

The sequential rise of female religious leadership

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Abstract: In his seminal work "Ordaining Women," Mark Chaves (1997b) highlighted the phenomenon of "loose coupling" regarding female religious leadership: congregations often display inconsistencies between their stated policies and actual practices. Some congregations declare openness to female leadership but do not practice it, whereas others officially forbid female leadership yet have women in leadership roles. Our article identifies a theoretical mechanism producing this inconsistency. We propose that congregations typically first loosen their formal rules governing female access to leadership and only later allow women to occupy leadership positions in practice. This two-stage process results in a temporal lag between rule change and practice change, creating the observed "loose coupling," where rules are often more gender egalitarian than practice. Using two waves of the National Congregation Survey Switzerland covering all religious traditions, we test our theory both on the aggregate and the unit level and find strong support for it. Simulations further indicate that certain characteristics of the organizational population of congregations, such as their low attrition rate, may explain a large part of the lag between rule change and practice change.

Keywords: female leadership; congregations; loose coupling; sociology of organizations

Reproducibility Package: A replication package with instructions, data, and R-code has been made publicly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/qbb5d/>

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THE question of women's access to leadership in religious organizations is the subject of passionate debate, both within religions and among the general public (De Gasquet 2009; Willaime 1996). As many observers have noted, the religious field is one of the most patriarchal social areas of western societies (Lee 2024). It exhibits more explicit barriers inhibiting female leadership and shows less female leadership than most other social areas (Chaves 1997a). In many religions, the followers are predominantly female, whereas the clergy is overwhelmingly male (Stolz and Monnot 2019). Several studies have found that when women occupy leadership roles within congregations, they frequently find themselves in subordinate leadership roles, either in terms of their position or in terms of the resources of the congregation they lead (Chaves, Roso, and Hawkins 2021; Lee 2024). This situation is often described as a "stained glass ceiling," which prevents women from accessing religious leadership positions (Adams 2007; Sullins 2000).

Following the seminal work by Chaves (1996, 1997b), the literature on female religious leadership has accepted the proposition of "loose coupling" between access rules and practice regarding female religious leadership. According to this proposition, access rules serve more as symbolic signals for or against gender equality, rather than as policies actually organizing women's roles. In particular, Chaves draws on the fact that we find denominations that formally prevent women from occupying leadership positions, but in which women practically act as leaders



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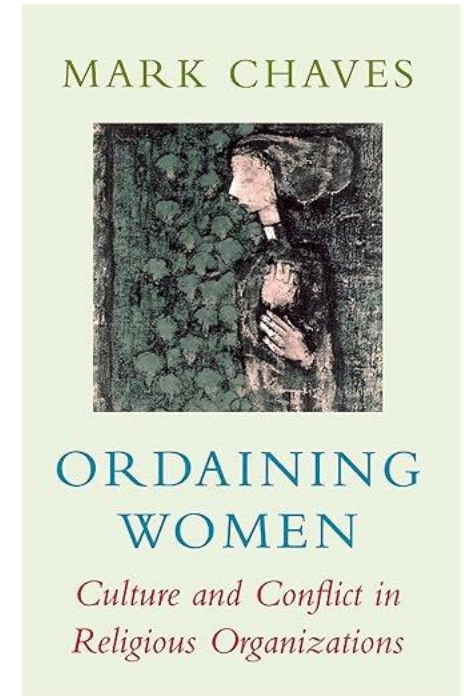
Motivation

- Religious field one of the most patriarchal social areas of western societies (Lee 2024)
- More barriers to female leadership than in other social areas (Chaves 1997a).
- In many religions: followers predominantly female, but clergy overwhelmingly male (De Gasquet 2009).
- "Stained glass ceiling"

Motivation

- Mark Chaves: "Loose coupling"
- = inconsistency between access rules and practice regarding female religious leadership (Chaves 1996)
- = Religious groups do not say as the do and do not do as they say

-> How can we explain this inconsistency?



Central questions

1. How have the access rules regulating women's leadership in Swiss congregations changed from 2009 to 2022?
2. How has the practice of female leadership evolved?
3. Is there, and how much, "loose coupling" between rules and practice? And if so, what mechanisms are responsible?

