

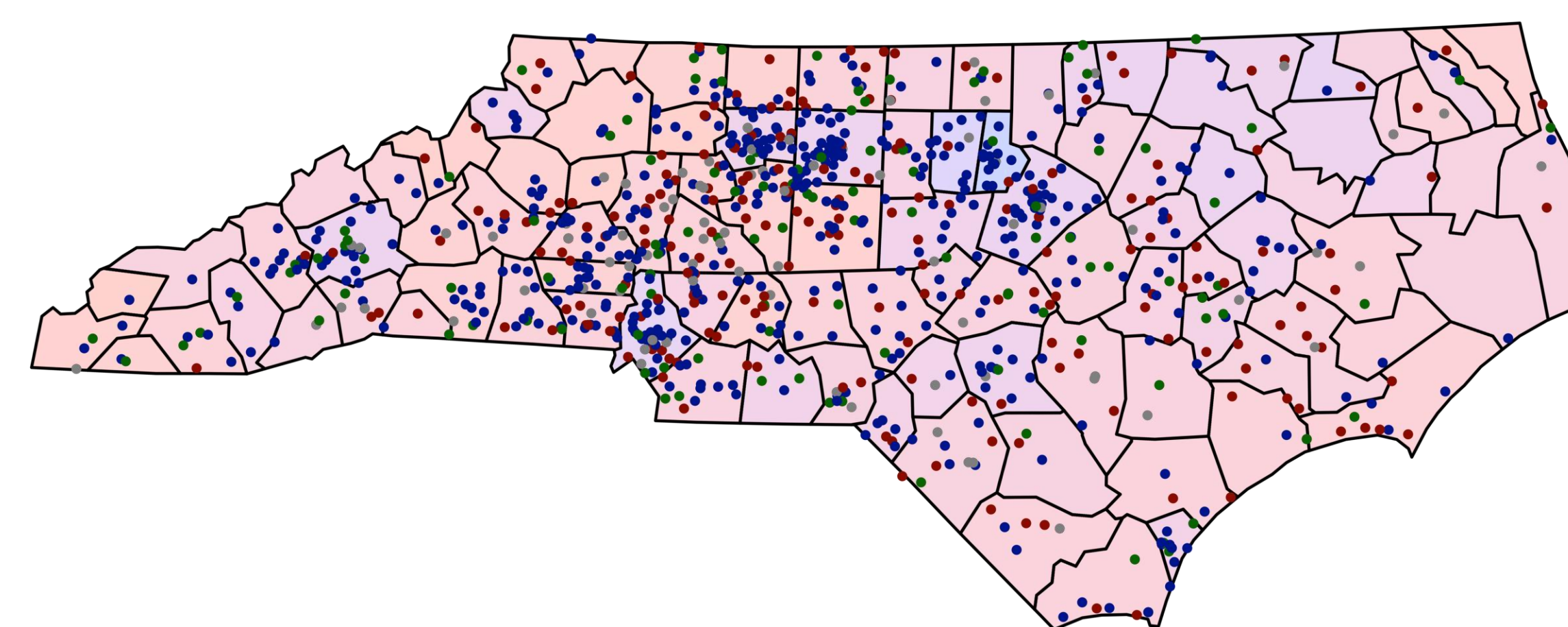
# Politics and Polarization in Mainline Protestant Congregations

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## PROJECT SUMMARY

Politics and Polarization in Mainline Protestant Congregations, a 2022-2023 Bass Connections team, examined whether and how political polarization has impacted Mainline Protestant clergy and congregations since the onset of COVID-19. Recent data from the National Survey of Religious Leaders shows while conservative Protestant congregations are highly polarized (80% of members and clergy lean Republican), Mainline Protestants are split along partisan lines and Mainline clergy, on average, reporting being more liberal than their congregations. Using three different methodological approaches and sources of data (sermons, interview, and survey data), the team has deepened our understanding of the impact polarization is having on clergy well-being, on the divergent ways clergy think about the relationship between politics and religion, and on the extent to which clergy discuss salient political and social issues from the pulpit.



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Nationally...

