

Religious Institutions and Collective Action: The Catholic Church and Political Activism in Indigenous Chiapas and Yucatán

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Abstract: Why do religious organizations facilitate secular political activism in some settings but not others? I contend that where religious institutions are characterized by decentralized local governance, they are more likely to facilitate political activism. Drawing on nine months of field research and 60 interviews, I conduct a qualitative comparison between the Mexican states of Chiapas and Yucatán. I argue Chiapas exhibits highly decentralized governance by the Catholic Church whereas Yucatán exhibits centralized clerical management. This difference accounts for why Chiapas experiences high levels of indigenous political activism while Yucatán experiences very little political activism.

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INTRODUCTION

Within some contexts, Karl Marx's classic disparagement of religion as the opiate of the masses remains aptly descriptive. The Muslim populations of Western Europe have not successfully organized to press for greater political rights and representation (Warner and Wenner 2006, 464; Pfaff and Gill 2006, 805), institutionalized Buddhism has not served as a platform for political mobilization in Taiwan or Korea (Cheng and Brown 2006, 3–4), and in locations such as Argentina and Italy, the Catholic Church has often reinforced traditional values and hierarchy (Gill 1998; Klaiber 1998; Trejo 2009; Putnam 1993, 107). In many other instances, however, religious organizations have played an important role in prompting collective action. Organized Islam helped mobilize both democratic and anti-Western protests in the Arab world (Wiktorowicz 2004; Stepan and Linz 2013, 17; Wickham 1997), Protestant African-American churches were critical to the Civil Rights movement in the United States (McAdam 1982), Buddhism influenced pro-democracy movements in Thailand, Myanmar, and Tibet (Cheng and Brown 2006, 18–19), and progressive Catholic theology has been strongly linked to democratic movements across Latin America (Klaiber 1998; Mainwaring and Wilde 1989; Gill 1998).

This study accordingly asks why religious organizations facilitate secular political participation in some settings but not others. I present a theory of religious decentralization suggesting where religious institutions decentralize monitoring, sanctioning, and decision-making authority to local laity, religious communities develop the organizational capacity to engage in collective action. In making this argument, the article examines political activism among the indigenous populations in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Yucatán.

Chiapas is characterized by a vibrant civil society, and it provided the setting for the 1994 Zapatista uprising where poor indigenous peasants rebelled against the Mexican state. The Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas is widely recognized as playing a key role in helping to overcome barriers to collective action throughout the region (Kovic 2005, 7–8; Trejo 2009, 323–342; Yashar 2005, 74; Womack 1999; Mattiace 2003; Collier and Quaratiello 1999). Yucatán, another state in Southern Mexico, is like Chiapas in many respects. However, political activism in Yucatán comes nowhere near the levels seen in Chiapas.

Drawing from secondary historical sources and more than 60 interviews conducted in Chiapas and Yucatán from 2011 to 2012, I contend that lay

religious governance was highly decentralized in Chiapas and centralized in Yucatán. In Chiapas, decentralized local lay governance encouraged bonds of reciprocity within and between communities, allowing them to engage in the effective provision of material religious club goods. This helped the region develop an organizational capacity that could be applied to political engagement. The Catholic Church in Yucatán, on the other hand, is centralized and subsequently provides few reciprocal networks, few religious club goods, little organizational capacity, and little political activism.

In the sections that follow, I assess how the previous literature has examined the relationship between religion and collective action. I continue by presenting my theory of religious decentralization and follow with a description of my research design. Then, I examine the governance structures of the Catholic Church in Chiapas and Yucatán, and I conclude with a discussion of my findings.

RELIGION, FRAMING, OPPORTUNITY, AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

The successful initiation of collective action depends on appropriate ideological frames that channel and coordinate dissent (framing), open political spaces and opportunities that allow discontent to express itself (opportunity), and access to institutional resources that organize and mobilize activity (resource mobilization) (McAdam 1982, 48; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 3–7; Snow et al. 1986, 464–481). Opportunity, framing, and resources must all be in place as no single factor is sufficient to prompt collective action on its own (McAdam 1982, 37). While convincing theories account for how religious institutional opportunities and theological frames explain variation in collective action, there is still a need to explain the conditions under which religious institutions are likely to produce mobilization structures facilitating political activism.

Framing involves self-conscious efforts by activists to prompt individuals to reevaluate their surroundings and to stir action (Zald 2008, 262), and religious organizations can certainly prompt such behavior. Importantly, clergy can “set a tone that suggests addressing political issues is a normal part of church life” (Djupe and Gilbert 2006, 119).¹ Particularly relevant to Latin America during the latter half of the 20th century, liberation theology encouraged the Catholic Church to advocate on behalf of the materially disadvantaged, to promote human rights, and

to side politically with the poor rather than the socio-economic elite (Philpott 2007, 511; Kovic 2005, 49–52; Planas 1986, 6–7; Prokopy and Smith 1999, 3; Betances 2007, 53). It was an explicit attempt by the Catholic Church to encourage political participation, reframe adherents' relationship to their own poverty, and encourage them to make political demands from their governments. The development of liberation theology created a new frame of “insurgent consciousness” that facilitated collective action, and the Church advocated most vigorously for democracy where liberation theology was most pronounced (Smith 1991; Philpott 2007, 511).

By opportunity, the literature in collective action refers to institutional features that affect the political openings militant actors possess to challenge the political system (Smith 1991, 58–59). We can apply the concept of opportunity to religious institutions by considering circumstances where religious elites² tend to support secular political movements. Religious elites are not likely to support secular political movements in situations where there are few competing religions. Doing so may alienate political authorities or socio-economic elites who provide valuable political and material support (Gill 1998; Trejo 2012, 32–33).³ When there is religious competition, on the other hand, religious adherents have the option to exit the dominant supplier and search for alternatives. The former monopolistic religion can no longer take the support of its parishioners for granted. Accordingly, religious competition creates an opportunistic condition where religious elites are now potentially predisposed to grant the resources of the religious organization to secular political causes to prevent conversions to competing religions (Gill 1998; Trejo 2009). The implication of the argument in Latin America is that where the Catholic Church faced competing Protestant religions, clergy were more likely to openly support secular political activism.

