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Explaining Schism in American Protestant Denominations, 1890–1990

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The remarkable degree of religious diversity in the United States is produced more through schisms and mergers occurring to preexisting denominations than through foundings of new religious groups. In this article we analyze schisms, focusing on mainstream Protestant denominations over the period 1890–1990. We treat schism as an organizational process rather than an expression of purely doctrinal disputes; more specifically, we argue that schisms arise from within denominations in response to attempts by denominational elites to achieve organizational consolidation. Event-history techniques are used to test hypotheses concerning resource environments, effects of denominational reorganization, resource mobilization capacity, network linkages, and denominational centralization. Results show that rates of schism are influenced by prior structural changes, size, and linkage to a liberal federation; we find no effects of resource or institutional environments.

INTRODUCTION

American religious denominations offer an attractive but, until recently, neglected opportunity for organizational analysis. They are attractive for three reasons. First, they are important features of the social landscape. Americans belong to churches more than any other kind of voluntary group, and church membership is higher in the United States than in any other Western nation (Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992). Thus they are second only to the workplace as sites of organizational involvement. Second, denominations in the United States are organizationally diverse (Finke and Stark 1992; Tocqueville [1835] 1969). Conventionally, this diversity has been treated as a matter of differences in doctrine, but it is just as obviously a matter of organizational form. Between Catholics and Protestants, and among the many Protestant groups, lines of conflict are drawn in terms of theological and ritual differences, but also in terms of organizational issues such as the authority of denominational hierarchies, the autonomy of local congregations, and the appropriate relationship between the church and secular institutions (Niebuhr 1929; Troeltsch 1960; Weber 1964).

Third, this organizational diversity is produced and reproduced through a distinctive set of population dynamics. American denominations are unlike many other organizational populations in that “births” and “deaths” occur mainly in the form of schisms and mergers. Independent denominational foundings are rare and dissolutions are almost nonexistent. In this article we focus on denominational schisms. Schisms present an interesting set of problems because they contain elements of both birth and death. From the perspective of the parent denomination, a schism represents a profound organizational failure; from the perspective of the schismatic group, schism represents the founding of a new, hopefully purer and more robust, organizational entity.

Existing accounts of denominationalism underemphasize organizational dynamics. The foundational sociological account by Niebuhr (1929) argues that denominational diversity is a byproduct of wider social divisions by race, class, and region in American society. Following this logic,

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Wilson (1971) suggests that schisms are likely to occur when social divisions become salient *within* denominations. We do not disagree with the descriptive aspect of this argument. The issue of mechanism, however, requires rethinking. Wilson's formulation downplays organizational processes, suggesting instead that schisms result from the aggregation of members' social-psychological dispositions. But some degree of value dissensus is undoubtedly present in all denominations; the important analytic task is to discover those conditions that make denominations more or less vulnerable to insurgency and exit.

Inspired in part by the rise of resource mobilization theories of social movements (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977), later sociologists have criticized the Niebuhr-Wilson account for placing too much causal weight on preexisting social differences and for paying insufficient attention to mobilization tasks necessary to transform latent grievances into overt conflict. Wallis (1979), for example, identified denominational age and degree of centralization as fundamental "structural conditions facilitating or inhibiting schism": younger denominations and denominations at either degree of centralization, he argued, were most likely to be schismatic. Stark and Bainbridge (1985:105) elaborated Niebuhr's account by highlighting the importance of activists for building divisive coalitions around latent social cleavages. Others have hypothesized that the death of a charismatic leader, the extent to which a religion is exclusivistic, and the existence of multiple sources of legitimate authority within a denomination can increase the likelihood of schism (Bruce 1990; Wallis 1979; Zald and Ash 1966).

Together these arguments converge on two broad explanatory themes: one theme emphasizes denominational structure, whether in terms of size, form of governance, or exclusivism; and the other emphasizes denominational history or process, in terms of age, shifts in leadership, or the dynamics of conflict. Although we think that both themes have merit, existing accounts are so far unsupported by rigorous empirical analysis. A partial exception in this regard is the study by Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow (1988), which is the only extant quantitative analysis of schism. We move beyond their analysis by employing a more extensive data set,¹ and by testing a wide range of hypotheses about multiple authority structures, denominational history, and environmental influences. To anticipate our conclusions, we find that denominational schism is intimately connected to efforts at organizational consolidation within denominations, particularly mergers and foundings. These events disrupt status quo arrangements of internal resources, generate internal conflict, and thereby create organizational opportunities for schism. Thus we remain in the Niebuhrian tradition of seeing social conflict at the root of schism, but we differ from that tradition insofar as we see organizational rather than identity variables as the causal mechanism.

THEORIZING DENOMINATIONAL SCHISM

What is a Schism?

It is important to recognize that denominations are national-level organizations characterized by both a religious authority structure and an agency structure (Chaves 1993). These two structures relate differently to congregations, which are the fundamental unit of denominations. Among other things, the religious authority structure is largely oriented to the control of congregations via, for example, the certification and appointment of clergy, the enforcement of doctrinally-based behavioral norms, and the definition of criteria for membership. The agency structure, by contrast, considers congregations more as a resource base than as arenas for exercising authority. Concretely, denominational agencies publish books and periodicals, promote missions, manage pension funds, develop Sunday School curricula, and deliver social services of various sorts. They need the resources of congregations, which they obtain either through gifts or through sales of materials and services, to carry on their work.

Denominational schisms occur through the creation of a new nonlocal organization that successfully mobilizes the loyalty and the resources of a subset of existing congregations. For

example, the 1936 schism of the Presbyterian Church of America from its parent denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., arose from a struggle over the legitimacy of alternative boards of foreign missions (Longfield 1991). This is a typical pattern in the history of American religion. Explaining schism, therefore, means explaining the forces that encourage the formation of insurgent national-level organizations that can compete successfully for the loyalty and resources of existing congregations. Three things are necessary for this to occur: the motivation for activists to create a new national-level organization, the presence of preexisting division that can be mobilized in support of a new organization, and the hope of securing congregational loyalty to it. The explanation we develop below elaborates this basic vision.

