



## Deus Ex Machina: The Influence of Polling Place on Voting Behavior

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*Voting is perceived as free and rational. Citizens make whatever choices they wish, shielded from external influences by the privacy of the voting booth. The current paper, however, suggests that a subtle source of influence—polling places themselves—can impact voting behavior. In two elections, people voting in churches were more likely to support a conservative candidate and a ban on same-sex marriage, but not the restriction of eminent domain. A field experiment found that people completing questionnaires in a chapel awarded less money (relative to people in a secular building) to insurance claimants seeking compensation for abortion pills, but not to worker's compensation claimants. A laboratory experiment found that people subliminally exposed to ecclesiastical images awarded less money (relative to people exposed to control images) to abortion pill claimants, but not to worker's compensation claimants. Exposure to ecclesiastical images affected only Christians; non-Christians' awards were unaffected by the prime. These findings show that polling locations can exert a powerful and precise influence on political attitudes and decision making.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Voting, Elections, Polling place, Priming, Churches

The act of voting seems like the utmost expression of free and rational behavior. People are free to make any choice they wish for any reason, shielded from coercive influences by the privacy and anonymity of the voting booth. Indeed, election laws are designed to ensure that voting occurs in an environment free from external pressures. For example, campaign signs are typically banned near polling places (e.g., Wis. Act, 2005); in 2004, when an initiative on taxpayer funding of a new stadium for the Dallas Cowboys was on the ballot in Arlington, TX, voters were prohibited from wearing Cowboys paraphernalia or required to cover it with a paper smock (Stewart, 2004). In this paper, I argue that, despite these efforts to protect voters from external influences, the places in which people vote can serve as primes that influence their attitudes and behavior. Specifically, I

suggest that the presence of churches activates Christian values and attitudes and can thereby influence voting.

Traditional analyses conceptualized voting as highly rational, with citizens' candidate choices (Markus & Converse, 1979) and the decision to vote at all (e.g., Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968) resulting from implicit cost-benefit analyses. Of course, voters' attitudes can be influenced, as campaign strategists well know. Racial cues (Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002), appeals to emotion (Brader, 2005), and news media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997) have all been shown to impact political attitudes. Although there is some recent evidence that long-term exposure to media can affect voting behavior (Druckman, 2004), the act of voting is typically viewed as resistant to short-term pressures; indeed, many voting models treat transient influences as random error (e.g., Wittman, 1989). Certainly, voting decisions are presumed to result from voters' attitudes—whatever their origin—at the time they enter the polling station. There is reason to believe, however, that physical settings, including some locations used as polling places, can serve as primes and exert a subtle yet powerful influence on political decision making.

The encoding specificity literature has shown that locations can serve as cues to facilitate memory (Tulving & Thomson, 1973). Information learned in one location is more easily recalled in the same location (Smith, Glenberg, & Bjork, 1978); conditioned fear responses are more likely to recur in the presence of contextual stimuli that were present when the fear response was established (LaBar & Phelps, 2005). Locations can cue attitudes and behavior by an analogous process: just as exposure to the location where information was learned facilitates the recall and use of that information, exposure to the location where values and attitudes were learned can facilitate the activation of those values and attitudes. Like other priming processes, this facilitation is probably subtle. Although people can, of course, pay attention to the peripheral details of their environment, they rarely do; the encoding and eventual impact of these cues likely takes place outside of the perceiver's conscious awareness.

The suggestion that certain locations can nonconsciously prime norms, attitudes, and behaviors is not unprecedented. For example, people interviewed in front of a funeral home rated a series of charities as more beneficial to society and more personally important than did people interviewed several blocks away from the funeral home (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). According to terror management theory, reminders of death lead people to compensate by placing increased importance on cultural values (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), in this case the goodness of charity. Similarly, the presence of funeral homes caused people to overestimate the popularity of their own political views (Pyszczynski et al., 1996). In another demonstration of the behavioral impact of physical settings, Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, and Ross (2004) found that people in corporate settings behave more competitively in negotiation games

than do people in neutral settings. Some locations, in fact, have such strong ties to social norms that merely being exposed to images of them is sufficient to activate the corresponding norm. For example, Aarts and Dijksterhuis (2003) demonstrated that exposing participants to pictures of a library activated the norm of “silence” (for participants who believed they would later go to the library) and caused them to speak more quietly in a subsequent task. Collectively, these studies show that environmental cues present in certain locations can influence attitudes and behavior.