Finally, resource mobilization is necessary. Successful collective action requires a group of individuals from which to recruit members and leaders, institutional resources (such as office supplies, secretarial support, and meeting spaces), and a communication network (Smith 1991, 59–61). A great deal of scholarship in this tradition has attributed religion with a positive role in mobilizing these resources (Smith 1991; McAdam 1982; Yashar 2005; Trejo 2009). As one example, Deborah Yashar specifically points to the Catholic Church in Latin America as having critically provided communication networks, meeting spaces, and civic skills that were essential to popular indigenous movements (Yashar 2005, 74).

However, much of this work has tended to assume religious institutions automatically provide these types of resources. Because it treats religious organizations as “undifferentiated unit[s]” (Djupe and Gilbert 2006, 117), little attempt is made to explain variation in how religious institutions might prompt such resource mobilization. While we possess theories accounting for changes in frames and opportunities that enable collective action, there is still a need for theories accounting for variation in resource capacity among mainstream religious organizations.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND RELIGIOUS DECENTRALIZATION

In explaining where variation in such mobilization capacity might come from, I argue that where religious institutions are characterized by decentralized lay governance, they are marked by increased capacities to mobilize the resources that are essential for collective action. Before continuing, however, we must consider the meaning of both religious institutions and what I mean by *decentralized* religious institutions.

We can define religion as “a public and collective belief system that structures the relationship of the individual to the divine and the supernatural” (Grzymala-Busse 2012, 422). While we often tend to think of the divine and supernatural aspects of religion, its public, collective, and institutional attributes are also important (Gill 2001, 120). Furthermore, religions provide a vast array of not only spiritual but also material goods and services to their members (McBride 2007, 406; Berman 2011 16–19, 75). In the terminology of economics, we might refer to these various “spiritual, social, emotional, and material benefits” as religious club goods (McBride 2007, 405–406). A religious institution is not simply the activity of religious congregations on days of worship. It also encompasses a “wide variety of small group activities [involving] interactions with other congregation members and religious professionals” (Djupe and Gilbert 2006, 118). These activities include the production of tangible material goods such as bake sales, barn raisings, and mutual insurance, health, and cooperative services (Berman 2011).⁴

Previous scholarship has conceptualized *decentralized* religious institutions as settings where religious governance is entrusted to laity in a bottom-up and nearly autonomous matter or where ecclesial and doctrinal control has been radically devolved from the hierarchy to the laity. The focus of decentralization here seems to be on doctrinal and ecclesial

decision-making (Trejo 2009, 327; Levine 1988, 257). However, effective governance requires more than decision-making. It also requires monitoring and sanctioning. My conceptualization of decentralization accordingly draws from the idea of “decentralized local institutions” (Keohane 2010, 578) as elaborated in the important and influential work of Elinor Ostrom and her associates. Decentralized local institutions are characterized by arrangements where individuals who consume common, collective resources have *at least some* institutional decision-making authority. At least as critically, the local individuals producing and consuming institutional resources *monitor* the use of that resource without relying on a central authority. These local consumers also divine their own appropriate *sanctions* when others violate their responsibilities. Decentralized arrangements are thought to be superior to more centralized organizations. This is because central institutions do not have access to the same kind of information about who is shirking than the individuals themselves consuming resources. Monitoring and sanctioning capacities are often provided more efficiently by individuals at a local level (Ostrom 1990, 10–11; 99–100; 185–186; Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Andersson and Ostrom 2008).

Accordingly, when I refer to decentralized religious governance, I refer to institutional structures that grant decision-making, monitoring, and sanctioning authority over the management of religious club goods to non-clerical members of a religious institution at a local level.⁵ This conceptualization of religious decentralization is differentiated from previous conceptions in two ways. First, in addition to considering those individuals who create doctrine or manage the institutional hierarchy, it focuses our attention on the individuals responsible for managing material resources. Second, it expands the conceptualization of religious decentralization beyond decision-making to include monitoring and sanctioning responsibilities.

By decentralized *decision-making*, I refer to the ability of non-clerical actors to have at least some role in determining matters of liturgical practice, general doctrine, leadership, and the production of material club goods. Decentralized *monitoring* by religious communities occurs when local, non-clerical actors shoulder responsibility for ensuring other religious members engage in cooperative behavior with each other (Ostrom 2007, 200–201; Putnam 1993, 172). Decentralized *sanctioning* in religious institutions entails the responsibility non-clerical religious actors have for punishing monitored shirking and transgressions. Sanctioned individuals are generally denied access to the goods and resources created by the religious institution. To the extent these sanctioning

decisions are decentralized, they are made by non-clerical members of the religious institution and are not likely to be overridden or commuted by members of the clergy.

Where a religious institution demonstrates decentralized governance, individuals are organized into relatively small and local groups (Djupe and Gilbert 2006) that more efficaciously monitor and sanction behavior, allowing greater reciprocity and higher contributions to religious goods and services. Cooperation slowly becomes a heuristic norm and an informal institution (Ostrom 2007, 196–197). The result is a feedback loop of greater participation and greater benefits provided. In the process of providing internal club goods, an organizational framework evolves, perhaps unintentionally, that can be applied to complex public goods problems such as political activism (Hechter 1987, 123; Rydin and Pennington 2000, 161–162; Djupe and Gilbert 2006, 118).⁶

At the same time, and in a similar manner as Doug McAdam notes regarding political opportunities, decentralization creates only organizational *potential* for collective action. To understand how such capacity is translated into sustained political activism, we must also examine “the subjective meanings [individuals] attach to their situations” (McAdam 1982, 48). In this case, for religious decentralization to prompt political activism, it is important it is accompanied by a framing “political theology” (Philpott 2007) that advocates for active political engagement. It must also be accompanied by open opportunities for collective action within the religious institution where elites are likely to support secular political activism.

CASE SELECTION, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA

Across Latin America, disenfranchised indigenous individuals have collectively banded together for political change despite being particularly susceptible to the costs of political activism. While the implications of the theory are not limited only to Latin American indigenous populations, this arena of political activism is compelling as these communities are in many ways least likely to engage in collective action.