Theory

- (P1) Swiss society is increasingly focused on gender equality. This creates increasing pressure on religious congregations.
- (P2) Religious congregations tend to respond to the pressure of gender equality in a sequence: first change rules, then change practice

Hypotheses

- (H1) Rules and practice move toward greater gender equality between 2009 and 2022 .
- (H2) Congregations without rule equality in 2009 will tend to adopt rule equality in 2022, but they will not show an increase in the practice of female religious leadership in 2022.
Congregations that had rule equality in 2009 will maintain it in 2022 and they will tend to increase the practice of female leadership in 2022.

Congregation

- = "local religious group"
- = "a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering" (Chaves 2004:1).

Data

	2008	2021
Unit of observation	congregation	congregation
Census: N	6341	5834
Sampling	stratified random all religions	stratified random all religions
Data collection	key informant CATI	key informant CATI/CAWI
Survey: n	1022	1395
Response rate	60.9%	45.4%

Measurement: Rule

Are women qualified to...

- be head of clergy or senior religious leader
- be full members of governing bodies or coordinating committees,
- preach at a main worship service,
- teach a class with adult men in it, and
- hold all volunteer leadership positions that are available to men.

Measurement Practice

- Is there one person who is the spiritual leader of your congregation — a priest, senior pastor, spiritual guide, etc.? (yes/no). If the respondent answered "yes",
- Is this person female? (yes/no).

Dependent variables

- Rule 2022:
 - % of congr. in a denomination allowing female leader (agg level)
 - Allowing female leader (yes/no) (unit level)
- Practice 2022:
 - % of congr. in a denomination having female leader (agg level)
 - Having female leader yes /no (unit level)

Independent variables

- Rule 2009:
 - % of Congr. in a denom. allowing female leader (agg. level)
 - Allowing female leader (yes/no), (unit level)
- Practice 2009:
 - % of Congr. in a denom. having female leader (agg. level)
 - Having female leader yes /no (unit level)
- Religious denomination
- Religious tradition

Two types of "loose coupling"

Inconsistency of rules and practice regarding female religious leadership on

... **conservative side:**

- rule against female leadership, but led by a woman:
- measurement on unit level

... **liberal side:**

- rule allows female religious leadership, but no parity in practice
- measurement only on aggregate level

Analytical strategy

- Denomination level: Bayesian multivariate beta Regressions (with logit link)
- congregational level: crosstabulate the four logical rule–practice possibilities for a congregation in 2009 with the four logical possibilities for a congregation in 2022. T-test for falling into allowed cells.