Just as funeral homes prime mortality, corporate settings prime competitiveness, and libraries prime silence, churches most likely prime Christian values. Such values, in turn, are associated with political attitudes, and their activation could conceivably influence political decision making. Religiosity in general and Christianity in particular have long been linked to political conservatism (e.g., Miller & Wattenberg, 1984; Petersen & Takayama, 1984). Stronger religious commitment, particularly among evangelical Christians, has been shown to relate to generally conservative attitudes (Layman, 1997) and to conservative attitudes on political issues such as abortion (Zucker, 1999). These findings are supported by national surveys showing that Christians have consistently supported Republican candidates more strongly than seculars, and that, among Christians, more frequent church attendance is associated with stronger Republican support (Green, 2007). With respect to specific issues, in comparison to seculars, self-identified Christians are more likely to believe that saving embryos is more important than conducting stem cell research, to oppose the availability of morning-after pills without prescriptions, to believe that abortion should not be generally available, and to oppose same-sex marriage. Furthermore, the frequency of church attendance strongly predicts opposition to same-sex marriage: 82% of people who attend church at least weekly oppose same-sex marriage, compared to 60% of people who attend church monthly or less and 45% of people who attend church seldom or never (Lugo et al., 2006). Of course, as Christianity is such a diverse religion, its relation to political attitudes is far from monolithic. Although Christian conservatism is strongly associated with political conservatism, doctrinal liberalism has been linked to political liberalism (Stellway, 1973), and some denominations have historically been sources of considerable liberal activism (Green, 2003). However, despite this individual and denominational political diversity, Christian religiosity is generally associated with political conservatism, and I hypothesize that the presence of churches will likely activate politically conservative attitudes for the majority of voters.

### **Approach of the Current Research**

To assess the impact of churches on voting behavior, I adopted a three-pronged strategy. First, I examined data from two elections, comparing the results of votes cast in churches to votes cast in other polling places. Next, I conducted a field experiment in which participants evaluated two insurance claims, one

relevant and one irrelevant to Christian values, while standing in either a chapel or an academic building. Last, I conducted a laboratory experiment in which participants were subliminally exposed to ecclesiastical or control images before completing the insurance claims decision-making task.

### Study 1

In the 2004 general election, South Carolina's 6th congressional district chose between two major-party candidates for U.S. Representative with sharply contrasting political ideologies: Democratic incumbent James Clyburn and conservative Republican challenger Gary McLeod. If voters are primed by churches, relatively conservative attitudes relevant to Christian values should be made more accessible. I therefore hypothesized that McLeod would perform better in precincts located in churches than in precincts located in other places.