Southern Mexico is home to the largest indigenous populations of Mexico, but the vitality of indigenous movements varies considerably across the region. I select the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas and the Archdiocese of Yucatán⁷ for my comparison because they exhibit maximum variance on my dependent variable, political

activism, relative to other potential cases in the region. This increases the representativeness and generalizability of my study because the full range of variation in the dependent variable is represented (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 300–301).

The vibrant civil society within the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas contains an array of political groups and community organizations that have successfully mobilized political activism (Mattiace 2003; Harvey 1998; Washbrook 2007; Trejo 2009; Eisenstadt 2011; Vanden and Prevost 2015, 101). Of all Mexico's southern indigenous states,⁸ Chiapas has experienced the highest levels of indigenous protest, and the vast majority of these events have occurred within the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas (Mattiace 2009, 161; Trejo 2004, 70, 73; 2010).⁹

In marked contrast, the Archdiocese of Yucatán has experienced surprisingly little political activism. It has the lowest levels of protest of all of Mexico's indigenous states (Mattiace 2009, 161; Trejo 2004, 70, 73; 2010). Furthermore, Yucatán was the last of Mexico's indigenous states to formally incorporate indigenous rights into its constitution (Mattiace 2009, 140). Associational activity centered on indigenous activity is highly limited, as “there are no large-scale associations in Yucatán centered on an ethnic identity of ‘Maya’” (Cocom 2005, 146). In short, “ethnic identity as not been politicized in Yucatán, and ethnic mobilization and organization have been sporadic and short-lived” (Mattiace 2009, 148). Beyond indigenous organization, there is little political activism generally. While a few independent organizations and groups formally embedded within Mexico's corporatist peasant leagues have organized movements for wage reform, these have typically not lasted (Diggles 2008, 154–155; Mattiace 2009, 145–146). Generally, peasants in Yucatán are not characterized by “independent or militant political behavior” (Baños 1988, 334).

On the other hand, and despite their differences in levels of political activism, both regions share many similarities.¹⁰ Both Chiapas and Yucatán possess large indigenous populations (CDI 2000), and both face high rates of poverty (Székely Pardo et al. 2007, 249, 260). Furthermore, both Chiapas and Yucatán have experienced robust political party competition to the previously dominant PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) political machine (Mattiace 2009, 147–148; Diggles 2008, 153; Harvey 1998, 156–160). Additionally, both Chiapas and Yucatán have experienced relatively high levels of Protestant competition (Dow 2005).¹¹ In both states, then, political opportunities existed for

clergy to potentially endorse secular political activism due to the presence of Protestant competition (Gill 1998; Trejo 2009). Furthermore, Chiapas experienced a liberation theology frame that advocated for militant political activism against the state. In Yucatán, Catholic clergy increasingly advocated for civic engagement that also could have potentially manifest itself in greater degrees of secular political activism. What explains the variation in Chiapas and Yucatán in levels of secular political activism, I argue, is the degree of diocesan decentralization.

The strategy for my qualitative comparison involves identifying both what James Mahoney describes as independent variable *causal process observations* (CPOs) and mechanism CPOs. Independent variable CPOs establish whether a cause occurred in the manner and timing implied by the theory. Here the task is to demonstrate first that diocesan decentralization (in the form of local lay monitoring, sanctioning, and decision-making) occurred in Chiapas but did not occur in Yucatán. I also seek to examine my stipulated causal mechanisms through the identification of mechanism CPOs that assess whether intervening processes between the introduction of the independent variable and the development of the dependent variable have occurred in the manner predicted (George and Bennett 2005, 176; Mahoney 2010). In this case, the undertaking is to demonstrate that decentralization led to increased local interactions, club goods development, and subsequently to an organizational infrastructure facilitating collective action. In Yucatán, on the other hand, the absence of such decentralization should mean we do not see this causal process.

Data for the qualitative comparisons was drawn from secondary historical sources and 60 semi-structured interviews I conducted in the field from the spring of 2011 through the fall of 2012.¹² These interviews have the advantage of generating reliably comparable data while allowing for the possibility of unanticipated responses (Leech 2002). Interviewees were selected through non-random purposeful and snowball sampling of Church officials, government officials, civic leaders, and regular citizens. While the case studies cannot make a claim to the statistical representativeness of qualitative interview respondents, respondents were specifically selected to reflect a spectrum of socio-economic statuses whose responses could be triangulated against each other. Furthermore, non-random and purposeful snowball sampling are useful when targeting both elite and marginalized populations (Cohen and Arieli 2011, 423–435; Tansey 2007, 765–772). Qualitative analysis maintains a comparative advantage in examining the causal processes stipulated by my theory (Gerring 2007), and random sampling in qualitative research is inappropriate due

to the large sampling error inherent in the relatively small samples used for in-depth qualitative interviews (Marshall 1996, 523).

THE DIOCESE OF SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Prior to the 1960s, there was little independent indigenous organizing or political activism throughout Chiapas.¹³ The diocese was marked by a hierarchical relationship between priests and parishioners, clergy had little interest in engaging with the cultural traditions of the indigenous population, and the Church aligned itself with landed elites (Trejo 2009, 336; Kovic 2005, 48; Interview 29, 2011; Interview 45, 2012). Laity held only limited responsibilities and were treated as “passive receptors of evangelization” (Kovic 2005, 49; Floyd 1996, 155). Lay teachers of the Catholic faith, known as catechists, were formerly instructed what to teach by members of the hierarchy in a process that was “doctrinaire, authoritarian, and [based] on local premises of Indian inferiority” (Womack 1999, 128–130).

Throughout Chiapas, there was little interaction or coordination between indigenous communities. Instead, communities were tightly enclosed, highly parochial, and generally compliant (Mattiace 2003, 1–2; Collier and Quaratiello 1999, 15; Eisenstadt 2011, 7). Furthermore, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries the indigenous populations of the region had been subjected to aggressive efforts at cultural assimilation, “forced relocation, debt peonage, and outright slavery by powerful owners of huge land tracts” (Eisenstadt 2011, 20–21). Landowners held major political power rather than the demographically dominant indigenous peasants (Collier and Quaratiello 1999, 39).

However, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, decentralized decision-making as it re-organized itself along linguistic lines into six pastoral zones (Kovic 2005, 50). A key focus of diocesan re-organization was on giving the laity a democratic voice in the Church’s affairs. As several Church officials described, newly formed pastoral assemblies provided parishioners with an opportunity to express their opinion over Church programs, and pastoral councils consulted with the Bishop to make decisions (Interview 81, 2011; Interview 56, 2011). “They hear the people — it’s democratic” (Interview 56, 2011). Consultation with the laity allowed local communities to form their own religious agenda predicated on their local needs.

Furthermore, the Church in Chiapas made itself more accessible to its parishioners by integrating indigenous culture into the liturgy. Through deep consultation with indigenous communities, the diocese encouraged priests and nuns to learn indigenous languages, translated the Bible into local languages, incorporated Mayan beliefs and customs into mass, and re-interpreted the Gospel through indigenous communities' unique cultural perspective (Trejo 2009, 338–339; Kovic 2005, 58; Interview 1, 2012; Interview 56, 2011; Interview 46, 2011). Rather than passively experiencing mass, indigenous communities now actively participated in redefining how mass occurred.

The diocese also allowed communities to democratically select their own catechists (Floyd 1996, 156; Interview 4, 2011; Interview 45, 2012; Womack 1999, 32). Furthermore, instead of passively instructing students in fundamentals of the Catholic faith, catechists actively developed their own ideas for reflection (Womack 1999, 30, 132–134; Harvey 1998, 73; Interview 4, 2011). Indigenous catechists subsequently selected human rights, agricultural production, and political analysis as themes for discussion (Kovic 2004, 195; Trejo 2004, 144). Such devolution of decision-making control was by no means inevitably granted in indigenous Catholic dioceses, as we will see in our companion investigation of Yucatán.

The diocese also created permanent deacons. Like catechists, these individuals teach, but they are given additional authority to perform sacramental functions such as baptisms and weddings (Trejo 2009, 339; Interview 56, 2011; Harvey 1998, 74). Communities chose their own deacons from among themselves (Interview 31, 2011).¹⁴ Together, the 8,000 catechists and 300 deacons located throughout the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas became important leaders in their communities by organizing local Bible study groups, aiding in pastoral decisions, and directing economic cooperatives (Mattiace 2003, 18; Kovic 2004, 188–193; 201; Harvey 1998, 74; Interview 56, 2011; Interview 4, 2011; Interview 81, 2011).

In Chiapas, the institutional Catholic Church created economic cooperatives as a deliberate strategy to provide material goods and services. To that end, it invested substantial effort into developing hundreds of lay-managed economic cooperatives across the region during the 1960s and 1970s. The Church provided the intellectual impetus for the creation of these cooperatives, and they were started by Catholic lay catechists and deacons (Eisenstadt 2011, 86; Harvey 1998, 71; Trejo 2009). Church pastoral workers provided the technical and organizational assistance that was necessary to start them, and their demographic composition was

overwhelmingly Catholic (Womack 1999, 32; Interview 81, 2011; Interview 17, 2012). These cooperatives were an important part of the indigenous Catholic community in Chiapas. As we will see later, no such efforts were made by the Church in Yucatán.

Clerical pastoral workers provided technical and organizational assistance to get cooperatives started (Trejo 2009, 338; Interview 45, 2012; Interview 17, 2012; Interview 2, 2012; Interview 1, 2012). At the same time, cooperatives were directed and initiated by lay catechists and deacons (Harvey 1998, 71; Womack 1999, 32; Kovic 2005, 59; Trejo 2009, 338; Interview 46, 2011). Depending on each community's specific needs, cooperatives focused on agricultural production (particularly coffee), transportation, financial savings, health, and women's issues (Trejo 2009, 338; Interview 1, 2012; Interview 2, 2012; Interview 17, 2012; Interview 46, 2011). As cooperatives were established, control over their administration was completely given to local laity (Interview 45, 2012; Interview 17, 2012; Interview 30, 2012), and local communities determined their own agenda for the material goods to be provided (Interview 1, 2012; Interview 2, 2012).

The cooperatives operated along an organizational model borrowed from European cooperativism. They emphasized "direct participatory democracy, equity, and mutuality" as well as efficient production using techniques predicated on reciprocity (Hernández Castillo and Nigh 1998, 141–142). A key concern for these cooperatives, then, was effective monitoring of member contributions. Accordingly, while a single cooperative may have been comprised by dozens of communities, responsibility for monitoring and sanctioning occurred locally by the laity. "In each community there is a control, whether it's a daily quota of work to be produced or it's a financial contribution ... Members always receive benefits so long as they contribute to the organization. If they don't comply, they are left out" (Interview 43, 2012). Other communities embedded an elderly couple with younger workers to ensure work was done (Interview 46, 2011). Whether through production quotas or direct supervision, the communities had the capacity to monitor the productive output of members.

Sanctioning involved the parceling of material resources. Individuals producing more product, such as coffee, received a larger portion of the profit from the sale of collectively produced products relative to individuals who produced less (Interview 30, 2012; Interview 43, 2012; Interview 17, 2012; Interview 83, 2012). "Those who work more receive more in the production of what they do" (Interview 30, 2012).

Sanctioning was further characterized by exclusion from a variety of services cooperatives provided for their members, including international marketing, technical assistance, consultations, and variety of health and educational benefits (Interview 83, 2012; Interview 17, 2012; Interview 30, 2012). For the most part,¹⁵ these services were only available to members, and membership required productive or financial contributions (Interview 83, 2012; Interview 1, 2012; Interview 43, 2012). “The services are not for the entire community. They are only for members” (Interview 83, 2012). “Members always receive benefits so long as they do not leave” (Interview 43, 2012). As one clergy member instrumental in the development of several early cooperatives suggested, “if there are rights, there must be obligations” (Interview 1, 2012).¹⁶

These production practices resulted in effective commodity and service production from local cooperatives, which became economic engines of their communities (Rus et al. 2003, 12). Many individuals were drawn by the material rewards the cooperatives increasingly provided (Interview 1, 2012; Interview 17, 2012). “It’s seeing the fruit of the organization that prompts more cooperation and more work” (Interview 17, 2012). By contrast, if cooperatives struggle to produce or fail to provide their members with tangible material resources, “the interest of producers is lost” (Interview 83, 2012).

