# Types of Congregational Response to Political Polarization

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For the past two years, the Congregations and Polarization Project (CAP) team has studied Indiana congregations with a focus on the way they are shaped by, and respond to, the current political and cultural environment. Our baseline assumption is that the United States is experiencing political polarization driven by cultural differences. We observed dozens of Indiana congregations during the 2024 election year and continued to observe them in the months that followed to see how increased levels of polarization affects them and how they respond to it.

There's no doubt that division remained high after the election. There is a culture war, though reasonable people could debate its depth. This tense social environment is the context for congregational mission. This is not to say that all congregations are politically active; many certainly are not. But American congregations pursue their missions in a charged political environment that reflects significant differences in culture and in values.

We began our research by assuming, based on previous research, that congregational responses to political polarization would vary widely. This has certainly proven true, though those responses have not always played out in exactly the way we might have predicted. What follows is a discussion of the types of congregational responses we expected to find—our assumptions—followed by a brief discussion of what we really found from talking to more than 200 pastors in interviews and focus groups.

## Expected Responses to Polarization

We originally posited four types of congregational responses to polarization based on previous research. Although polarization is about differences in culture and values that run deeper than partisan politics, in American life "politics" is always part of the equation and is in many ways the easiest place to measure differences. Therefore, as we observe congregations, we are always wondering how they address the political issues related to cultural differences.

Our original four congregational types are ideal types, pure examples that were meant as theoretical tools to help us sort what we observed as we observed it:

**Squabblers (Internally Conflicted):** We expected to find some congregations experiencing internal conflict because they had members on both sides of the cultural divide and were seeking some sort of resolution. We were always conscious that what we were observing on any day was only a single point, a moment, on a long timeline. Congregations that are conflicted today might have been stable 10 years ago or might be stable again 10 years in the future as membership or leadership changes.

**Warriors (Politically Engaged):** We expected to find some congregations that were fully immersed in the culture wars and in policy debate, faith communities whose values were homogeneous enough that they could identify which "side" they were on in political debates and participate fully not only as individuals, but as congregations.

**Islanders (Aggressively Neutral):** We expected to find congregations that tried to avoid cultural division and refused to engage in politics at all. These groups would keep political debates and other value-related conflicts outside worship or service as much as they could. This is hard to do, but we assumed there would be congregations that insisted their mission was separate from these worldly concerns.

**Peacemakers (Purposely Purple):** We expected to find congregations that insisted the two sides in the culture wars, often called "red" and "blue," could find harmony within their faith communities. These congregations would not try to keep conflict out entirely but would instead seek to defuse it through mediation, compromise, or other cooperation-promoting measures.

Again, these are ideal types. What we really expected to find was congregations who leaned, on average, in one or another of these directions.

## Findings from Real Indiana Congregations

**Few congregations are currently defined by internal squabbling.** In fact, congregations have sorted into "liberal" and "conservative" both theologically and politically to a very high degree. Those that have not sorted have developed a strategy for minimizing the impact of any differences. This is especially true for Protestant congregations. The United Methodist Church finished an acrimonious split during our study, but most congregations had chosen sides (or left entirely) long ago. For Catholics and other groups where membership in the church is a bond more like ethnicity, sorting is harder. In some places, there is no alternative parish and therefore no ability to sort. But in general, on many of the issues that drive internal squabbling, especially abortion and sexuality issues, congregations have already made their decisions, and their memberships have adjusted accordingly.

There is a subset of internal squabbling that requires special mention. In some instances, the congregation is relatively homogeneous but at odds with their pastor. This is especially true in denominations where bishops or other elders "place" pastors in congregations. Even this type of internal conflict appears to be mostly sorted at this point, but it is worthwhile to remember that conflict between a pastor and the majority of a congregation is different than conflict in which members themselves are more evenly divided.

**Relatively few congregations see themselves as combatants in the culture wars.** Liberal congregations are more likely than conservative ones to be actively engaged in policy advocacy. Most biblically conservative congregations are hesitant to take stances in the political arena. Their members may be highly involved in politics as individuals, but their congregations, collectively, likely are not. Most evangelical congregations will insist that their primary mission is individual salvation, not social change (although they surely hope social change will come from changed individuals). Even Catholic parishes with strong pro-life stances are unlikely to speak, publicly, on social and political issues. It is not what most Catholic priests see as their spiritual responsibility within their community.

Liberal Protestant congregations are more likely to do what pastors describe as "advocacy." Liberal pastors and their congregations are more likely to collectively take a public, moral stance on social issues. Pastors of these congregations say that trying to discern when to move from character formation, which they do every day, toward public advocacy is one of the hardest decisions they and their congregations must make. Which issues demand a public response? What are the risks to their faith community for taking a public stand? What might be lost? Immigration, abortion, sexuality, economic justice, anti-racism, environmental care—congregations must decide when to move beyond using Christian values to frame these and toward active advocacy on behalf of (or against) particular public policies.

**Many congregations seek complete neutrality, but they recognize that choosing not to engage is itself a choice with theological and political implications.** Some pastors and their congregations are proud of their disengagement and non-advocacy. For them, congregations must be havens and their focus on the spiritual precludes much involvement in culture wars, politics, or policy debates. This stance raises important questions about the role religion plays in contemporary American society. Is religion a wholly separate sphere of activity from economics or government? It is surely not separate from family life and education. Is religion supposed to be therapeutic, a respite from other settings in life? What do people want from religion? What does God want from them?

Enforced neutrality is a difficult space to occupy and most pastors who seek neutrality are keenly aware of this. Elections will be lost or won whether they participate or not, and policy implications will follow. If congregations do not engage as advocates, they risk letting other kinds of organizations control the outcome. If congregations do engage, they risk losing their distinctive voice as communities of faith focused on values higher than

routine, secular, politics. In this realm, perhaps more than any other, pastors and their flocks find it critical to discern what God wants them to do and the disagreement during this discernment is both honest and real.

**Some congregations actively seek to practice peace, but few do this as a mission involving public advocacy.** Because congregations are "sorted" along theological and political lines, they do not usually need to do much peacemaking internally. However, few see it as their mission to actively seek this peace in the wider communities they serve.

On the one hand, seeking to negotiate and mitigate values disagreements in the public sphere would not seem to be a congregation's primary role. On the other hand, managing the tension among different values is something they do every day.

## What Congregations Add to the Mix

There are many ways to frame America's cultural divisions, but one is to see them as grounded in moral values. There are Americans who value fairness and care above all else. Fairness and care are bedrock values in essentially all Christian traditions (and most other religious traditions as well). There are also Americans who put a high value on appropriate authority, such as biblical authority and government authority. These same people tend to value orthodoxy and tradition. Authority, orthodoxy, and tradition are also bedrock values in all Christian traditions (and, again, in nearly all world religions).

America is having difficulty balancing these two competing visions of the good, but churches have been balancing them for centuries. Churches are sometimes accused of responding slowly to progressive change, but this is because they must weigh all change in terms of historical claims, including biblical ones. It is important to care, but also important to make sure change stays grounded in the community's long-term beliefs and in the scriptures.

As congregations think about their public stance in a turbulent social climate, it will benefit them to reflect on the ways they hold orthodoxy and change in creative tension. There is no easy way to share this gift with the wider community, but sharing it is a goal worthy of communities of faith.

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