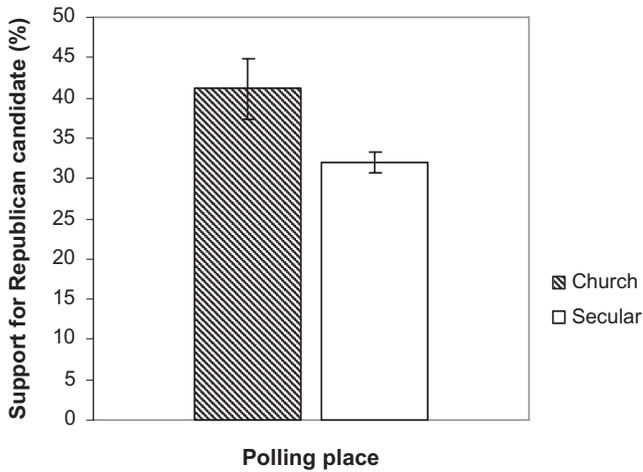
#### *Method*

Election results, polling location information, and precinct-level partisan composition were obtained from the South Carolina State Election Commission's website (<http://www.scvotes.org>). Partisan composition (i.e., the ratio of Democrats to Republicans) was used to address the issue of preexisting differences in political conservatism between precincts. As people typically register for political parties in a different setting from that in which they vote (often registering by mail or via the motor vehicle registration system, and frequently doing so several years before the election), voters' preexisting party identification is not affected by their current polling location. Controlling for this variable at the precinct level, then, ensured that any differences observed in voting patterns between precincts could not be explained by the partisan affiliation of their residents. Although party identification is not a perfect proxy for political conservatism, in practice there is considerable overlap between the two. Data were available for 406 precincts in the 6<sup>th</sup> district; analyses considered 35 churches and 371 secular locations.

#### *Results and Discussion*

I conducted a precinct-level analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in which polling location was the independent variable, percent support for McLeod was the dependent variable, and partisan composition was the covariate. As expected, McLeod performed better in churches (receiving 41% of the vote, adjusting for precinct-level partisan composition) than in secular locations [32%;  $F(1,402) = 3.91, p = .05$ ]. These data are displayed in Figure 1.

This finding suggests that polling place location can be associated with differences in voting behavior. However, it is conceivable that this effect was



**Figure 1.** 2004 Election results (Study 1). Mean support for Republican candidate by polling location, controlling for precinct partisan composition.

specific to these candidates, reflecting an impact on how these two particular men were evaluated (perhaps due to some idiosyncratic difference between them) rather than the hypothesized impact on voters' political attitudes. In addition, although party identification is a good (if imperfect) proxy for political conservatism, no other precinct-level data were available to rule out alternative demographic explanations for the observed finding. Study 2 addressed these limitations.

## Study 2

The design of Study 2 improved in two ways on that of Study 1. First, it examined a specific political issue relevant to Christian political values and compared it to a neutral issue. If the predicted polling place effect occurs on the Christian-relevant issue but not on the neutral issue, it is less likely that the polling place effect is driven by unexplained differences in the voters assigned to each polling place. Second, precinct-level data were available for age, race, and sex, enabling statistical control of these factors.

Study 2 examined the 2006 general election, in which South Carolinians voted on several proposed amendments to the state constitution. One amendment sought to establish the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, an issue shown by polling data to be associated with Christian political values. Another proposed amendment sought to restrict the state's powers of eminent domain, an issue likely irrelevant to Christian values. I predicted that polling places would influence voting on the amendment relevant to Christian political values, but not on the irrelevant amendment.

### *Method*

As in Study 1, electoral data were obtained from the South Carolina State Election Commission's Web site. As one of the amendments analyzed concerned the state's power of eminent domain, an a priori decision was made to exclude government buildings (e.g., town halls, police stations) from analyses; seven Christian-affiliated nonchurches (e.g., YMCAs, Knights of Columbus halls) were also excluded. Thus, analyses considered 438 churches and 1,030 secular locations.

