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Jessica Collins
West Liberty University

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A Study of Religiosity and Conservatism in Relation to Social Value Orientation and Philanthropy

Jessica Collins
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the potential interdependent relationships between religiosity, conservatism, social value orientation and philanthropy. Participants included members of four religious institutions. A non-experimental survey design was used to gather information. Subjects were given a hypothetical task related to social value orientation, two scales of measurement related to religiosity and philanthropy and asked to self-identify their political orientation. Chi Square analysis identified a significant relationship between political orientation and social value orientation. A correlation was found between religiosity and philanthropy within the liberal sample, rather than in the suspected conservative sample. Additionally, a one-way analysis of variance revealed that there were no significant differences in attitudes towards philanthropy. Results provide support for models suggesting that religion promotes competing psychological stances: conservatism and a prosocial value orientation.

The Pew Research Center (2012) recently reported that America's politics fall along partisan lines and are more polarized than at any other time in the previous 25 years. This sentiment is often alluded to in today's media, and the 2012 Presidential election evidenced this as well. Each candidate emphasized that the 2012 election was about the fundamentally different paths on which America could be lead.

A primary way that the policies of conservatives and liberals differ is the degree to which they facilitate government intervention in socioeconomic matters. Generally, the conservative base supports policies that stress minimal intervention. What is striking about this is that a core component of the conservative base is largely religious. While religious institutions typically promote prosocial attitudes and action, such as helping the poor, conservative economics reduce the amount of spending on social welfare programs. It seems that in regard to helping those of a lower socioeconomic class, political conservatism violates one of the primary tenets of most churches, yet many religious individuals continue to identify with conservative ideology (Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt, & Green, 2006; Kelly & Morgan, 2008; Layman & Carmines, 1997).

This apparent contradiction was addressed extensively in a study conducted by Malka, Soto, Cohen, & Miller (2011). Their research was based on the hypothesis that religion has competing psychological influences on social welfare attitudes, and findings suggested that religiosity was a predictor for both opposition and approval of social welfare programs. It was argued that there are two pathways by which an individual can be influenced: one stressing conservatism, the other stressing prosocial values.

Although specific determinants leading an individual to either pathway were not identified, the conservative pathway can be understood by recognizing that many politically conservative messages are those that are supported by the church. For instance, stances on sexuality, abortion and traditional families are topics that are central to each institution's identity. In relation to these stances, opposition to social welfare was hypothesized to be connected to one's need to be consistent in his or her world views. Malka et al. (2011) state that when a religious individual's views are aligned with the conservative end of politics, he may, in turn, "drag" his view of social welfare toward the conservative side so that his
views become more integrated and consistent.

Conversely, Malka et al. (2011) argue that religious individuals may also follow a pathway that stresses prosocial values, leading to approval of social welfare. It is reasoned that helping behavior is highly regarded in most major religious doctrines, which in turn promotes a prosocial value orientation by encouraging individuals to assist others in need. In accordance with this assumption, past work has shown positive correlations between religiosity and generosity as well as religiosity and volunteerism (Will & Cochran, 1995; Ruiter & De Graf, 2006).

Supporting Malka et al.'s work is documentation that religious institutions play a role in political expression, whether directly through the promotion of political involvement, such as voting, or indirectly through the promotion of particular values that establish attitudes (Hougland & Christianson, 1983; Schwartz & Huismans, 1995; Secret, Johnson, & Forrest, 1990; Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988). Indeed, a number of studies have identified a link between religiosity and political conservatism (Cuker, De Guzman, & Carlo, 2004; Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1988). In fact, according to the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (as stated in Brooks, 2003), religious individuals were 38% more likely to identify themselves as conservatives when compared to those individuals who stated they were not religious.

Although many religious individuals identify as politically conservative, which is assumed to mean an objection to social welfare, there is a wealth of literature that supports the premise that those who are religiously involved are more philanthropic than those who are not (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007). Related to this, Vaidyanathan, Hill, & Smith (2011) report finding that when religious and nonreligious giving was studied, religion entirely mediated the effect of political ideology. Furthermore, it is documented that social value orientation is more closely related to attitudes than political affiliation (Braithwaite, 1998).

From these findings, it can be deduced that opposition to social welfare by those who are politically conservative and religious may be offset by philanthropic contributions. This would make sense when taking into consideration that fiscal conservatives often cite the private sector, as opposed to the government, as the entity that should be responsible for charity.

The research presented here examines the idea that those who are religious and politically conservative may express a prosocial value orientation in a different way than those who are religious and not politically conservative. More specifically, it proposes that religious conservatives, when compared to religious liberals and independents in their attitudes towards philanthropy, reflect a preference for helping with private monies (charity), rather than public monies (tax dollars).

On this basis, the following hypotheses were tested: 1. There will be no relationship between political orientation and social value orientation. 2. There will be a higher correlation between religiosity and philanthropy within the conservative sample when compared to the liberal and independent samples. 3. Conservatives will have more positive attitudes towards philanthropy when compared to liberals and independents.
Method

Participants

A non-experimental survey design was used to gather information regarding political orientation, social value orientation, religiosity, and attitudes towards philanthropy from 61 participants (32 females, 28 males, one unreported gender; mean age: 52.59, age range: 20-82) who were recruited from four different religious institutions: one Catholic (18 participants), one Evangelical Christian (14 participants), and two Unitarian (29 participants). At each church, the congregation was informed that I would be seeking participants for research during the “social/coffee hour” held after the service, and were informed that they would be requested to take a survey concerning “the potential interdependent relationships between philanthropy, religiosity, political affiliation, and social value orientation.”