Initially, these cooperatives were small and local in character (Levine 1988, 253). However, they expanded and eventually encompassed many communities, increasing the level of reciprocal interactions across small villages and towns (Interview 17, 2012; Interview 43, 2012). Individuals from various municipalities became increasingly willing to interact with each other. While it was once the case, for example, that small communities would not permit their daughters to marry outside of the community, one pastoral worker directly attributes the influence of these lay-run organizations to fostering more inter-communal marriages (Interview 1, 2012). “These organizations were not explicitly cultural, but they organized Indians across community boundaries, allowing Indians of different ethnicities to see themselves as members of a larger community” (Mattiace 2003, 19).

A FRAMING POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Church decentralization created a well-networked system of catechists, deacons, and cooperatives throughout the Dioceses of San Cristóbal de

las Casas. The organizational framework was in place to foment the development of political activism across the region. However, to understand why that organizational framework applied itself to political activism, it is necessary to examine the influence of progressive Catholic theology.

The Catholic Church in Chiapas was undeniably informed by progressive Catholicism. Bishop Samuel Ruiz García was one of the few Mexican bishops to be influenced by liberation theology. He felt the Church should make indigenous communities aware of their marginalized situation, question their position in the social order, and help build capacities to change that order (Womack 1999, 23). All throughout the dioceses, catechists were charged with the mission of consciousness-raising and promoting both community and political participation (Womack 1999, 28–31; Harvey 1998, 83; Collier and Quaratiello 1999, 75–76). Catechists led Bible studies within their own communities emphasizing this message (Womack 1999, 132).

Accordingly, one may be tempted then to conclude that the agenda of political activism came about solely due to the theology of Bishop Samuel Ruiz. However, we should keep in mind that the liberation theology movement consisted of both ideological and organizational principles. While the ideology of liberation theology sought to shift the consciousness of Catholic adherents and question the social order, the organizational principles called for a greater role for the laity throughout Latin America and Mexico (Smith 1991, 25). “There are countless cases” where progressive clerical elements in the Catholic Church failed to turn their liberation-inspired ideals into reality” (Levine 1988, 252). Frequently, liberation theology failed when the institutional Church neglected to grant decentralized control. “It is common to encounter the anomaly of ‘progressive’ priests ... [promoting] a liberationist agenda in authoritarian ways” (Levine 1988, 257). These authoritarian priests emphasized the theological component of liberation theology, but not the organizational component.

In Chiapas, the diocese centrally decided to re-orient catechism so that it was “communitarian, reflective, evocative, stirring the community, [and] dissolving the Word of God into it” (Womack 1999, 30–31). Catechists were instructed by the hierarchy to encourage adherents to reflect on their experiences and socio-economic position (Harvey 1998, 64). However, the Church in Chiapas was careful to break away from the previous paternalistic nature of catechism and to encourage indigenous communities to form their own reflections on their socio-economic status. It saw its role as accompanying indigenous communities rather than leading them (Harvey 1998, 63, 75).

While initially missionaries and priests wrote syntheses for catechists to use in their lessons, indigenous catechists quickly designed their own lessons to lead autonomous reflective discussions within the community. They developed their own themes for discussion and examined their ethnic status, the extremely low wages they were paid to work landowners' land, their relationship with the government, and their relationships with mestizo business and landowners (Harvey 1998, 73; Womack 1999, 132–134).

Communities formed agreements on how to defend themselves from exploitation, and these were “the result of dialogue rather than pre-established doctrines and were interpreted by the dioceses as theological statements” (Harvey 1998, 73). Certainly, the encouragement of re-assessing the status quo was an ideological imperative centrally planned and coordinated by the dioceses. However, it was up to individual communities to come up with their own reactions to that status quo and to design their own responses to it, and this was facilitated by newly decentralized decision-making granted to catechists and deacons. The result was a new political theology that emerged at the grassroots from the indigenous communities that sought social justice through political engagement. When combined with the organizational capacity that resulted from the Diocese's increased ability for club goods production due to decentralized monitoring, sanctioning, and decision-making, the result was an extraordinary potential for political activism.

THE BY-PRODUCTS OF DIOCESAN DECENTRALIZATION AND POLITICIZED CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

It was in this developing organizational infrastructure and political consciousness that the indigenous communities organized an Indigenous Congress in 1974. The Governor of Chiapas had asked Bishop Ruiz's assistance in organizing an Indigenous Congress to curry favor with the indigenous population. The ruling PRI political party of Mexico was still unpopular following its violent suppression of a student movement in 1968, and the Governor's request was part of a larger effort by the government to ingratiate itself with the public. It was not the intent of the Governor to create a forum for indigenous communities to express their grievances (Collier and Quaratiello 1999, 61; Harvey 1998, 76–77).

Ruiz agreed so long as the Congress was organized by the indigenous themselves (Collier and Quaratiello 1999, 61; Harvey 1998, 77; Womack

1999, 31). He chose six organizers (Catholic priests and members of religious orders) to promote the event throughout the Diocese. These six organizers sent their own groups of indigenous Catholic catechists out into the countryside, and these catechists pulled on their own Catholic cooperative organizational networks. The catechists met with representatives of small individual indigenous communities and explained that the purpose was to represent their interests (Womack 1999, 148). Many communities agreed to participate and in turn developed their own internal coordinators and organizers, also drawing on their newfound Catholic organizational networks, to coordinate activities within and across indigenous communities (Womack 1999, 148–149). The resultant Congress was “dominated” by Catholic catechists (Trejo 2012, 97).

Much to the consternation of state officials and landed elites (Womack 1999, 32), the delegations used the Congress to voice their displeasure with the government and the slow pace of land reform, and they also called for less discrimination against indigenous communities. These themes reflected topics of discussion commonly covered in catechist-led discussion groups. It was with the Congress that the indigenous populations realized their potential to politically organize. Soon after, catechists began consolidating the vast array of Catholic food production, transportation, health, and service cooperatives into large, regional, and more explicitly politicized producer organizations independent of the Mexican corporatist state (Harvey 1998, 74, 78–79; Womack 1999, 32).