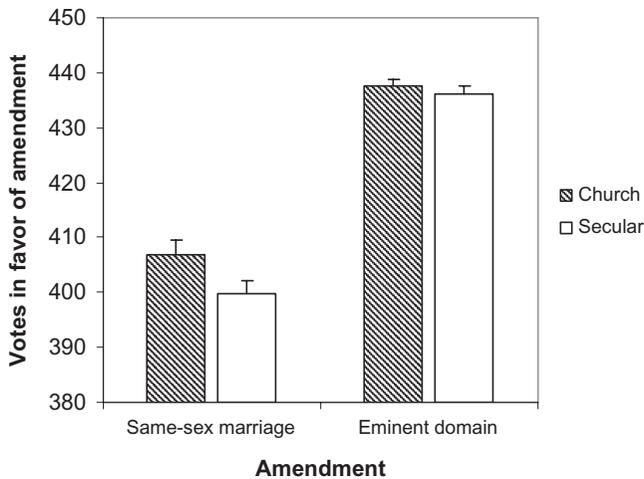
### *Results and Discussion*

To analyze these data, I conducted precinct-level analyses of covariance in which polling location was the independent variable, the number of votes for each amendment was the dependent variable, and precinct size and demographic composition (sex, race, age, and party identification) were covariates. Because the prevalence of churches is suggestive of both the religiosity of a precinct's residents and the likelihood of a church being selected as a polling place (simply by virtue of being the most convenient large building in the area, for example), the number of churches per capita at the county level<sup>1</sup> was included as an additional covariate. The definition of marriage amendment was supported more strongly in churches (83.0% voting yes, adjusting for all covariates) than in secular locations [81.5% voting yes;  $F(1,1456) = 6.34, p = .01$ ]. However, the eminent domain amendment was supported equally in different polling places [91.8% vs. 91.5%;  $F(1,1456) = 1.14, p = .29$ ]; these data are displayed in Figure 2. Thus, polling places were related to voting behavior only on the amendment relevant to Christian political values. This selective influence suggests that the effect is not driven by unexplained differences in the voters assigned to each polling place, particularly as it occurred after controlling for race, gender, age, church prevalence, and party affiliation.

### **Study 3**

Although the effect observed in Study 2 occurred after controlling for party affiliation and many demographic characteristics, the study was correlational, and alternative explanations for the effect—perhaps most notably, potential differences in religiosity at the precinct level—cannot be eliminated. I therefore conducted two experiments to examine the causal impact of the presence of churches on decision making.

<sup>1</sup> Data downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.theARDA.com](http://www.theARDA.com), and collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.



**Figure 2.** 2006 Election results (Study 2). Mean support for amendment by polling location, controlling for precinct age, sex, racial, and partisan composition and county churches per capita.

First, however, it was important to conduct an additional examination of the nature of Christian values in the context of politics. At the individual level, it may be that the *actual* political beliefs of Christians are less important than the way that “Christian values” are *perceived* in a political context in determining the impact of churches on political attitudes at the individual level. That is, the values and attitudes implicitly activated by the presence of a church could be those that a person associates with Christianity; these may not be the same as those they personally endorse, or those that actually tend to be endorsed by Christians. As the literature on religion and politics has focused on the latter sets of attitudes, I conducted a study to further examine the perceived associations between Christian values and political attitudes and issues.

In this study, I asked participants to report their beliefs about the meaning of Christian values in a political context. The objective, then, was to examine the nature of beliefs *about* the political meaning of Christian values, rather than to examine individual Christians’ beliefs and political attitudes. A secondary objective was to assess the way that Christian values were represented in the population in which the experimental studies were conducted.

### *Method*

Twenty-eight students (16 females, 12 males) in an introductory psychology class participated in the study for course credit. Participants were informed that the study examined political attitudes, were seated in individual cubicles, and were given a questionnaire.

The questionnaire first asked participants to report their political attitudes on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 representing liberal and 5 representing conservative. Next, participants rated “Christian values in a political context” on the same 1–5 scale. In this way, I assessed participants’ representations of the general political meaning of Christian values. Participants then answered the question, “What specific political issues are associated with Christian values?” in a free-response format. Last, participants completed a demographic questionnaire in which they reported their religion (as well as their age, class year, and other variables irrelevant to the study). Nineteen participants’ responses were coded as Christian (including Catholic, Lutheran, Protestant, and Christian); nine participants’ responses were coded as non-Christian (including Jewish, atheist, and “none”).

### *Results*

Although individuals’ political attitudes varied widely, all participants believed that the attitudes reflective of “Christian values in a political context” were as conservative ( $n = 4$ ) or more conservative ( $n = 24$ ) than their own ( $t = 7.68, p < .01$ ). The difference between personal attitudes and perceived Christian attitudes was significant ( $p < .01$ ) for both Christian and non-Christian participants. Thus, Christian values were perceived as politically conservative in both an absolute and relative sense. As I have noted, Christianity is extremely diverse; the views of both individual Christians and different denominations span the political spectrum. However, in this study, this diversity was not reflected in people’s beliefs about how “Christian values” translate into political attitudes. Rather, these findings imply that most people believe that “Christian attitudes” are more conservative than their own.