External Influences on Rates of Schism

It is useful to distinguish between two aspects of denominations' environments: the technical environment and the institutional or cultural environment (Scott 1991:125–34). The technical (or task) environment contains the material and informational resources required by an organization to achieve its core goals. Institutional environments comprise a more amorphous set of network, cultural, and historical arrangements within which organizations are embedded. While task environments emphasize efficiency, institutional environments emphasize legitimacy: organizations attempt to adopt structures and practices that conform to the appropriate set of normative expectations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

The technical environment of denominations contains only two kinds of resources, members (actual or potential) and money, both of which are crucial for the creation and maintenance of denominational organizations. This suggests a familiar population ecology approach: schisms create new national-level organizations that add to the population of denominations; thus in the aggregate, variation in rates of schism should respond to variation in the richness of the resource environment. But we think there is good reason to doubt that the resource environment affects rates of schism. As we described above, a schism is a rearrangement of resources internal to the denominational population, not a new claim on resources external to the already existing organizational population. After a schism there are two denominations rather than one, but this does not mean that the denominational niche has expanded, since the number of *congregations*—the key resource-consuming unit—tends to stay the same. Local resource environments are likely to influence the founding and dissolution of individual congregations, and the national resource environment may affect the founding and institutionalization of new religious movements. But we do not expect increases in the resource environment of denominations to produce increased rate of schisms—an expectation we can state as our first hypothesis.

H1 *Measures of the richness of denominations' resource environment will be unrelated to rates of schism.*

Concretely, we treat the United States as a single environment for denominations, the richness of which varies along several dimensions—changes in overall levels of religious participation, to changes in overall levels of religious contributions, and the like—over time.

Our expectations with respect to the institutional environment are different. Denominations, with their ambiguous goals and technology, are very close to ideal typical cases of “institutionalized organizations” (Meyer and Rowan 1977)—those that are deeply influenced by the expectations of relevant cultural environments. Denominations have at least two relevant institutional environments—the broad secular environment and the religious environment constituted by other denominations—and we expect developments in both to influence rates of schism.

With respect to the broad secular environment, we would expect that serious cultural or social conflict would be likely to produce conflict inside denominations. Since religious schism is always framed in terms of ideological or theological disagreement, we would expect that the presence of conflict in the society will lend ideological ammunition to discontented parties inside

denominations, and thereby will increase the likelihood of the type of activity that may lead to schism. The presence of broad cultural conflicts over, for example, slavery, involvement in war, openness to African Americans, and gender equality all have produced internal conflict and schism for U.S. religious organizations at some time in our history.² The presence of broad cultural conflict also makes it more likely that denominations will attempt to force congregations to comply with a national policy on some controversial issue, an argument we develop further below. This line of argument can be stated as a hypothesis.

H2 Rates of denominational schism will be higher in times of broad cultural or social conflict.

With respect to the religious environment, we would expect that schism is more likely in any one denomination if it is happening more frequently in the population as a whole. This is simply a special case of the general principle that organizations like denominations, which are characterized by fundamental ambiguity about the “proper” or “legitimate” ways to proceed, often model their behavior after other organizations in the field. Hence, conflicting parties within a denomination will be more likely to resolve their conflict via schism if they look around and see that other denominations are resolving their conflicts that way. Stated as a hypothesis:

H3 The more schisms that have occurred in the recent past, the higher the likelihood that any given denomination will experience schism.

Internal Influences on Rates of Schism

Our primary emphasis in this article, however, is on a set of organizational influences on schism that stem from inside denominations themselves. We believe three factors are key: the existence of efforts to consolidate or centralize denominational organizations, the availability of ideological and social “resources” for mobilizing dissent, and the reasonable expectation that a potentially schismatic national organization will win the loyalty of congregations. We will discuss each factor in turn.

Efforts at Organizational Consolidation

Organization theorists have argued for some time that changes in organizational structure temporarily raise the risk of organizational failure—the greater the change, the greater the risk (Hannan and Freeman 1984). This occurs because structural change involves a redeployment of resources and a disturbance in the fit between the organization and its environment. Our reading of American denominational history suggests a parallel argument that denominational *consolidation* increases the likelihood of schism. Denominational consolidation largely takes three forms: (1) attempts to increase centralized control over existing nonlocal denominational organizations; (2) the creation of new nonlocal structures that congregations are expected to support; and (3) attempts by existing nonlocal structures to enforce congregational compliance with some denominational policy. Any of these types of efforts at organizational consolidation almost always produce intra-denominational conflict, and we find them in the background in many specific cases of schism.

Two of the cases of 19th-century schism described by Wilson (1971) nicely illustrate the common phenomenon of “Type 1” efforts at consolidation—increasing centralization of existing denominational organizations. The 1827 Hicksite schism from the Quakers was precipitated by the fact that “the Hicksite party saw the movement’s development of centralized organization and an oligarchic leadership as a radical departure from the organizational principles of the movement” (Wilson 1971:9). Organizational centralization also was important in the 1828 schism in which the Protestant Methodists broke from the Methodist Episcopal Church (Wilson 1971:8). Fitts

(1985) provides an additional example: the 1915 schism of the National Baptist Convention, Unincorporated from the National Baptist Convention, Incorporated occurred as a result of the parent denomination's attempt to assert tighter control over its publishing board.

"Type 2" consolidations include denominational mergers and foundings. There are several examples of mergers giving rise to schisms. For example, the Southern Methodist Church broke away from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1939 when the latter merged with two other denominations to form the Methodist Church. The congregations forming the Southern Methodist Church refused to be part of a denomination that included African-American congregations. As this example suggests, mergers always require some degree of ideological, social, and organizational compromise. Moreover, consolidation is likely to rupture the aura of legitimacy that surrounded the previously autonomous denominations. Denominational foundings are likely to incur the same kinds of risk, since they occur mostly when established local congregations attempt to create a new nonlocal organization of some sort. Foundings need not require a sacrifice of prior denominational commitments, but they invariably impinge on the autonomy of local congregations, create new demands for resources, and require members to shift their loyalty upward to a more remote source of authority. Thus we expect that both mergers and foundings will raise the rate of schism, but only in the short run; as new arrangements become institutionalized, rates should decline to normal.

It is also important in this context to address the effects of denominational schism on the likelihood of subsequent schisms. One possibility is that the experience of schism leaves a denomination with weakened legitimacy and a depleted resource base, thus making future defections more likely. This is compatible with Hannan and Freeman's (1984) formal argument that any profound organizational change raises the likelihood of subsequent failure—schisms, in this light, have the same effect as mergers and foundings on subsequent schisms. But our more substantive argument about denominational consolidation suggests the opposite: we expect the recent experience of schism to reduce the chances of another schism in the same denomination. Schisms are, in effect, *de*-consolidations: they separate conflicting factions, leaving both the parent denomination and the new schismatic denomination more ideologically and socially homogeneous. Schism may also influence the behavior of denominational elites by warning them away from controversial initiatives, including efforts at consolidation. This leads us to predict that schism to some degree immunizes a denomination against further schisms, and that this immunization wears off with time.