The potential of these regional Catholic organizations to serve as kindling for political change grew first from their ability to provide basic goods and services to their members. A brief examination of two of these organizations that formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, La’Qu’iptik and the subsequent Union de Uniones (Union of Unions)¹⁷ helps to reinforce the point. In both cases, organizers (primarily Catholic catechists) were interested in prompting independent peasant organization, but they realized such organization had to be grounded on providing tangible material benefits to individual producers (Kovic 2005, 59).

In both La’Qu’iptik and the Union de Uniones, coffee served as the pretext for successful organization. “Everything revolved around coffee” (Interview 45, 2012). Politicized Catholic communities sent delegations throughout the region to explain how successful organizing, predicated on decentralized cooperative modes of production, could lead to better terms for the supply and transportation of coffee (Harvey 1998, 84). Organizational life in remote communities like Guadalupe Tepeyac and San Marcos (later Zapatista strongholds) subsequently grew around

coffee cooperatives, and it was through economic development that these regional organizations grew. The “capacity for independent political action depended less on denunciations and confrontations and more on the economic viability of peasant organizations ... economics became the key to political emancipation” (Harvey 1998, 87).

Slowly, successes materialized. The new indigenous organizations negotiated favorable contracts for their producers with the Mexican government. As they grew larger, more economically viable, and consolidated into the comprehensive Union de Uniones, the possibilities for political activism expanded. Catechists and deacons were the primary catalysts in constructing powerful intra-community organizations that directly sponsored new protest movements (Trejo 2012, 99). These grassroots organizations orchestrated massive protests such as a march 3,000 strong on the capital city of Chiapas and engendered greater concessions from the political elite (Womack 1999, 34; Harvey 1998, 84; Mattiace 2003, 41; Collier and Quaratiello 1999, 70, 76). Despite the subsequent splintering of the movement, most civil society groups that emerged in Chiapas owed their organizational origins to the decentralized network of cooperatives developed by the Catholic Church. The Zapatista movement, for its part, was strongly affiliated with Catholic networks that had developed in the region (Womack 1999, 35–38, 199–201; Harvey 1998, 164; Eisenstadt 2011, 87). As several observers describe, it was the encouragement of “decision-making and internal accountability” that led to the development of politicized groups in Chiapas (Washbrook 2007, 13; Trejo 2004, 144). The result was “people were participating for the first time as citizens” (Harvey 1998, 64–65).

Finally, it should be noted that my account complements the explanations proffered by Gill (1998) and Trejo (2009) described earlier in this article. Trejo convincingly argues that religious competition in Chiapas prompted the clergy to support secular political activism. Explanations emphasizing the importance of religious competition help us understand the conditions under which religious authorities will support secular political movements, enabling an opportunity for collective action through the religious institution. However, while Protestant competition occurred in both Chiapas and Yucatán, political activism did not emerge in the latter. While necessary, conditions prompting an opportunity for collective action within the religious organization are likely not sufficient to produce it without appropriate framing and resource mobilization (McAdam 1982, 37, 48). Laity do not organize politically as an automatic consequence of clergy support, and they must overcome their own collective action

problems. My work augments Gill and Trejo's accounts by describing how collective action is mobilized among the laity in situations where religious elites support secular political causes.

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF YUCATÁN

While the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas decentralized from the 1960s onward, the Archdiocese of Yucatán remained tightly hierarchical. From 1969 to the mid-1990s, the Catholic Church was ideologically conservative under Archbishop Manuel Castro Ruíz (Mattiace 2009, 139–140). At first glance, the archdiocese appears to have subsequently made a commitment to increase avenues of participation for its laity with the arrival of current Archbishop Emilio Carlos Berlie Belaunzarán in 1995. Yucatán's Catholic hierarchy has emphasized greater participation of the people in their own parishes, and a key development in this regard has been the creation of pastoral councils who advise the parish priest (Interview 69, 2011; Interview 11, 2012).

While this all appears participatory, laity are not given substantive decision-making authority across the archdiocese. The pastoral plan is drawn up by a select number of individuals in the hierarchy. Local priests are given freedom to choose the best way to implement it, but “everything comes from the top” (Interview 22, 2012). Laity have the right under Canon law to assemble and advise clergy, but they do so under the direct supervision of a parish priest (Interview 63, 2011; Interview 22, 2012). At no point, one priest stressed, do laity convene together to identify or formulate solutions to problems (Interview 22, 2012). While individuals appear eager to follow instructions given to them from a priest, they do not make decisions themselves. “Laity lack initiative in this sense. What the priest says, they do with good charity but always just what the priest says” (Interview 23, 2012). One priest also made it clear he ultimately makes the decisions in the parish. “What [the council] tells me is fine, but I decide what's going to happen. The decision is mine” (Interview 51, 2011). Thus, while parishioners are given the right to organize and advise in pastoral councils, they have few capacities to make substantive decisions. Furthermore, unlike Chiapas, lay catechists in Yucatán receive instruction from the priest who chooses themes for discussion and decides how they are to be taught locally. Catechists then communicate and implement those instructions within their assigned community (Interview 39, 2012; Interview 11, 2012; Interview 26, 2011).

As discussed earlier, the Catholic Church in Chiapas made a concerted effort to incorporate Maya beliefs, customs, and languages into the liturgy of the Church, making it easier for local populations to participate in it. In the Archdiocese of Yucatán, however, this has not been the case. While some priests express a need to adopt indigenous liturgical elements into the Church (Interview 11, 2012), the Archdiocese of Yucatán has not made the kind of concerted effort the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas has to incorporate Maya elements into the liturgy. “There are priests that don’t speak Mayan, there are priests that have not engaged with Maya traditions ... Here in Yucatán it’s more traditional” (Interview 23, 2012). Other priests express outright hostility to such an idea (Interview 51, 2011). The archdiocese has not made a resolute push to incorporate Maya culture into its pastoral plan. This has resulted in fewer avenues for participation than in the Chiapan Church by indigenous communities.