In addition to conservatism in general, Christian values were perceived to be associated with specific positions on various political issues. Asked to identify political issues relevant to Christian values, participants in the preliminary study listed abortion (named by 27 of the 28 participants), same-sex marriage (17), capital punishment (6), and stem cell research (5) most frequently. These results are consistent with extant research on the political attitudes most frequently endorsed by self-identified Christians (Lugo et al., 2006). Study 3 provides further evidence, then, that elections in which these issues are prominent should be particularly subject to influence by church-primed Christian values.

### **Study 4**

To examine the causal impact of the presence of churches on political decision making, I first conducted a field experiment. In this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to complete a decision-making task in one of two locations: a chapel or an academic building. After entering one of the two buildings, par-

ticipants completed a voting analog, playing the role of insurance adjusters and evaluating two claims. One claimant sought compensation for the use of an “abortion pill”; the other claimant sought compensation for a work-related injury. The former claim is relevant to Christian values; the latter is not. Because greater accessibility of Christian values should lead to relatively stronger anti-abortion attitudes, I predicted that participants in the chapel would award less money than participants in the academic building to the abortion pill claimant, but would not award less money to the workmen’s compensation claimant.

### *Method*

Participants (43 females, 34 males) were recruited from an introductory psychology class and told that they were participating in an experiment about decision making. When recruited, participants were not given a specific location to report to; instead, they were contacted 24 hours before the experimental session and given the location at that time. In this way, participants could be randomly assigned to locations, avoiding the possibility of their self-selection into experimental conditions.

Two locations were used to administer the decision-making task. The first was the atrium of a nondenominational chapel on the university campus. Although no specific religion is endorsed by the chapel, it is similar in layout and appearance to a Christian church. From the atrium, participants had a clear view down the chapel’s center aisle. The second location was the lobby of an academic building on the same campus. This building, which houses the English and Philosophy Departments, was selected because it, like the chapel, is large, centrally located, ornate, and culturally significant (it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places). From the lobby, participants had a view of several stories of classroom and office doors leading from a series of hallways and staircases.

One male experimenter was positioned in each location during each experimental session, with one participant assigned to each location; this approach enabled control for weather, time of day, and similar factors. The two experimenters were counterbalanced by location, so that each of them conducted an equal number of sessions in each location. After reporting to the assigned location, participants were greeted by the experimenter and asked to complete the decision-making task.

In this task, participants were instructed to play the role of insurance claims adjusters and were told that they would be awarding money to several claimants. They were instructed to consider the language of the policy and the specific claim, but also to use their own judgment in making awards. The claimants’ policies and the circumstances of their cases were described in such a way that the validity of the claims was subject to participants’ discretion. Participants awarded payments to both the abortion pill claimant and the workmen’s compensation claimant in counterbalanced order. Participants were allowed to award any amount of money

up to the amounts requested; as the maximum permissible award was slightly different (to avoid arousing suspicion) in the two claims, the percentage of the maximum award was the dependent variable. Thus, the task served as a voting analog that offered the sensitivity of a continuous measure. After completing the decision-making task, participants were probed for suspicion, debriefed, and dismissed.

### Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed a significant multivariate effect [ $F(2,74) = 3.07, p = .05$ ] in the predicted direction; participants in the chapel awarded relatively less money to the abortion pill claimant than did participants in the academic building. Unexpectedly, participants in the chapel also awarded more money to the worker's compensation claimant than did participants in the academic building. The overall pattern, though, was consistent with hypotheses: participants in the chapel awarded less money to the abortion pill claimant, relative to the awards they gave to the worker's compensation claimant, than did participants in the academic building. These findings are displayed in Figure 3. This suggests that the presence of the chapel lowered participants' awards in the case relevant to Christian values, but not in the case that was irrelevant to Christian values. Although there are several possible explanations for the mechanism by which it occurred, it is clear that the location in which participants made their decisions influenced their decision making in a manner consistent with hypotheses.