The impact of "Type 3" consolidation efforts—attempts to enforce congregational compliance with a denominational policy—is illustrated by another schism described by Wilson (1971). In 1848, the Plymouth Brethren split into two groups, the Open Brethren and the Exclusive Brethren. Although the theological issue was the question of open communion—the rules that would govern who would be allowed to break bread with whom—this issue was inextricably linked with the question of whether there would be more centralized control over this religious matter. Growing size contributed to this centralizing pressure.

But as the number of [Brethren] assemblies began to grow, pressures increased to establish some form of self-definition, thus challenging the notion of open communion. Expansion also increased the pressure towards some kind of central organization which could coordinate the activities of the various assemblies and this, too, was a challenge to the original anti-sectarian stance of the movement. (Wilson 1971:6–7)

Schism occurred as a result of an effort to enforce a uniform communion policy on all congregations.

The split of the Methodist Episcopal Church into northern and southern branches in 1846 is another example of schism prompted by an effort to consolidate organizational power in the form of enforcing compliance with a denominational policy.³ Northern and southern Methodists had disagreed over slavery from the organizational beginnings of the denomination in 1784; the practical issue was whether members or officials could own slaves. The General Conference of

1816 adopted the compromise position that “no slaveholder should be appointed to any official position in the church, if the state in which he lived made it possible for him to liberate his slaves.” This compromise held until 1844, when a southern bishop became a slaveholder “by inheritance and by marriage.” Georgia law forbade manumission, so the bishop was in compliance with the 1816 compromise rule; but nonetheless in 1844 the General Conference of the denomination sought to oust him from his position. Southern delegates disagreed vehemently, and in 1846 they formed “a distinct ecclesiastical connection, separate from the jurisdiction of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” The key analytical point here is that the immediate precursor to schism was *not* internal disagreement over slavery, which was present at least since 1784, but rather the effort of the General Conference to assert its authority over the issue.

So, there are both theoretical and historical reasons to expect that internal efforts at organizational consolidation—of which mergers, foundings, and national bodies’ efforts to assert authority in new realms are special cases—will raise the likelihood of denomination schism. This line of argument suggests one general hypothesis and several more specific hypotheses.

H4 *Attempts at organizational consolidation or centralization will raise the likelihood of schism.*

H4a *Schism is more likely immediately after a denominational founding or merger, and less likely immediately after a schism.*

H4b *Consolidation of agency structures will raise the likelihood of schism.*

Note that these hypotheses exploit our conceptualization of denominations as dual structures in that they specify effects for consolidation of entire national structures (H4a) that are distinct from hypothesized effects for consolidation of parts of the agency structure (H4b). Still, it seems likely that foundings, mergers, and schisms—which usually involve both religious authority and agency structures—are likely to be more disruptive for denominations than are consolidations within the agency structure alone. Hence, in keeping with Hannan and Freeman’s (1984) argument that more profound organizational change will have a stronger effect on the likelihood of organizational failure, we offer another related hypothesis.

H4c *The likelihood of schism will be more strongly influenced by recent founding or merger than by recent consolidation within agencies alone.*

Potential for Mobilizing Dissent

Whatever the source of the dispute, schism requires the mobilization of congregations in support of alternative nonlocal organizations that constitute the schismatic denomination. Anything that enhances the likelihood that congregations will withdraw their support from existing denominational organizations will raise the likelihood of schism. We can identify two variables that will raise the potential for this sort of mobilization. First, in line with previous literature both on social movements in general and on religion in particular (e.g., Doherty 1967; Greenslade 1953; Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow 1988; Wallis 1979; Zald and Ash 1966), we would expect more heterogeneous denominations to be more prone to schism. The idea here is that internal discontent will be more easily mobilized in the presence of preexisting social differences of various sorts. Unfortunately, we have no direct measures of intra-denominational social heterogeneity, but we do have two indirect measures: size and explicit ethnic identification. Larger denominations are likely to be more heterogeneous than smaller denominations, and denominations with a distinctive ethnic identity (i.e., African-American denominations and those that are explicitly associated with a white ethnic immigrant group) are likely to be more homogeneous. Hence, two more hypotheses.

H5 *Larger denominations will have higher rates of schism.*

H6 *Denominations with a distinctive ethnic identity will have lower rates of schism than denominations without such an identity.*

Second, the extent to which denominations have a tradition of tolerating internal dissent will be relevant to the mobilizing potential of a schismatic movement. Denominations that value internal diversity and therefore try to incorporate the concerns of disgruntled congregations if at all possible should have lower rates of schism than denominations that insist on internal conformity on a wider range of issues. To operationalize this idea, we draw on Bruce's (1990:46) argument that liberal Protestant denominations have fewer schisms because they are more tolerant of internal diversity. Others, as well, have pointed out that liberal Protestantism is distinctive "in its commitment to religious pluralism—or, better, in its religious commitment to pluralism" (Hutchinson 1986:79). Although we do not directly measure the extent to which a denomination's theology is "liberal," we use membership in several interdenominational organizations to proxy this characteristic.

H7 *Denominations linked to the liberal interdenominational organizations (i.e., the National Council of Churches and its predecessor, the Federal Council of Churches) will have lower than average rates of schism.*

H8 *Linkage to conservative interdenominational organizations (i.e., the National Association of Evangelicals and the American Council of Christian Churches) will have no effect on the likelihood of schism.*

Earlier research (Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow 1988) found that denominations linked to the liberal NCC/FCC had lower than average rates of schism. The present study uses more refined, time-dependent data on denominational membership in these liberal organizations. Also, the inclusion of data on membership in conservative interdenominational organizations permits empirical tests that will address the question of whether the NCC/FCC effect is a "liberal" effect or merely an effect of membership in an interdenominational organization, whatever its theological leanings.

Congregational Autonomy

Finally, propensity to schism might be related to differences in governance structures. The key issue here is control over local congregations: while the relative difficulty of merely forming a new nonlocal organization does not vary much across denominations, denominations do vary quite dramatically in the ease with which congregations are able to redirect their loyalties and their resources to alternative organizations. Sophisticated actors inside denominations will know this and therefore will be less likely to attempt schism in a denomination in which the autonomy of local congregations is structurally constrained.