Unlike the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, where cooperatives provided laity with monitoring and sanctioning capacities in the production of material club goods, the hierarchy has not promoted cooperatives in the Archdiocese of Yucatán. In fact, the hierarchy has actively discouraged such cooperatives and provided no similar initiative throughout the Yucatán peninsula. The Catholic Church in Yucatán subsequently has provided few material club goods for its members and has not facilitated the emergence of an organizational network.

Those cooperatives that do exist have been formed outside the auspices of the Church. I spoke to one individual who has led an effort to form them. Though devoutly Catholic, he suggested the two largest obstacles to his work have been the government and the institutional Church. Accordingly, the work of forming and sustaining cooperatives has been difficult (Interview 71, 2012). Similarly, a small core of progressive priests operating an agricultural school (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica) in the south-eastern town of Maní encouraged the development of an economic cooperative. However, the archdiocese has actively sought to hinder their efforts by shutting the project down, and it has also succeeded in intimidating priests to abandon the project. Consequently, the focus and impact of the economic cooperative is too localized to have the capacity to link communities and foment a regional political movement (Mattiace 2009, 151–152).

The result is that there is little solidarity across communities in Yucatán or within the larger municipalities (Interview 8, 2011). It was common for me to encounter skepticism on the part of interview respondents regarding

whether they could count on other members of their communities to cooperate rather than pursue their own individual interests (Interview 25, 2011; Interview 37, 2011; Interview 38, 2011; Interview 48, 2011; Interview 49, 2011; Interview 10, 2011; Interview 70, 2011). As one respondent suggested, “throughout the whole state, we tend to be quarrelsome. We don’t know how to work in a team ... we are a selfish people who do not allow others to grow” (Interview 25, 2011).

The Archdiocese of Yucatán has not encouraged the development of decentralized monitoring and sanctioning through cooperatives or through any other analogous institutional mechanism. Cooperatives have not, subsequently, served to entice participation in the production of material club goods. They also have not contributed to reciprocal exchange across the archdiocese or the development of an organizational network. The absence of an organizational framework facilitating collective action, due to the lack of decentralization in the Archdiocese of Yucatán, largely explains the absence of political activism by indigenous communities in Yucatán.

While liberation theology never became pronounced throughout the peninsula, framing opportunities did exist to encourage political engagement. The Archdiocese of Yucatán has been slowly marked by increasing encouragement of civic participation and democratic engagement, despite a marked legacy of political conservatism. Under Archbishop Manuel Castro Ruiz from 1969 to 1995, the Archdiocese of Yucatán was one of the most conservative dioceses in all of Mexico and discouraged regional social movements (Mattiace 2009, 148, 150). Yet the archdiocese has pursued a less ideologically conservative course under Bishop Archbishop Emilio Carlos Berlie Belaunzarán than what had been pursued under his predecessor.

Over the last 15 years, there has been a significant expansion of avenues for lay participation through pastoral assemblies.¹⁸ The pastoral plan implements many of the progressive pastoral recommendations made by the Second Vatican Council (Interview 51, 2011). Indeed, the Yucatecan Church has even sought to foster heightened democratic participation through workshops on democracy (Interview 11, 2012). The Diocese has slowly become characterized by what Roderic Camp describes as the “Chihuahua Tendency” where members of the hierarchy advocate for “political rights, electoral integrity, and democratic change” but are not “progressive on other pastoral and spiritual issues” (Camp 1997, 272). Such movement frames certainly have the capacity to promote a great deal of civic engagement, as vast protests and activities

in Chihuahua against the PRI political party in the 1980s can attest (Chand 2001, 160–169). However, because this frame has not also been accompanied by decentralization, political activism has not developed.

The archdiocese has not made substantive efforts to decentralize authority to its laity through decision-making, monitoring, and sanctioning in the provision of material club goods. One parish priest complained about his attempts to prompt more participation in the pastoral council (Interview 69, 2011). He has found the laity are generally unwilling to participate and attributes this reluctance to the years in which laity have lacked a legitimate voice in parish affairs (Interview 63, 2011). Encouraging the laity to participate is not the same as giving it decentralized authority. Without a sustained effort by the archdiocese to the latter, it is difficult to effectively prompt the former.

While the ideological pronouncements coming from the Archdiocese of Yucatán were certainly never as radical as the prescriptions of liberation theology, the archdiocese became marked by the development of pastoral assemblies and workshops for democratic development. The framing has not existed to encourage the type of activism we have seen in Chiapas, but it has openly encouraged greater levels of participation and engagement. This has not, however, led to increases in civic engagement across the region.

CONCLUSION

Within this article, I examined variation in levels of indigenous political activism between the Mexican states of Chiapas and Yucatán. Both Chiapas and Yucatán possessed theological frames that, though differing, could have potentially encouraged political activism. Both also experienced relatively high levels of Protestant competition creating opportunities wherein religious elites might have been more willing to endorse secular political activism. I argued, on the other hand, that the Catholic Church decentralized monitoring, sanctioning, and decision-making to local laity in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. Regarding decision-making, laity were given the freedom to select their own themes for discussion and focused on their own local socio-economic problems. Furthermore, indigenous cultural and linguistic practices were incorporated into the liturgical practices of the Church. Monitoring and sanctioning were facilitated by economic cooperatives scattered across the region. Local community members had the responsibility for

monitoring group contributions of members, and sanctioning decisions were made locally. These sanctioning decisions typically included exclusion from the material club goods created by the cooperatives. As these cooperatives expanded, they created reciprocal networks of interaction across communities and a subsequent organizational basis that was applied to political activism.

The Archdiocese of Yucatán exhibits centralized monitoring, sanctioning, and decision-making. The archdiocese has generally devolved few substantive decision-making opportunities to the laity, and it has discouraged the development of economic cooperatives that have characterized Chiapas. The result has been few reciprocal networks of exchange, little organizational capacity across the state, and subsequently few indigenous movements across the state.