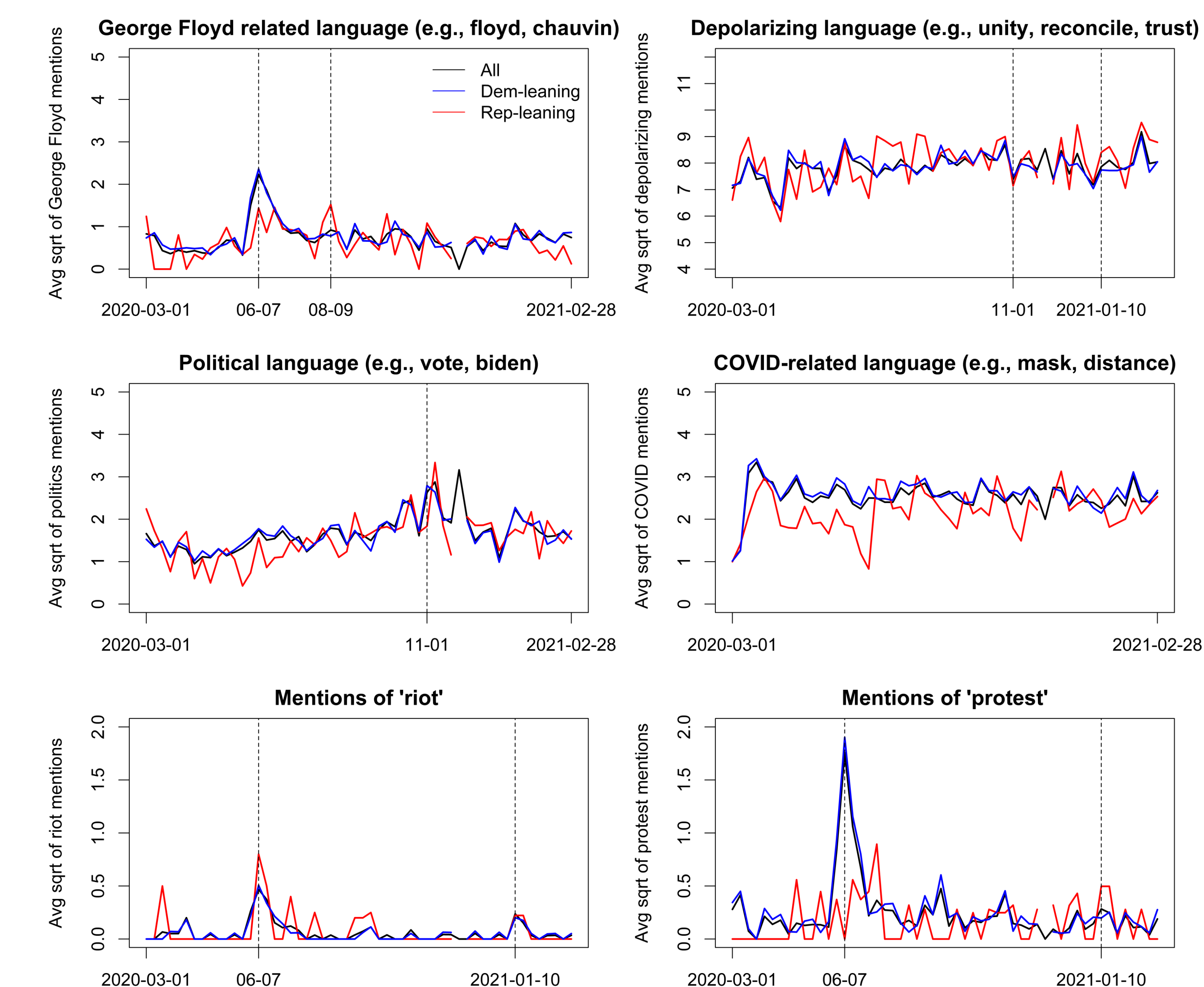
The United Methodist Church (UMC) is the third-largest denomination in the United States, with **6.5 million members**, **30,543 churches**, and **38,308 clergy**. Nearly **1 in 10** congregations in the United States are UMC.

### In North Carolina...

Our research focuses on UMC clergy and congregations in North Carolina. These include **1,521 clergy** assigned to **1,803 congregational charges**. **479,853 people** are members of United Methodist churches in the state. On an average Sunday, **120,009 North Carolinians** attend a UMC congregation.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SERMONS

Do UMC pastors address salient political events from the pulpit?



The Sermon Analysis sub-team studied quantitative textual data analysis methods to explore if political polarization is represented in Sunday sermons and how pastors navigated political tension over time. This team collected and analyzed sermons from 217 United Methodist congregations in North Carolina, including 25 majority-black congregations, from March 1st, 2020 to February 28th, 2021. The sermons were linked to pastor-level surveys from the Clergy Health Initiative. Each team member also came up with their own research question(s), identified variables, and created word sets that correspond to salient issues and political events.

## INTERVIEWS WITH UMC CLERGY

Is there a place for politics in the pastorate?

*"I feel like the **gospel is inherently political**. To preach what Jesus taught is to be political."*

*"You **cannot separate politics from religion**, nor can you separate religion from anything else. It should be the voice and the guiding light in everything that we do and how we believe."*

*"I **don't preach politics**. I don't preach injustice. I don't preach social issues. I **preach Jesus**, because Jesus is the answer for all of it."*

The Interview Analysis sub-team spent this year honing their skills in qualitative data analysis, including coding, memo writing, and structural and thematic analysis. Focusing on interviews from 34 pastors in NC, students investigated if and how pastors incorporate politics into their ministry, how they handle political conflicts, and how they connect the political and the theological. Students found that pastors vary significantly in their thoughts about the role of politics in the pastorate. However, regardless of the pastors' stated preference on including politics in their ministerial activities, the team found that almost all pastors did, in fact, incorporate political language or action into their ministry in some way.

## SURVEY AND NETWORK ANALYSIS

Is political conflict in pastors' workplace associated with worse well-being? And who do they turn to for support?

The aim of the survey analysis sub-team is to uncover the association between the demands of congregants and the well-being of pastors in a polarized work environment. This team used the R programming language to clean the 2021 wave of the Clergy Health Initiative survey, geocode the location of churches and merge information from the census. Our team produced two analyses. Regression analyses reveal that younger pastors who struggle to handle political conflict in their congregation also report more mental distress – independent of political party. Network analyses found that pastors are turning to elders within their own conference, but not necessarily within political party, for social support.