There are two main mechanisms by which denominations constrain congregational choices: the control of property and the control of clergy careers. Schism obviously is very difficult when congregations do not own their own property. Less obviously, even when congregations own their property, denominational influence over clergy appointments will greatly reduce the likelihood of schism. Because clergy careers mainly do not cross denominational lines, career-minded clergy will be very unlikely to accept a job at a congregation that is disloyal to the parent denomination. Hence, congregations in denominations with greater influence over clergy careers will be less likely to be schismatic, both because the potential costs to the congregation are higher (i.e., increased difficulty in finding a pastor for the congregation) and because career-minded pastors of such congregations will be less likely to support a schismatic move, other things being equal.

Thus, we would hypothesize that denominations with congregations that are less autonomous in these ways will have lower rates of schism. We will test two specific hypotheses.

H9 *Denominations with more centralized religious authority will have lower rates of schism.*

H10 *Denominations with seminaries will have lower rates of schism.*

SAMPLE, DATA, AND MEASURES

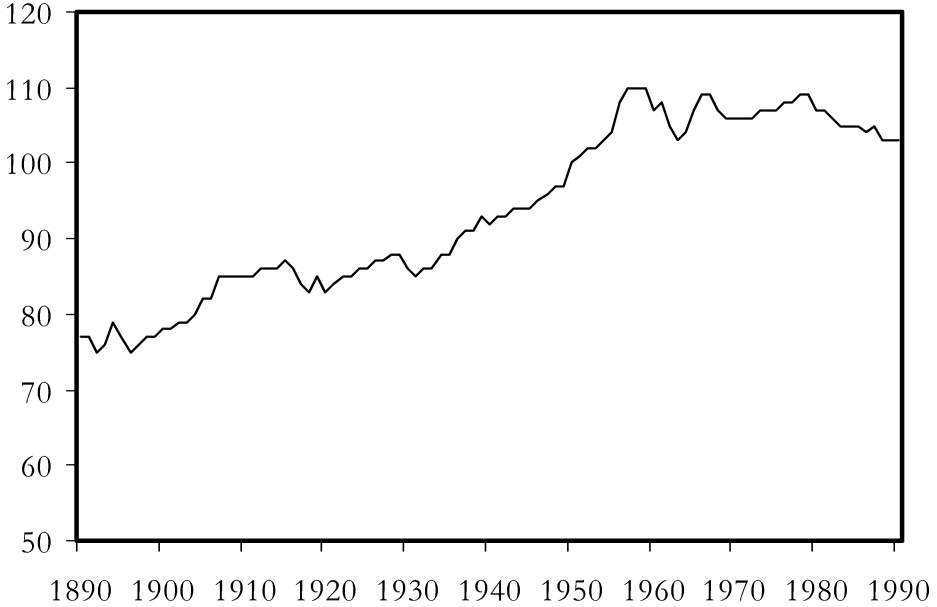
The data for this analysis comprise the life histories of 178 American Protestant denominations. Our sample includes all denominations that (1) existed in the United States at any time between 1890 and 1990, (2) were listed as members of either the Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian/Reformed families in the sources described below, and (3) had at least 1,000 members at any time in their history. We have excluded small denominations because their life histories are poorly recorded in available reference works. The sample also excludes several important religious groups, including Catholic, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Jewish, and Mormon denominations. These exclusions obviously limit the generalizability of our results, but the mainstream Protestant denominations included here represent an important subset of the denominational world, and our ability to sample virtually the entire population of such denominations justifies some sacrifice of breadth.

The present data record the date and form of denominational birth (whether through schism, merger, or independent founding), the date and form of dissolution or merger (in all but two cases dissolutions occurred through some type of merger), and the timing of any schisms that may have occurred. It is important to point out that, in these data, schisms are coded as events occurring to the “parent” denominations, not to the denominations that were “born” through schism.

The major sources used to identify denominations and collect data are standard references on American religious bodies: Melton’s (1978) *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, Piepkorn’s (1978) *Profiles in Belief*, and, especially, the National Council of the Churches of Christ *Yearbooks* (1916–1991). We supplemented these sources and cross-checked the validity of our data with other reference works, including Mead’s (1980) *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, Geisendorfer’s (1983) *Religion in America*, and various reports on religious bodies by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1890–1936). Broyles and Fernandez (1984) provided data on the founding dates of seminaries. Ecological data came from a number of sources. We drew indicators of religious membership through 1936 from Census data, and after that from published poll data (e.g., Gallup Organization 1987). Data on religious periodicals came from Ayer (various years), a standard reference on the publishing industry in the United States. Economic data were gathered from the U.S. Bureau of the Census’s *Historical Statistics* (1974) and, in more recent years, from its *Statistical Abstract* (various years).

The data are organized in an event-history format (Tuma and Hannan 1984). The main data set contains 9,358 observations, with each observation representing a one-year spell in the history of a given denomination. The value of structuring the data in this way is that it allows us to update our measurements of denominational characteristics over time. We put a great deal of effort into assuring that data on the timing of events—dates of schisms, mergers, and the founding of seminaries, for example—are measured accurately to a given year. But there is some inevitable inaccuracy in our measurements of continuous variables such as denominational membership and agency structure because our sources do not reliably report annual data on such denominational characteristics. For example, our most valuable source, the NCCC *Yearbook*, contains entries submitted by the headquarters of individual denominations, and denominations typically update their entries only every few years. We estimated values for intervening years in different ways, depending on the nature of the variable. For denominational size, we assumed linear change between updates and used linear interpolations to fill in missing data. Although this strategy inevitably yielded inaccuracies, the resulting estimates are unbiased. For some denominations, membership data for their first few years are not reported in any of our sources, and for a few very short-lived denominations we found no membership data at all. We omit these observations

FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF BAPTIST, LUTHERAN, METHODIST, AND PRESBYTERIAN-REFORMED DENOMINATIONS BY YEAR, 1890–1990



from our analyses, leaving an *N* of 8,125 observations. Agency structures are likely to be more “sticky,” and to change in a stepwise rather than linear form over time. Thus we filled in missing data by forward projection rather than interpolation. In practice this meant that, whenever we found a valid set of agency data for a given denomination in a given year, we assumed that those values remained constant until the denomination filed an updated report with a different set of values.