Materials and Procedure

Those who approached me were given a packet consisting of a release form, a hypothetical task, and two scales of measurement related to religiosity and philanthropy. Contained within was also a statement asking individuals to self-identify as either: conservative, liberal, independent, or “none of the above.” They were instructed to fill the packet out completely and return it to me before the end of the “social/coffee hour.”

To establish the value orientations of participants, they were asked to complete an imaginary task allotting valuable points between themselves and individuals they would never meet. This task, based in game theory, allowed persons to be categorized as one of three orientations: prosocial, competitive, or individualistic (Van Lang, Otten, DeBruin, & Joireman, 1997).

A seven-item measure of attitudes was used to gain information about respondents’ views towards philanthropy (Schuyt, Smit, & Bekkers, 2004). This scale consisted of statements which pertained to one’s own responsibility towards the public good, and participants were instructed to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. These seven items were totaled and scored as one factor, giving individual scores that ranged from 7 (least favorable attitudes) to 35 (most favorable attitudes).

Religiosity was measured using a 10-item scale comprised of statements pertaining to one’s strength of religious faith (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997). As with the philanthropy scale, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. This, too, was totaled and scored as one factor and rendered scores ranging from 10 (low faith) to 40 (high faith).

Results

Participants were categorized as one of three value orientations: prosocial, competitive, or individualistic, as well as one of three political orientations: conservative, liberal, or independent (no individuals identified as “none of the above”). Opposing what was put forth in Hypothesis 1, Chi Square (Pearson’s goodness-of-fit test) analysis revealed a relationship between social value orientation and political orientation, $x^2 (8) = 85.12, p = 15.51$.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between religiosity and
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A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between religiosity and
philanthropy within each sample. I predicted that the highest correlation between these two variables would be in the conservative sample; however, a relationship was found in neither the conservative sample, \( r(16) = -0.03, p > .40 \), nor the independent sample, \( r(14) = 0.39, p > .42 \). On the contrary, a correlation between religiosity and philanthropy was identified in the liberal sample, \( r(25) = 0.43, p > .32 \).

Additionally, an analysis of variance was performed to gauge differences in attitudes towards philanthropy, \( F(2, 58) = 1.12, p = .332 \). Diverging from the proposed hypothesis that conservatives would have more positive attitudes towards philanthropy than liberals or independents (Hypothesis 3), no significant disparities in attitudes were uncovered.

**Discussion**

All hypotheses for this study were unsupported. There was a relationship found between political orientation and social value orientation, there was no correlation between religiosity and philanthropy within the conservative sample, and conservatives did not have more positive attitudes towards philanthropy than did liberals or independents. These results provide further support for models suggesting that religion promotes competing messages: conservatism and a prosocial value orientation.

When investigating these variables, future studies may benefit from using an interval scale, rather than a nominal scale, to gain information about political orientation and social value orientation. Doing so would allow the degree to which they affect each other, if at all, to be more precisely determined. The use of categorical data required testing to be conducted through the use of a Chi Square. Measures using an interval scale could be subject to more powerful tests, making it more likely to detect a true difference.

An additional concern for related research may be the way in which these variables are operationalized. For example, rather than assessing attitudes towards philanthropy, it may be advantageous to assess philanthropic behavior. As past research has shown, attitudes are not always indicative of behavior (Wicker, 1969). A related matter is that it is important to understand that attitudes toward philanthropy or even philanthropic behavior itself are not comprehensive of all the ways a person's value orientation could be expressed. Contextually, philanthropic attitudes were assessed with the proposal in mind that religious conservatives may offset the disapproval of social welfare that is traditionally tied to political conservatism with a preference for private charity. It should be kept in mind that religious conservatives could express a prosocial value orientation in other actions. For instance, as mentioned before, there is evidence that there is a relationship between religiosity and volunteerism (Ruiter & De Graf, 2006).

Another consideration is that there are limitations in terms of external validity. The participants surveyed came from institutions that were either traditionally liberal (Unitarian) or traditionally conservative (Catholic & Evangelical), and since a relatively small sample of 61 was used, the conclusions drawn may not apply to those of other faiths or denominations.

Also note that how Unitarians define "religious faith" is quite broad. While those who belong to Christian communities proscribe to the doctrine within the Holy
Bible, Unitarians stress being inclusive of all ideas of faith and allow individuals to define it for themselves. When looking at the relationship between religiosity and philanthropy within each political sample, it should be pointed out that the liberal sample was almost entirely comprised of individuals from the Unitarian churches (22/27). It is possible that the different ways in which each group defines “religious faith” affected the outcomes. In the future, this could be overcome by comparing participants from within the same institutions, for example, Catholic conservatives compared to Catholic liberals.

Although the results gleaned from this study were not as predicted, they are useful in the continuation of related research. Malka et al. (2011) did not identify the factors that may lead religious individuals on particular paths toward the support or disapproval of social welfare. This study attempted to find evidence that religious conservatives offset their disapproval of social welfare with a preference for private charity evidenced in similar social value orientations, a higher correlation between philanthropy and religiosity within the sample, and more positive attitudes towards philanthropy. Since support for the aforementioned proposals was not found, future studies may find more explanatory power in the theory of cognitive dissonance as it relates to the seemingly contradictory messages of conservatism and prosocial value orientation.

References


