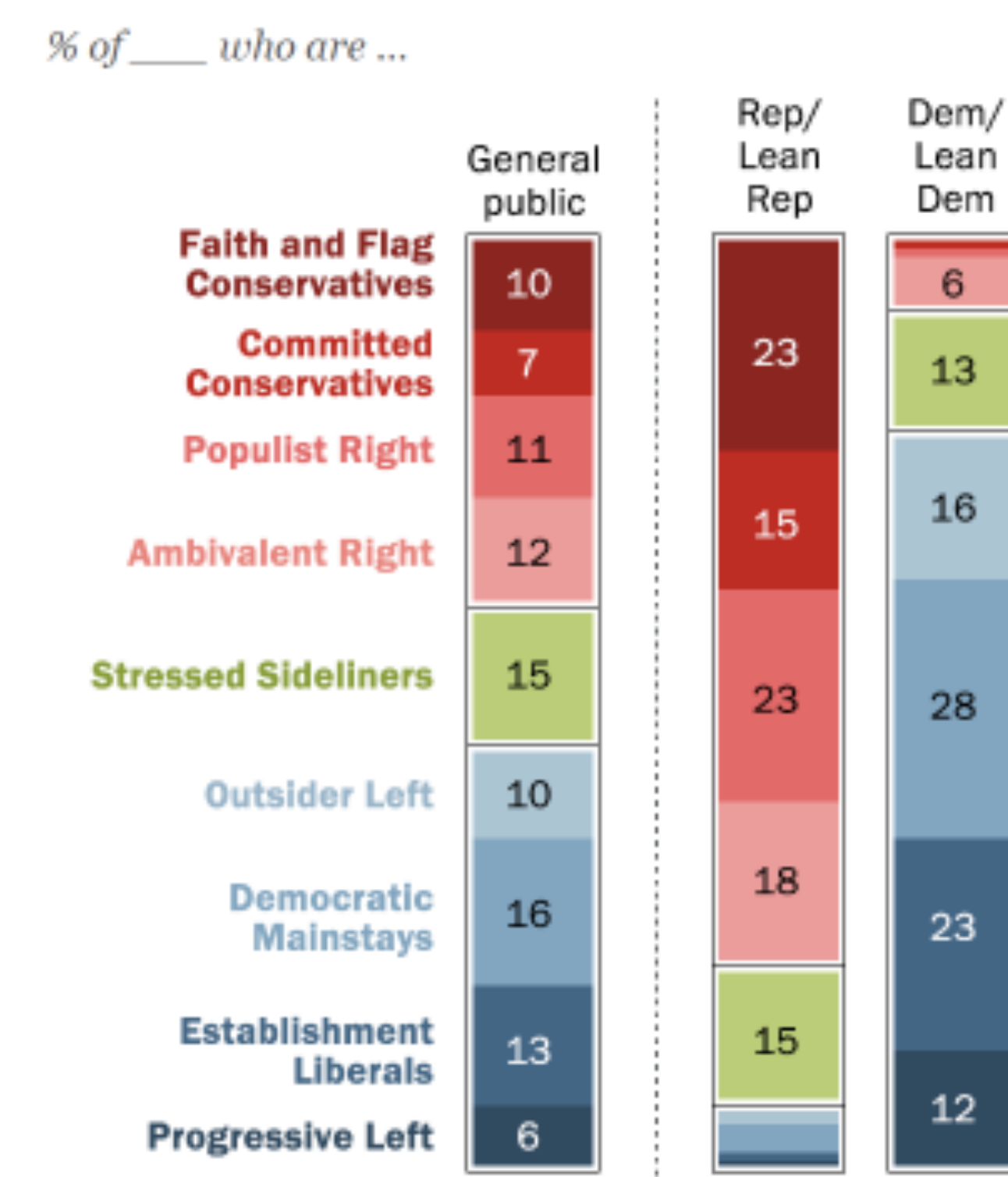
Background

Social science data: growing ideological polarization in the United States

My research and writing: how faith shapes political engagement (and increasingly how the opposite is true)



The 2021 political typology



My research

Aim: Get a better understanding of what this looks like on the ground

Method: Interviewed pastors from a variety of denominations and in a variety of settings

Key findings

General concerns

- Problem of commitment / apathy / primary identity in Jesus
- Church involvement with tensions in the broader society

Geographic concerns (disproportionately impacting these churches)

- Urban - aging, poverty, finances
- Suburban - loss of connection, apathy, not really being formed by Church life
- Rural - disagreement about Covid, concerns about Christian nationalism, allegiance to Jesus

Common concern among most pastors that political divisions are having an adverse spiritual impact on their congregations

- Interesting exception: minority pastors
 - Some possible reasons
 - Other issues more central
 - Amount of duties bi-vocational pastors are juggling
 - Used to mainstream society not reflecting values
 - Artifact of my research (small number of minority pastors)

Differences less about denominational gaps and more about geography

- Focus on environment
- Reaction to Biden win in comparison to reaction to January 6th
- Tone on moral issues (abortion, LGBTQ)

Particular reflections from pastors

Rural Churches

Baptist

- Discussed 6 January and George Floyd protests and noted a similar problem of pent-up frustration – how should we respond?

Methodist

- Reading blogs like QAnon has become a kind of quasi-devotional practice in some people's minds

Lutheran

- In preaching and teaching, calling congregation to fix eyes on Jesus, but when other political side gets demonized, there is a tendency for congregants to let go of things Jesus said that don't fit with their politics, e.g. care for poor, seeking justice for marginalized, loving enemies

Suburban Churches

Catholic

- “Tremendous tug and pull to have churches align with dominant political and social ideology out there”

Anglican

- The “evangelism” for other belief systems that people are caught up in leaves almost no space for them to hear the church

Covenant

- “The challenge has always been how to encourage one another to deeper, more meaningful life-engaging, transforming faith”

Urban Churches

Baptist

- Should hold what it means to be the church more highly than politics, recognizing the limits of the spectrum provided by liberal democracy. Gospel does not fit neatly with that, but we've allowed that spectrum to define and constrain how we engage with the world around us.

Baptist

- Will people walk away from faith if insufficient space is created for their questions?

Concluding implications

For the Church: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” / Who is in our primary community?

For the state and for democracy: Having a “rich soil” for political flourishing requires that politics be less central

Acknowledgements

This research was carried out during my spring 2021 sabbatical from Bethel University. I'm grateful to Bethel for the funding for the sabbatical, as well as for funding to attend the Symposium on Religion and Public Life and present a paper on this research during the spring of 2022.