We describe our data in graphic terms in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 shows the number of denominations that appear in our sample over the entire period of the study. With the exception of a few interesting dips during World War I, the Depression, and World War II, denominational numbers rose steadily and, in fact, accelerated through the 1960s. Growth stopped at that point, and

FIGURE 2
NUMBER OF SCHISMS BY YEAR, 1890–1990

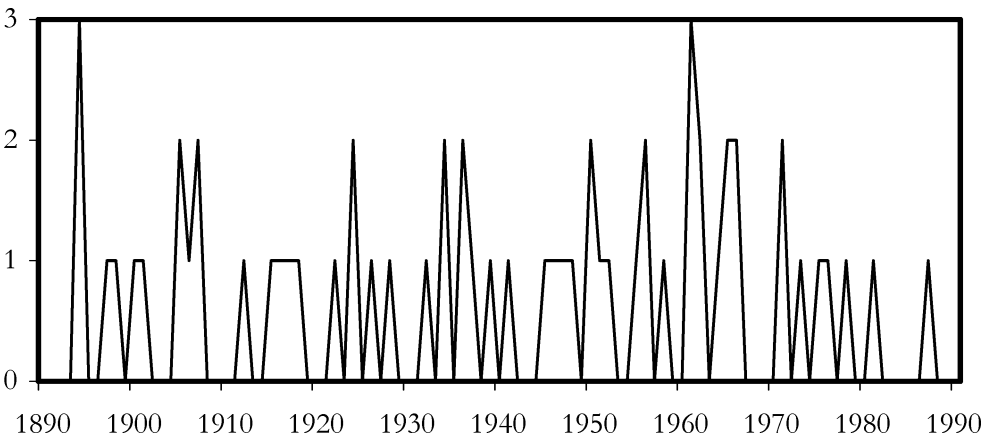


TABLE 1
HYPOTHESES, INDICATORS, AND EXPECTED EFFECTS

Hypotheses	Measures	Effects
H1: Resource environment	Protestant church membership as percent of U.S. population	0
	Business failures as percent of all U.S. businesses	0
	Number of Protestant periodicals published per 100,000 U.S. population	0
H2: Cultural and social conflict	U.S. war in last 5 years	+
	Immigrant arrivals as percent of U.S. population (5-year running average)	+
H3: Recent schisms	Total schisms in last 5 years	+
H4: Denominational consolidation	(Log) years since most recent founding, schism, or merger	-
	Most recent event was merger (1,0)	+
	(Log) years since denominational merger (coded 0 if most recent event was founding or schism)	-
	Most recent event was schism (1,0)	-
	(Log) years since most recent schism (coded 0 if most recent event was founding or merger)	+
	Change over last 5 years in number of agency offices	+
	Change over last 5 years in agency bureaucratization	+
H5-H6: Capacity for mobilizing dissent	Change over last 5 years in agency centralization	+
	(Log) denominational membership, in thousands	+
	White ethnic or black denomination (1,0)	-
H7-H8: Federation membership	Membership in liberal federation (NCC/FCC) (1,0)	-
	Membership in conservative federation (NAE or ACCC) (1,0)	0
H9-H10: Congregational autonomy	Episcopal polity structure (1,0)	-
	Presbyterial polity structure (1,0)	-
	Denominational seminary (1,0)	-

numbers have even declined somewhat in the 1980s. Figure 2 shows the distribution of schisms over time. We count a total of 68 schisms, which makes for an average rate of about two every three years. In no years were there more than three schisms, and in most years there were none. Visual inspection reveals little in the way of time trends. Schisms are fairly evenly distributed over the 100-year time span, with one apparent exception. It appears that rates of schism may have dropped a bit in the 1970s and 1980s; this could be one source of the overall decline in numbers of denominations. A plot of the cumulative hazard function (Tuma and Hannan 1984:59-61), i.e., the average probability that a given denomination will experience a schism in a given year, confirms the impression of a modest slowdown after 1970.

We summarize our hypotheses and their associated measures in Table 1. Resource environment indicators are measured at the national level; thus they vary over time but are constant across denominations in a given year. As a measure of potential membership resources, we use the percentage of the U.S. population currently affiliated with a Protestant church (including denominations not represented in this sample). Shifts in the economic environment are captured by the business failure rate, calculated as the number of business failures per 10,000 businesses.

Another measure of the overall strength of the Protestant sphere is provided by the number of Protestant periodical titles published per 100,000 population. These measures are included as tests of possible ecological effects, but we anticipate that no such effects will appear.

Our hypotheses about the institutional environment focus generally on the impact of cultural and social conflict and, more specifically, on the possibility that schisms propagate in waves across the denominational field. Wars and immigration provide the primary indicators of conflict, and in both cases we allow for a five-year lag in their effects on schism. Thus if the United States was involved in a war in any year from $(t-5)$ to $(t-1)$, the war variable is coded 1 in spell (t) ; otherwise it is coded 0. The immigration variable averages the number of immigrant arrivals from $(t-5)$ to $(t-1)$ as a percent of the U.S. population at $(t-1)$. We measure schism waves in a similar way, by summing the number of schisms that occurred from $(t-5)$ to $(t-1)$.

We treat hypotheses about the consolidation of denominational structures as different forms of state- and duration-dependence (Tuma and Hannan 1984:192–95). This means that schism rates are influenced by events in the history of a denomination, and by elapsed time since the most recent event. Our data record the timing of three major events: mergers, foundings, and schisms. Formal population ecology theory suggests that *any* of these events will raise the rate of schism temporarily. This argument is represented in our models by a variable that indicates the (log) years since the most recent event for each year of a denomination's history. In other words, this is a measure of (log) elapsed time that resets to zero whenever a merger or schism occurs. If the formal theory is correct, the coefficient attached to this variable should be negative.

Since our hypotheses predict that different events might have different kinds of effects, we include a more detailed set of state and duration measures. A pair of binary variables indicates the form of the most recent reorganizing event: the "mergers" variable is coded 1 if the most recent event was a merger (including denominations that were founded through a merger), and 0 otherwise; the "schisms" variable is coded 1 if the most recent event was a schism (including schismatic parents and denominations born in schism), and 0 otherwise. The reference category (codes of 0 on both variables) comprises spells for which the most recent event was an independent founding. These binary variables allow us to test whether different events push rates of schism up or down, but they do not allow rates to change in the intervals between events. Thus we include a second pair of variables that indicate elapsed time since a given event: one is coded with (log) years since last event if the last event was a merger, and 0 otherwise; the other is coded with (log) years since last event if the last event was a schism, and 0 otherwise. Again, founding is the reference category: when both pairs of schism and merger variables are in the model, the general "time since last event" variable operates as a measure of time since founding. Our hypotheses about denominational consolidation predict that schism rates will rise temporarily after foundings and mergers, and decline temporarily after schism.