Results



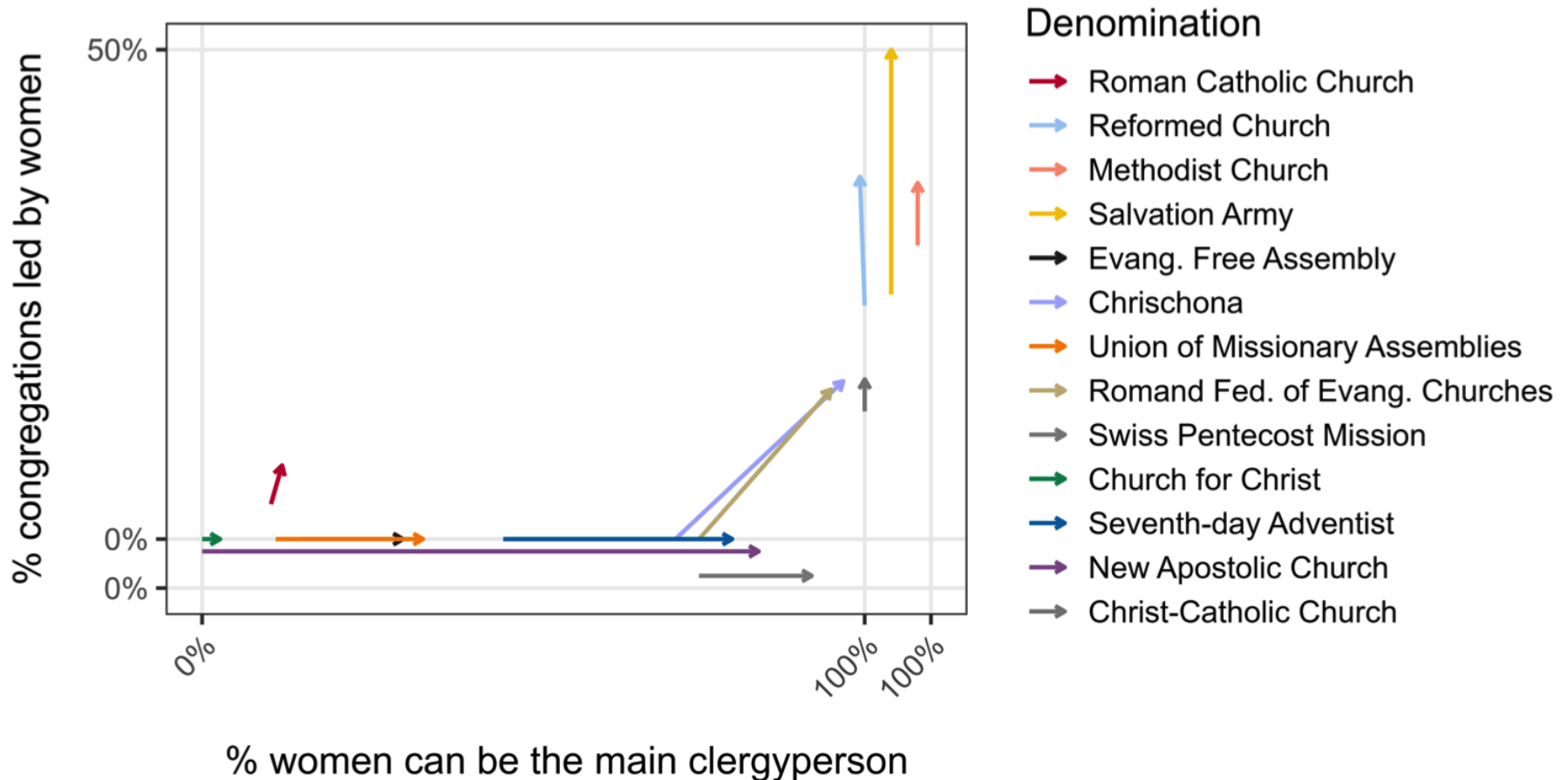
Female leadership: rules & practice

Variable	2009	2022
Access rules: Women may be ... (%)		
Main clergy person	47.8	54.0*
Preaching at a main worship	65.8	75.9**
Board member	90.0	92.7*
Holding all volunteer leadership positions	87.8	91.1*
Teaching in class with men	91.3	93.9*
Practice: actual female leadership (%)		
female leading clergy person	12.3	14.7
women on board	41.2	42.7

Loose coupling ...

	2009		2022	
	N	%	N	%
.. on the liberal side	137	88.1	205	85.9
.. on the conservative side	19	11.9	34	14.1

Female leadership, rules & practice denominational level (2009-2022)



Female leadership: rules & practice

$$g(\mu_{T1i}) = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 x_{T0i} + \beta_2 y_{T0i} + \varepsilon_1,$$

$$g(\eta_{T1i}) = \alpha_2 + \beta_3 x_{T0i} + \beta_4 y_{T0i} + \varepsilon_2,$$

Loose coupling ...

	Rules 2022	Practice 2022
Intercept	-1.09*(0.51	-3.85*(0.69)
.. Rules 2009 (post sd)	4.07*(1.16)	0.51(3.86)
.. Practice 2009 (post sd)	1.28(1.04)	8.62*(3.58)