The results of this article further suggest that the institutional configuration of social institutions (like religious institutions) that structure individual interactions at a local level have important ramifications on the ability of communities to engage in collective action. Continued study is necessary to understand how religious institutions structure incentives for individuals to engage with their communities. This is particularly true in developing areas such as Latin America where religious institutions, here in the form of the Catholic Church, continue to play a powerful role in social affairs.

NOTES

1. While liberation theology was a progressive frame, it is important to point out that religious framing of political issues is certainly not always progressive and can also be used to support conservative political goals.

2. Religious elites are the clerical leadership that is formerly empowered by the religious institution to make a variety of doctrinal and institutional decisions (Gill 1998, 9). In Roman Catholicism, religious elites include the formal Church hierarchy. This particularly includes bishops who hold nearly autonomous authority within their respective dioceses (Camp 1997, 261–262; Kalyvas 1996, 29–30).

3. Djupe and Gilbert (2002) find that clergy often speak out politically on behalf of marginalized members in the United States. Most bishops in Mexico, however, “rarely offer any public statements,” and the Catholic Church often has not provided the same function across the country (Camp 1997, 273).

4. Laurence Iannaccone and Eli Berman (2006) have provided economic models explaining the conditions under which religious organizations prompt collective action. While their analyses emphasize the importance of sacrifice and stigma in prompting club goods production and consequently political violence among radical religious groups, this study builds on their economic approach in attempting to develop a model of collective action applicable to large, mainstream religious organizations.

5. It would be possible for religious governance to be local but not decentralized. For example, if bishops were to give important responsibilities to priests, religious governance would be more local, but it would not be decentralized in the sense that the laity who consume many of the club goods

provided by the religious institution would not be directly responsible for managing the production of those goods.

6. The argument *could* be characterized as neo-Weberian insofar as it provides an explanation for why many Protestant religions may also be associated with material goods production. However, Weber's explanation focused on how theologically-inspired asceticism lead to the re-investment of surplus capital into productive business enterprises. My explanation focuses on very different organizational mechanisms.

7. The political state of Chiapas is divided into three dioceses. 80% of the indigenous population of Chiapas resides within the Diocese of San Cristóbal. The State of Yucatán and the Archdiocese of Yucatán are coterminous.

8. I refer to indigenous states as those states where at least 10% of the population speaks an indigenous language.

9. For the reader concerned that the high level of political activism seen in Chiapas may be a result of the 1994 rebellion, Chiapas has been characterized by a high degree of political activism since the 1970s. Chiapas experienced 937 separate protest events prior to the Zapatista uprising in 1994 (spanning a period from 1975 to 1993). Yucatán, on the other hand, had 54 such events during the same time (Trejo 2010).

10. The characteristics of religious orders in the two regions are similar in terms of priests per capita (Cheney 2015). Furthermore, individual missions typically serve a specific local area, and their influence cannot account for diocese-wide trends.

11. As of 2000, Protestants accounted for 21.9% of the population of Chiapas (ranking first among Mexico's 32 states). In Yucatán, Protestants accounted for 11.4% of the population (ranking fifth among Mexico's 32 states). Nationally, Protestants accounted for 7.3% of the population (Dow 2005, 13).

12. All interviews were transcribed in Yucatán by Spanish-speaking undergraduate students at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.

13. Religious institutions often re-orient themselves to respond to demands from adherents (Djupe and Olson 2013). In this case, however, there is little evidence the indigenous populations of Chiapas made demands for decentralization or political responsiveness from Church authorities in the early part of the 1960s.

14. Within the Diocese of San Cristóbal, catechists and deacons are important community leaders. There are a limited number of these positions within each community, however, and so they were selected democratically after much deliberation (Harvey 1998, 74).

15. Some cooperatives provided education and health benefits to non-members within their communities. Preferential access to credit, technical assistance, market information, preferential commodity pricing, profit shares, and price floors were restricted to members (Hudson and Hudson 2004, 130–146; Reynolds, Murray, and Taylor 2004, 1109–1121; Interview 17, 2012).

16. The spiritual services provided by the Catholic Church were not dependent on working in a cooperative. Religious organizations provide a "menu" of club goods, some contingent on certain forms of participation even if many services are not. Cooperatives provided indigenous Catholic communities a particularly useful organizational model to easily "[identify] and selectively reward high contributors" (McBride 2007, 395).

17. These organizations were run by catechists and deacons and predominantly Catholic. "Only Catholics belonged" (Womack 1999, 32).

18. Pastoral assemblies are small jurisdictions where representative members of the laity meet and select individuals to coordinate various activities of the diocese such as lay-manned charitable operations. They may also provide their opinions to the priest. In Yucatán, they meet under the direct supervision and guidance of a parish priest (Interview 11, 2012).

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- Interview 22, Church Official. 2012, Yucatán, June 28.
- Interview 23, Church Official. 2012, Yucatán, June 18.
- Interview 25, Party Official. 2011, Yucatán, October 24.
- Interview 26, Citizen. 2011, Yucatán, October 13.
- Interview 29, Civic Association. 2011, Chiapas, November 17.
- Interview 30, Cooperative member. 2012, Chiapas, July 23.
- Interview 31, Church Representative. 2011, Chiapas, December 1.
- Interview 37, Civic Leader. 2011, Yucatán, October 12.
- Interview 38, Civic Leader. 2011, Yucatán, October 12.
- Interview 39, Church Volunteer. 2012, Yucatán, June 21.
- Interview 43, Cooperative member. 2012, Chiapas, July 31.
- Interview 45, Church Official. 2012, Chiapas, July 12.
- Interview 46, Church Official. 2011, Chiapas, December 1.
- Interview 48, Civic Leader. 2011, Yucatán, October 11

- Interview 49, Government Official. 2011, Yucatán, October 6.
Interview 51, Church Official. 2011, Yucatán, October 3.
Interview 56, Church Official. 2011, Chiapas, November 24 & November 27.
Interview 63, Church Official. 2011, Yucatán, October 7.
Interview 69, Church Official. 2011, Yucatán, October 26.
Interview 70, Citizen. 2011, Yucatán, October 29.
Interview 71, Citizen. 2012, Yucatán, September 23.
Interview 81, Church Official. 2011, Chiapas, November 4.
Interview 83, Cooperative member. 2012, Chiapas, July 25.