Measures of the consolidation of agency structures focus more on the magnitude of change and less on exact timing, in large part because the timing of agency reorganization cannot be measured with the same precision as schisms, foundings, and mergers. We examine three dimensions of agency structure. First, the size and internal differentiation of agency structures is measured by a count of the number of separate agency offices, as listed for each denomination in various years of the NCCC *Yearbook*. Second, relative bureaucratization is measured by the ratio of agency offices devoted to internal administration (such as accounting, benefits, and human resources) to total agency offices. Third, centralization of agency structures is measured by a three-point index in which one point is scored for a positive response to each of the following items: (1) the denomination has a national headquarters; (2) all agency offices are located in the same city; and (3) a distinct board exists with some responsibility for coordinating the work of the agencies. These variables measure agency structures as they exist at different points in time. Our hypotheses, however, are about consolidation, which requires measures of *change* in agency structures. Thus we reexpressed these measures in terms of their unit change in the five-year period preceding the

current observation: for each observation at time (t), the values of the size, bureaucratization, and centralization variables are their values at ($t-1$) minus their values at ($t-5$).

Hypotheses about capacities for mobilizing dissent focused on denominational size and ethnic homogeneity. Denominational size is measured here as the (log) number of members at ($t-1$), and we expect the effect of this variable to be positive. As an indicator of ethnic homogeneity we created a binary variable coded 1 for African-American denominations and any denomination with an explicit ethnic identifier in its name (e.g., the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), and 0 for all others. Since it is likely that more heterogeneous denominations are more prone to schism, the effect of this variable is expected to be negative. To measure federation membership, we use two binary variables that distinguish between liberal and conservative federations. The liberal federation variable is coded 1 in years when a denomination was a member of the National Council of Churches (or its predecessor, the Federal Council of Churches) and 0 otherwise, and the conservative federation variable is coded 1 for membership in either the National Association of Evangelicals or the American Council of Christian Churches, and 0 otherwise. Data on FCC/NCC affiliation came from the NCC *Yearbooks*, and headquarters offices of the NAE and ACCC provided data on denominational affiliation with their respective federations.⁴ Finally, we measure congregational autonomy in two ways. First, Takayama's (1975) typology of episcopal, presbyterial, and congregational polities is the standard indicator of the centralization of religious authority. Polity type is fixed over time, and this analysis uses two binary variables to indicate episcopal polities (the most centralized) and presbyterial polities (the intermediate category). Congregational polities, which are the least centralized, make up the reference category. The effect of episcopal polities is expected to be negative, and that for presbyterial polities either negative or zero. Second, existence of a seminary—measured by a time-dependent binary variable—provides an indicator of denominational control over clergy careers, and a negative effect is predicted.

These hypotheses are tested in multivariate models using event-history techniques. In these models the unit of analysis is the spell, as described above; we use standard maximum-likelihood techniques to estimate models in the form

$$\log r_{jk} = \Phi_{jk}x,$$

where r is the rate of schism, x is a vector of variables, and Φ is a vector of parameters. The dependent variable, r_{jk} , is defined technically as the instantaneous rate of transition from state j (not having a schism) to state k (schism); one can think of it as the slope of the hazard function. The log-linear form of the model is quite standard, and is compatible with the trend observed in Figure 2.

RESULTS

Model results are shown in Tables 2 and 3. These tables reflect an iterative model-building process: in each iteration a block of variables is added to the equation, and variables that show nonsignificant effects are dropped in the next iteration. This simplifies the presentation because it does not require us to show the effects of all 19 variables in a single equation. But it raises the possibility of specification bias because one or more of the variables dropped early on could show significant effects when subsequent controls are added. In fact, we have estimated a model in which all of the hypothesized effects are tested simultaneously, and the results are substantively identical to those presented here.⁵

Model 1 is the baseline constant-rate model. The constant term shows the average (log) rate of schism, ignoring variability due to denominational structure and history.⁶ Subsequent models containing explanatory variables can be evaluated relative to Model 1 by comparison of log-likelihoods: twice the difference in log-likelihoods is distributed as X^2 , with degrees of freedom

TABLE 2
MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECTS OF ECOLOGICAL
FACTORS, STRUCTURAL CONSOLIDATION, AND CHANGE IN AGENCY
STRUCTURES ON RATES OF SCHISM (STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES)

	1	2	3	4
Percent Protestant		0.028 (0.030)		
Protestant periodicals		0.096 (0.093)		
Business-failure rate		0.001 (0.006)		
War		-0.022 (0.330)		
Immigration rate		-0.631 (0.703)		
Schism rate		-0.019 (0.079)		
(Log) years since last event			-0.817** (0.270)	-0.619*** (0.164)
Last event was merger			-1.492 (1.284)	
(Log) years since merger			0.617 (0.400)	
Last event was schism			-1.997* (1.121)	-1.414* (0.737)
(Log) years since schism			0.672** (0.309)	0.474* (0.222)
Growth in agency offices				-0.001 (0.035)
Bureaucratization				-0.367 (4.060)
Centralization				0.346 (0.502)
Constant	-4.876*** (0.127)	-6.639*** (1.982)	-2.302*** (0.999)	-2.894*** (0.536)
Log-likelihood	-673.9	-672.8	-664.9	-666.18

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

equal to the difference in the number of parameters. Model 2 tests for effects of ecological variables. As we hypothesized, none of these variables appears to influence rates of schism: none of the individual parameters is significant, and the likelihood ratio is only slightly (and insignificantly) higher than that in Model 1.

Model 3, showing the effects of recent structural reorganization, gives strong support to the duration-dependence hypotheses. The coefficient for the “years since last event” variable is negative and significant. Because the effects of prior schisms and mergers are represented explicitly in the model, this coefficient can be taken to represent the time-dependent effects of independent foundings. The coefficients for the merger variables are not in the expected directions—they imply that the rate of schism drops immediately after a merger, and subsequently rises—but they are far from significant, suggesting substantively that the effect of mergers is no different than that of foundings. The coefficients for the schism variables are both significant. The binary variable

TABLE 3
MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECTS OF STRUCTURAL CONSOLIDATION, MOBILIZATION RESOURCES, FEDERATION, AND POLITY STRUCTURE ON RATES OF SCHISM (STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES)

	1	2	3	4
(Log) years since last event	-0.363* (0.164)	-0.452** (0.161)	-0.447** (0.161)	-0.451** (0.161)
Last event was schism	-1.006 (0.724)	-1.648* (0.741)	-1.744* (0.753)	-1.653* (0.740)
(Log) years since schism	0.399* (0.217)	0.555** (0.220)	0.604** (0.227)	0.556** (0.220)
(Log) membership	0.334*** (0.057)	0.434*** (0.063)	0.434*** (0.072)	0.435*** (0.063)
White ethnic or black denomination	-0.405 (0.319)			
Liberal federation membership		-1.227*** (0.364)	-1.211*** (0.382)	-1.225*** (0.364)
Conservative federation membership		-0.074 (0.602)		
Presbyterial polity			0.179 (0.383)	
Episcopal polity			-0.377 (0.417)	
Seminary			0.134 (0.352)	
Constant	-5.991*** (0.782)	-6.168*** (0.766)	-6.604*** (0.781)	-6.180*** (0.761)
Log-likelihood	-646.98	-641.33	-641.34	-641.34

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

shows a negative effect and the “years since” variable shows a positive effect, suggesting that schisms temporarily reduce rates of subsequent schism. A comparison of log-likelihood figures shows that Model 3 improves significantly over the constant rate model ($X^2 = 18.0$, with four degrees of freedom). Model 4 retains the significant duration-dependence effects and incorporates the effects of the growth, bureaucratization, and centralization of agency structures. None of the coefficients associated with the agency variables is significant, and the coefficients for the other variables remain about as they were in the previous model.

