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## CHURCH IMPACTS POLITICAL ACTIVISM AMONG BLACK AMERICANS, EXPERT SAYS

MANHATTAN — Religion has continued to be a salient social and cultural institution in the United States. Its impact stretches even to presidential elections.

Ryan Spohn, assistant professor of sociology at Kansas State University, said the importance of organized religion has been particularly pronounced for black Americans, who tend to have higher levels of religious belief and church participation than other Americans.

"The black church has traditionally played a crucial role in their lives by providing periodic sanctuary to its members forced to live in an oppressive and hostile society," Spohn said.

Past research has indicated that the black church facilitated political activism in the black community in at least two important ways.

"First, as evidenced by the speeches of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., religious themes and biblical references were central to the framing of the civil rights movement," Spohn said. "Second, the churches played a key role in the mobilization of black people by providing the organization and institutional resources necessary for boycotts, sit-ins and other protest activities."

Spohn, along with Scott Fitzgerald of the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, recently conducted research targeted at assessing the modern-day importance of religious organizations on political protest activities of black people in the United States.

Specifically, they wanted to determine if black people who are active within their churches are more likely to become involved in political protest activities and if exposure to political messages within the church setting influences them to participate in protest activities.

Spohn said they found that activism within the church, such as serving on a committee, does not have a significant impact on black people's involvement in political protest activities such as protest demonstrations or neighborhood marches.

(more)

"This particular finding might suggest that individuals who are involved in these more conservative church activities are unlikely to take part in protests," Spohn said. "It appears that involvement in secular organizations working toward the improvement of the lives of African Americans is a much more important factor than their activism with the church."

However, Spohn said they did find that exposure to political messages within the church can lead to political protest for some church members.

"Specifically, we found that exposure to these political messages increased the protest behaviors of two groups of individuals — those lacking a college education and those who are not members of secular organizations working to improve the lives of African-Americans," Spohn said.

"Most social and political theorists agree that a vibrant democracy is dependent upon the involvement of a substantial proportion of a nation's citizenry," Spohn said. "As a result, increases in political participation are often heralded as producing a healthy political discourse, as well as increasing the likelihood that the voices of minorities will be heard."

Spohn said political activism is generally higher for black people who are college educated, members of secular organizations promoting black causes, or both.

"However, our research indicates that, for African-Americans who do not fall into these categories, political communication within the church can serve as an alternative motivation for political involvement," Spohn said. "An optimistic conclusion is that many sources of social and cultural capital, both religious and secular in nature, increase political activism amongst this sample of African-Americans."

Spohn said this research can be of use to religious leaders, politicians and anyone who is working for social change.

"Given the relatively low voting rates of Americans — rates that are even lower for African-Americans — attention to how organizations can facilitate participation in non-electoral politics is crucial," Spohn said.

The results of this paper, "Pulpits and Platforms: The Determinants of Political Participation and Protest among Black Americans," were presented at the 2002 American Sociological Association Meetings in Chicago by Spohn and Fitzgerald. It has been accepted for publication in *Social Forces*.