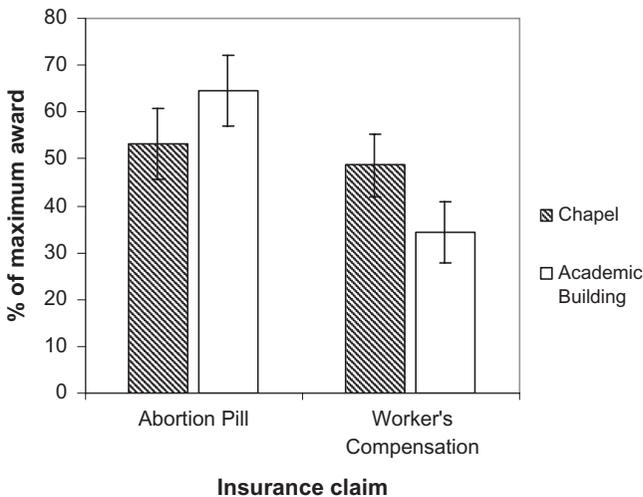


Figure 3. Results of field experiment (Study 4). Mean percentage of claim awarded by location.

### Study 5

Study 4 demonstrated experimentally that locations can impact decision making and suggested specifically that the presence of churches can impact decisions related to Christian values. The mechanism of this influence, however, is unclear. I have argued that churches activate Christian values, and thereby affect decisions relevant to those values. However, Christian values should only be present (and thus subject to priming) in people who are themselves Christians; non-Christians do not have Christian values to activate. Weisbuch-Remington, Mendes, Seery, and Blascovich (2005) found evidence to support this prediction. Participants in a motivated performance situation who were exposed to positive and negative Christian images evinced challenge (positive) and threat (negative) reactions, but only if they were themselves Christian. Similarly, Baldwin, Carrell, and Lopez (1990) demonstrated that subliminal exposure to the Pope's disapproving face lowered Catholic participants' self-evaluations, but not for nonpracticing Catholics. Thus, it is likely that priming with Christian stimuli only impacts self-identified Christians, for whom the stimuli are personally relevant (although see Devine, 1989, for a contrasting perspective that argues that mere knowledge, without endorsement, of a stereotype is sufficient to activate it). If so, the presence of churches and Christian images should influence the decision making of Christians, but not of non-Christians.

To replicate my findings and examine this moderator, I conceptually replicated Study 4 under more controlled conditions. I conducted a laboratory priming experiment in which I examined the causal impact of exposure to churches and related imagery on decision making. Participants were exposed to either ecclesiastical images or control images and then completed the same decision-making task used in Study 4. As before, participants evaluated two claims, one from a claimant seeking compensation for the use of an "abortion pill," the other from a claimant seeking compensation for a work-related injury. Exposure to ecclesiastical images should make Christian values more accessible, which in turn should lead to relatively stronger anti-abortion attitudes. Thus, participants primed with these images should award less money than control subjects to the abortion pill claimant, but not to the workmen's compensation claimant. However, this should only occur for Christians; non-Christians should not be affected by priming with ecclesiastical images.

#### *Method*

Sixty participants (32 females, 28 males) were recruited from an introductory psychology class and told that they were participating in an experiment on rapid visual perception. Participants were primed while completing a perceptual task (based on a procedure developed by Weisbuch-Remington et al., 2005). This computer-based task consisted of viewing a series of "tiled" images (arrays of

colored panels resembling mosaics) that appeared for one second; participants rapidly classified the images based on the number of panels they contained. Unbeknownst to participants, each tiled image was immediately preceded by a prime, which appeared for 30 milliseconds. Participants were randomly assigned to be exposed to either ecclesiastical images (which included churches and objects contained therein, such as a crucifix and a stained-glass image of Jesus bathed in light) or control images, which were a series of abstract paintings (such as Severini's *La Danza*). These control images were selected because they are neutral and should not activate any particular values or attitudes.