In Model 1 of Table 3 we drop the agency variables and add the membership and ethnic exclusivity variables. The effect of membership is positive and significant, showing as anticipated that larger denominations are more vulnerable to schism. Although on average ethnically exclusive denominations had lower rates of schism, this difference is not significant.⁷ Model 2 incorporates the effects of federation membership. Coefficients show that denominations affiliated with the FCC/NCC experienced significantly lower than average rates of schism, but affiliation with the NAE or ACCC had no effect. This supports our contention that the decisive factor is not federation membership as such, but rather membership as an expression of a liberal commitment to inclusivity and nondogmatic doctrinal stands. The effects of recent foundings, size, and liberal federation membership persist in Model 3, where we drop the conservative federation variable and add indicators of denominational authority structures. Contrary to our expectations, neither presbyterial nor episcopal polities show lower rates of schism than the (omitted) congregational

polities; likewise, having a seminary has no effect on schism. Model 4 retains the four variables that have emerged as significant in previous iterations.

DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the substantive implications and limitations of Model 4 in Table 3. To begin with, the resource environment of denominations—whether conceptualized in terms of economic or human resources available to denominations—has no apparent effect on schisms. This suggests, as we expected, that denominational “births” via schism are dependent less on broad ecological conditions than on denomination-specific organizational factors.

But, contrary to our expectations, the institutional environment of denominations also has no apparent effect on schisms. As nearly as we can tell, our results imply that denominational schisms in this historical period are driven more by processes internal to denominations than by external processes. However, there is one sense in which our results are consistent with the idea that schisms are induced by external pressure. In this period the broadly-based ecumenical movement, represented at the highest level by the NCCC, sought to establish church union and federation as a legitimate cultural model. To the extent that specific mergers represented attempts by denominational elites to bring their organizations into line with the ecumenical model, it is reasonable to suggest that ensuing schisms had their ultimate source outside the organizational boundaries of denominations.

The most important new findings in this regard concern duration-dependence effects, which show that two important determinants of schism are structural consolidation or schism in the recent past. The qualitative implications of these effects can best be described in graphic terms. The models showed that foundings and mergers have statistically similar effects on subsequent rates of schism. This is a sensible result, since both foundings and mergers represent, in our terms, consolidation of denominational authority structures. In our summary model, the time-dependent effect of consolidation is described by two coefficients: the constant term shows the rate of schism one year after a founding or merger, and the parameter for (log) years since last event shows the change in the rate over time. The formula for the effect of consolidation on rates of schism, then, is:

$$r = \exp(-6.180 - 0.451 * \log(\text{YEARS})),$$

where YEARS is the number of years since the most recent event. The effect of recent schisms can be calculated by adding the coefficient for “last event was schism” to the constant, and adding the coefficient for “years since schism” to that for “years since last event”:

$$r = \exp(-7.833 + 0.105 * \log(\text{YEARS})).$$

These effects are plotted with respect to time in Figure 3. As the figure shows, mergers and foundings sharply raise the likelihood of schism, and schisms lower the likelihood of subsequent schism modestly: one year after a founding or merger, rates of schism are five times higher than they are one year after a schism (for foundings and mergers, $e^{-6.180} = 0.0021$; for schisms, $e^{-7.833} = 0.0004$). After this initial spike in the risk of schism immediately following consolidation, rates of schism drop precipitously. For schismatic denominations, rates of schism rise gradually in the years after the schism, so that within about 20 years their risk of schism is the same as that for consolidated denominations. After that it appears that consolidated denominations actually experience lower rates of schism, but this is probably not a reliable inference. The curves represent average tendencies for the two groups; confidence intervals, which we omit from the graph for simplicity, suggest that rates of schism do not differ significantly between consolidated and schismatic denominations beyond about 15 years after their respective events.⁸ Thus the key findings here are the short-term effects of reorganization. The evidence points on the one hand to a

FIGURE 3
EFFECTS OF TIME SINCE MOST RECENT EVENT ON RATES OF SCHISM



powerful but short-lived “liability of consolidation,” and on the other hand to a mild immunization effect of past schisms.

We think it is highly suggestive that both the increased risk of schism after foundings or mergers and the decreased risk after a schism last no more than 20 years. With respect to mergers or foundings, it seems very plausible that resistance to organizational consolidation would be carried by the cohort in mature adulthood at the time of consolidation. If that cohort does not itself produce a schism, it is unlikely that they could pass on their attitude of resistance to the next generation, which would by then have been socialized into the new regime. By the same token, it is reasonable to expect that whatever immunization results from having experienced a schism would apply only to the generation that actually experiences it. Hence, we believe the 20-year time span of both these effects is consistent with the micro-level story implied by our basic argument: some actors within denominations respond to organizational consolidation by resisting what they perceive to be encroachments on their own local territory or prerogatives. This story would be much less plausible if the effects displayed in Figure 3 lasted 50 or 60 years rather than 20 years.

Episodes of major structural reorganization appear to have strong effects on schism; however, changes in denominational agency structures appear to have none. Given the strong qualitative evidence of intra-denominational conflict over agency structures, we are surprised by this negative finding. But we do not regard this issue as entirely settled. Limitations of the available data required us to use indicators that are less precise than we would have liked: it could be that *attempts* to change agency structures—on which we have no data—incite conflict as readily as accomplished changes; and because of the frequently irregular ways denominations filed reports with the NCCC, our data capture the timing of changes in agency structure only approximately. For the present, however, we must conclude that organizational developments affecting agencies alone are irrelevant to the occurrence of schisms.