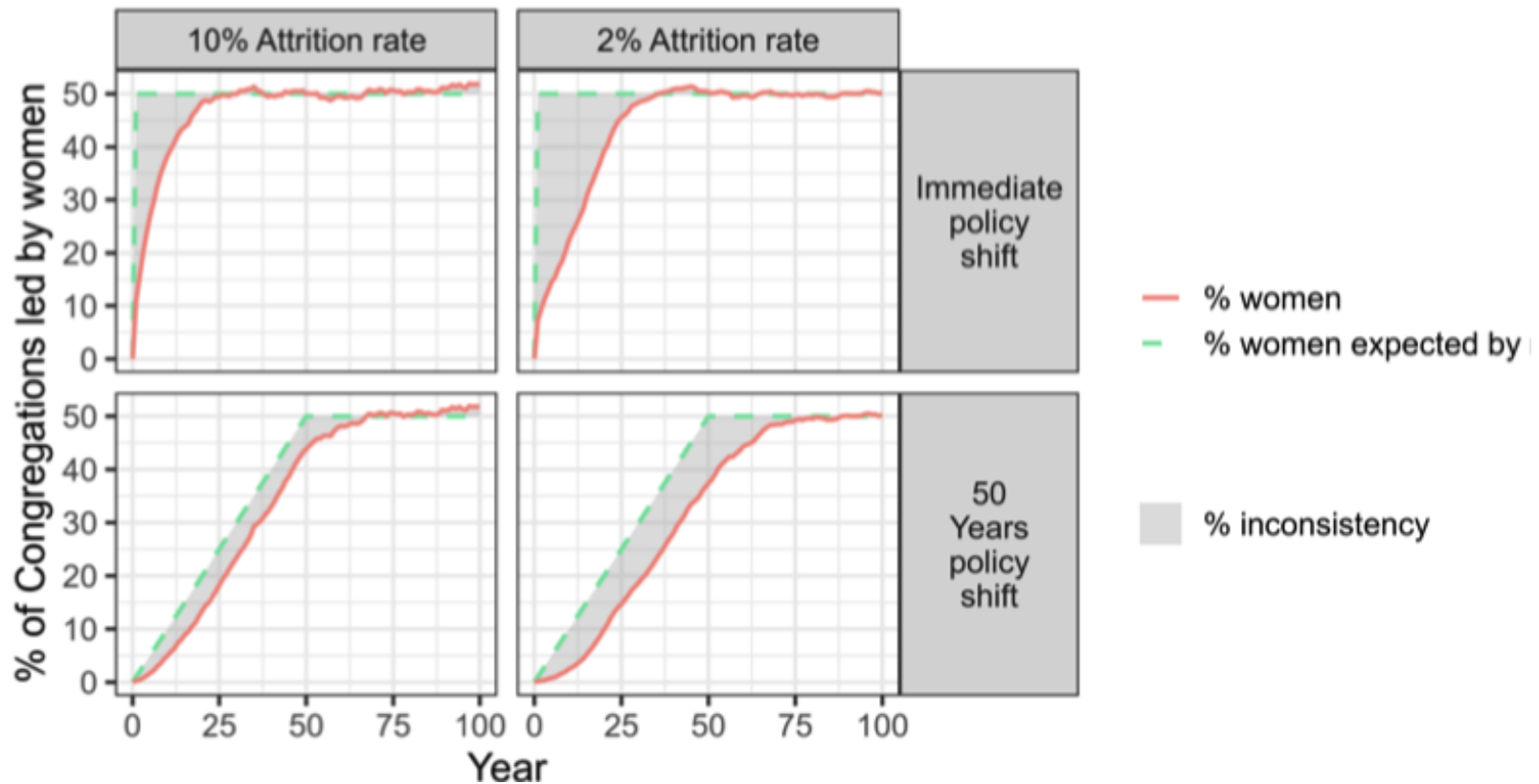
Female leadership, rules & practice congregation level (2009-2022)

		2022			
		1	2	3	4
2009		Rule: liberal; practice: female	Rule: liberal; practice: male	Rule: conserv.; practice: female	Rule: conserv.; practice: male
1	Rule: liberal; practice: female	12 (step 2)	18 (step 2)	1	1
2	Rule: liberal; practice: male	41 (step 2)	97 (step 2)	0	7
3	Rule: conserv.; practice: female	0	2	0	0
4	Rule: conserv.; practice: male	2	22 (step 1)	2	69 (step 1)

Simulation

- Intuition: if this rule-practice sequence important -> takes time to move to full equality because of tenured male incumbents
- How long would it take to move from 0 female leadership to 50%
 - (a) under **best conditions** (all denoms switch immediately to liberal rules; 10% attrition) -> 25 years
 - (b) under **realistic conditions** (denoms switch during 50 years; 2% attrition rate) -> 75 years

Liberal side inconsistency over time (simulations)



Conclusion

- Access rules & practice of female religious leadership moved toward greater gender equality between 2009 and 2022. (H1 ok)
- Considerable extent of inconsistency (“loose coupling”) between rules and practices of female religious leadership both in 2009 and 2022. Inconsistency "on the liberal side" overwhelmingly more frequent than "on the conservative side". Rule–practice inconsistency "on the conservative side" overwhelmingly Roman-Catholic .
- Rule–practice inconsistency emerges and disappears mainly because of a two-step sequence (H2 ok)
- Simulations: rule–practice sequence must generate long-term liberal side loose coupling, because filling up of positions with women is slowed down by tenured male incumbents.

Conclusion

- Overall: Identified a unit-level mechanism accounting for most of the "loose coupling" between rules and practice of female religious leadership in the aggregate

Thank you!