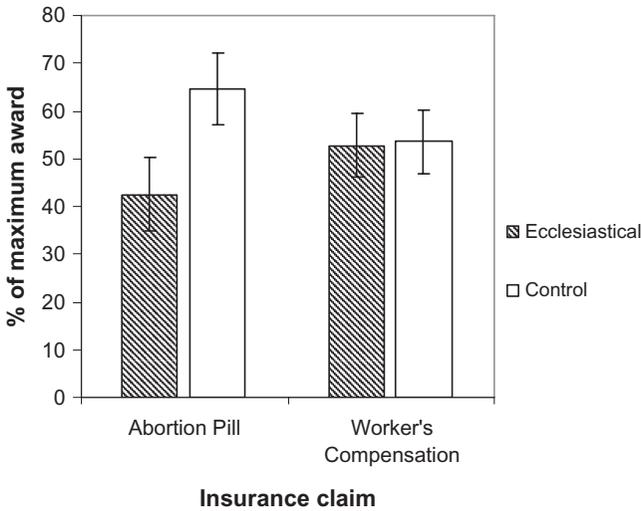
Participants then completed the decision-making task, which they believed was being used in unrelated future research. This task, in which participants awarded money to both abortion pill and worker's compensation claimants, was identical to that used in Study 4. For unknown reasons, one participant underwent the priming procedure but did not complete the decision-making task. After completing the task, participants were probed for suspicion, debriefed, and dismissed.

### Results

Although a MANOVA yielded only a marginally significant multivariate effect [ $F(2,56) = 2.27, p = .10$ ], there was a trend in the predicted direction; the prime impacted awards made to the abortion pill claimant, but not to the worker's compensation claimant. I conducted planned comparisons to examine this trend. As predicted, church-primed participants allocated less money to the abortion claimant than did control-primed participants, [ $t(57) = 2.06, p = .04$ ]. Conversely, there was no difference between church- and control-primed subjects in allocations made to the workmen's compensation claimant [ $t(57) = 0.07, p = .94$ ]. These data are displayed in Figure 4.

To clarify this finding, I conducted a second analysis in which I controlled for participants' religion and attitudes about abortion. A subset of the participants ( $n = 36$ ) had completed a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester in which they provided this information; responses for religion were recoded into "Christian" (23 participants, including Catholics and members of various Protestant denominations) and "non-Christian" (13 participants). An analysis of covariance (controlling for participants' religion and attitudes about abortion) showed that the priming effect remained statistically significant despite the smaller sample size [ $F(1,32) = 4.50, p = .04$ ]. Awards made to the workmen's compensation claimant did not differ by prime even after controlling for subjects' religion and attitudes about abortion [ $F(1,32) = .54, p = .47$ ].

To examine the predicted moderating effect of Christian identity on the impact of the primes, I conducted separate ANOVAs for Christian and non-Christian participants, with the type of prime and participants' attitudes about abortion as independent variables and awards to the abortion pill claimant as the dependent variable. I then compared the effect sizes of each independent variable (Cohen,



**Figure 4.** Results of laboratory experiment (Study 5). Mean percentage of claim awarded by prime.

1992) to assess the relative impact of the prime and participants' attitudes about abortion. Examining these effect sizes revealed that, for Christians, the type of prime (partial  $\eta^2 = .14$ ) affected responses more than did attitudes toward abortion (partial  $\eta^2 < .01$ ). Conversely, for non-Christians, attitudes toward abortion (partial  $\eta^2 = .22$ ) affected responses more than did the prime (partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ). Thus, as hypothesized, priming with Christian ecclesiastical stimuli influenced the awards made by Christians; conversely, priming with ecclesiastical stimuli did not affect the awards made by non-Christians, whose decisions were driven by their preexisting attitudes about abortion.

### General Discussion

The current studies present converging evidence that the presence of churches can impact political decision making. Churches were associated with support of a conservative candidate (Study 1), and for a conservative constitutional amendment, but only if the amendment was relevant to Christian values (Study 2); the presence of a chapel (Study 4) and exposure to ecclesiastical images (Study 5) lowered insurance awards, but only to claimants who violated Christian values. Thus, the current studies demonstrate that the influence of churches on decision making is not only powerful but precise.