The remaining effects shown in Model 4 replicate and extend the results reported earlier by Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow (1988). As in that study we find that larger denominations experience a higher rate of schism. The meaning of this effect, however, remains ambiguous. It might reflect the importance of preexisting intra-denominational social differences, which are likely to be more salient in larger denominations. But we would be more confident of this interpretation if our direct measures of one type of social homogeneity—ethnic homogeneity—had yielded significant effects. Alternatively, the size effect might represent the increased difficulty of maintaining institutional and administrative control over larger numbers of congregations, clergy, and members spread over a larger geographical territory. From this perspective we would expect that, other things equal, congregations in larger denominations would enjoy greater freedom to redirect their loyalties to a new national-level organization. We are not able to distinguish between these two interpretations with the measures at hand.

Also consistent with earlier research, these results show that affiliation with a liberal interdenominational federation lowers rates of schism. But more than was possible in Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow (1988), we are able here to narrow the range of plausible interpretations of this finding. At the outset it was not clear whether this inhibitory effect resulted from federation membership *per se*, or from an underlying theological commitment to religious pluralism. By controlling for affiliation with conservative federations, the models shown here implicate theological liberalism as the key factor. If this is the case, it suggests an interesting inference. The conventional assumption, shared by the Protestant clergy and laity, is that different denominational families represent broadly distinct theological commitments—in other words, that different Baptist denominations should agree with each other more than they do with denominations in the Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian families. This assumption receives some support from the fact that, of all the schisms recorded in our data, none involved a change of family identification: without exception, Methodists continued to identify as Methodists, Lutherans as Lutherans, and so on. Following this logic, the Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow study used denominational family as a proxy for doctrinal differences. Finding no interfamily differences in rates of schism, it concluded that theology was unimportant. We also tested for family effects, and found none; we saw no reason to report these redundant results. In the present findings, though, theology becomes relevant in the form of federation affiliation.

This interpretation suggests that salient doctrinal differences among 20th-century American denominations are manifest more in their external linkages to the institutional environment than in traditional distinctions among denominational families. We believe this to be an important aspect of the 20th-century restructuring of American religion. Wuthnow (1988) has argued that in the 20th century, traditional denominational boundaries have given way to new fault lines within denominations. We suggest, in addition, that denominational boundaries might also be giving way to an interdenominational restructuring evident in patterns of association with interdenominational organizations.

At the same time, the finding of null effects associated with conservative federation membership should perhaps be tempered by limitations in our data. The present sample excludes denominations that are not affiliated with the four mainstream Protestant families. The excluded denominations tend to be among the most conservative of Protestant denominations, and they make up the bulk of the membership in the National Association of Evangelicals and the American Council of Christian Churches. Inclusion of these groups might have shown that NAE or ACCC affiliation has the same inhibitory effect on schisms as affiliation with the NCCC. This seems unlikely, but the possibility cannot be dismissed.

A final caveat: our null finding regarding the effect of religious authority centralization on rates of schism ought not to be taken as definitive. This is again because of the limited scope of the population under investigation here. Specifically, limiting our attention to Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian families restricts the range of our centralization variable in ways

that would make it more difficult to discern a significant effect even if one were present. This choice of religious families excludes the most highly centralized denominations (e.g., Catholic, Episcopal, Orthodox) and, although we cannot be certain, we think it is likely that including these denominations would yield the expected negative effect of centralization on schism.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we believe that these results support our central argument that denominational schisms are largely generated by resistance to attempts at consolidating nonlocal organizations. This argument is consistent with historical accounts of schisms, although it calls attention to a feature of schisms that has not been emphasized in either the historical or sociological literature. Specifically, we have sought to emphasize the fundamentally organizational nature of denominational schism. By this we mean three things. First, schisms are primarily events that occur to national-level organizations, and they most directly represent the realignment of existing congregations to new nonlocal organizations. Second, since schisms are generally conflicts about the scope of nonlocal organizational authority, they are not reducible either to social differences or to theological disagreements among members. Third, an understanding of schisms requires paying close attention to the organizational dynamics of denominations, as we have tried to do here.

Our organizational argument implies a certain irony in the population dynamics of U.S. denominations. At least since Niebuhr, ecumenically minded observers of American religion have presumed that large numbers of denominations represent the failure to bring together American Protestants under one organizational umbrella. By this light, denominational mergers were the organizational goals to be pursued, since each new merger would reduce the denominational Babel. The irony arises from our finding that denominational consolidation, including merger, has been a major source of schism. A particular kind of organizational success, then, seems intimately tied to a particular kind of organizational failure. We suspect that a more general version of this phenomenon—that organizational consolidation generates internal dissent and resistance—might apply to organizations other than denominations. It is particularly likely to apply to organizations such as political parties, labor unions, and social movements that are profoundly dependent on the voluntary commitment of members.

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NOTES

1. Our sample is based on the one used by Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow (1988), but the one used here covers a longer time-span, and thus includes several more denominations; in addition, our data set includes many more theoretically relevant independent variables.
2. See Kniss (1996) for an account of how broad cultural conflict influenced conflicts inside one denomination.
3. The next two paragraphs are based on the brief denominational history in Part II of the 1906 *Census of Religious Bodies* (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1890–1936). All quotes are from page 469 of that volume.
4. The prior study of schisms by Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow (1988) used indicators of federation membership that were not time dependent, that is, denominations that were ever members of a federation were coded as members throughout their life histories. Their findings in this regard are therefore suspect. Our data record years of affiliation and, in a few cases, disaffiliation with federations.
5. Tables showing these results, and other subsidiary results referred to below, are available from the first author.

6. This and subsequent models do not, however, ignore the effects of “competing risks”—in this case, the possibility that a denomination will disappear through merger or dissolution before it experiences a schism. This happened 51 times in our data, and we coded disappearance as an alternative transition. Thus the models shown in Tables 2 and 3 also contain constant terms for rates of disappearance, but we omit them because they are not of substantive interest.
7. In parallel tests we broke this variable into separate indicators of white ethnic and black denominations. Neither variable showed significant effects.
8. Confidence intervals for the two estimates in the graph grow wider over time because of declines in the number of denominations remaining in the respective risk sets, i.e., denominations that persisted without a merger or schism. But this attrition was not so great as to render the estimates meaningless. Attrition was greatest for schismatic denominations: for this group, the median value of the YEAR variable is 34, meaning the risk set was cut in half within 34 years of a schism; it was reduced by three-quarters within 64 years, but at that point it still contained over 1,100 observations. For “consolidated” denominations—those that had recently been founded or experienced a merger—the median value of YEAR is 63, and the risk set contained over 800 observations after 100 years.

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