These findings augment the growing literature demonstrating the priming of attitudes, values, and norms by incidental exposure to meaning-laden environments (Jonas et al., 2002; Pyszczynski et al., 1996) and objects (Berkowitz &

LePage, 1967; Kay et al., 2004; Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, & Gross, 2007; Kemmelmeier & Winter, 2008). The current findings complement those of Aarts and Dijksterhuis (2003), who found that images of a library only activated the concept of silence when participants had a goal to subsequently go to the library, but not when participants were merely exposed to the library images. Participants in Study 4 had the goal of going to the chapel (to participate in the experiment), as did the voters in Studies 1 and 2, who had the goal of going to the places in which they voted (albeit to vote, not to worship). Study 5, however, is somewhat dissonant with the findings of Aarts and Dijksterhuis (2003), as the priming effect took place without participants' awareness, and certainly in the absence of a consciously activated goal. This discrepancy suggests that subliminal (in contrast to merely nonconscious) location primes may not require the activation of a goal and raises questions about the role of goal activation in priming processes.

The current studies also suggest that Christian identity plays an important role in ecclesiastical priming. Because the ecclesiastical prime only affected Christian subjects in Study 5, and Study 3 suggested that the Christians and non-Christians in this population have comparable beliefs about the nature of Christian attitudes, it can be inferred that a minimal level of identification with the group "Christians" was necessary for the prime to take effect. This finding implies an important boundary condition on the impact of churches as primes, one consistent with the findings of Weisbuch-Remington et al. (2005) and Baldwin et al. (1990), and somewhat inconsistent with the implications of Devine (1989). In addition, this finding suggests a mechanism for the priming effect: that ecclesiastical images have their impact by increasing Christian identity, which in turn activates Christian values and their implications for political issues. Future research could directly examine this possibility by measuring Christian identity to determine if the extent of identification moderates the impact of the prime on decision making. Similarly, it may be that more committed Christians, those higher in self-reported religiosity or more regular in their church attendance, would be more sensitive to the impact of ecclesiastical images. In addition, a more nuanced consideration of Christian identity, accounting for denominational differences among Christians, could be a fruitful avenue of future research; for example, ecclesiastical stimuli may well evoke different values and political attitudes for Baptists than they do for Presbyterians. Indeed, although Christian religiosity is often associated with political conservatism, it may also be linked to values of charity, peace, and social justice.

The current findings suggest that the use of churches as polling places could be advantageous to politically conservative candidates and to supporters of conservative positions on abortion, same-sex marriage, and other relevant issues. Importantly, though, it should be noted that churches are probably not unique; other locations used as polling places could also prime attitudes and values. Police stations, for instance, might activate respect for authority, fire departments might activate helping norms, and schools might activate intellectual curiosity (or,

perhaps, obedience and adherence to norms). The expression of an attitude at a given moment is influenced by an array of contextual factors, including mood (e.g., Bless, Mackie, & Schwartz, 1992), alertness (Bodenhausen, 1990), and accessible memories (Wilson, Hodges, & LaFleur, 1995); a “true” attitude, uninfluenced by context, likely exists only in theory. Nevertheless, because governments exert considerable effort to conduct voting in environments free from undue influence, one potentially appealing alternative is all-mail balloting (Karp & Banducci, 2000). Such ballots can be completed anywhere, but are often filled out in voters’ homes. Homes are unique environments that reflect their owners’ personalities, beliefs, and attitudes (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). As such, voting by mail would seem to insulate citizens from location priming biases or would at least limit potential primes to those introduced by the voters themselves. The current findings, then, imply that all-mail elections would be less contaminated, yielding results more representative of voters’ true attitudes.

More generally, these findings suggest that voting and other political decisions are subject to transient and contextual influences to a greater degree than is accounted for by many conceptualizations of voting behavior. The expression of political attitudes, like the expression of other attitudes, depends in significant part on the environment in which the attitude is expressed. This, in turn, implies that an appreciable number of voters remain “undecided” until they enter the voting booth. Further, it is clear that such voters can be effectively influenced by stimuli far less overt than an eleventh-hour television advertisement or canvassing effort.

Election administrators go to great lengths to protect voters from external influences; however, these efforts stop short of the polling place door. The current paper demonstrates that polling locations can affect the outcome of political decisions. Because the purpose of voting in a representative democracy is to make a single decision that serves as a proxy for many future decisions, the impact of any influence on voting behavior is dramatically magnified. Thus, although their influence is subtle and transient, polling places can have important long-term personal and societal repercussions.

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