

Conservative Religion and Conservative Politics: Examining How Conservative Faith Impacts and Influences Political Ideology

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To better understand American politics and culture we explore the role religion plays in influencing political belief systems. We argue that there is a relationship, most notably between conservative protestant groups and conservative political organizations and values, between one's religious faith and one's political affiliation and ideology. To this end, we utilized data from the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) and found that religious beliefs and religious affiliation do in fact shape political ideology and affiliation. We discovered that one's religious identity and belief structure greatly influence one's interest in politics, likeliness to identify one's self as liberal or conservative, and political party affiliation.

Research Question

In this study we seek to explore how religion shapes political affiliation and ideology. A notion exists that religious conservatives, especially conservative protestants, will also be politically conservative, in both ideology and party affiliation. Also, conventional wisdom dictates that religious liberals will be more liberal politically. We examine this question in order to better understand the relationship between religion and politics. We also seek to examine the impact of conservative religio-political movements.

A growing body of research of the interaction between religion and politics in America shows that religious belief and religious affiliation shapes and influences political beliefs and affiliation. A number of studies of voting patterns have shown that there is a distinct trend of religious individuals becoming more and more involved politically and demonstrating a growing inclination to affiliate oneself with a political party. These facts are demonstrated in the emergence of a plethora of conservative political activism groups, coming into existence and power in the last 30 years. These groups, such as the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, under the leadership of individuals such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, have provided a means and outlet for conservative Christians to become informed about and involved in the political process. With these new stirrings renewing political interest and participation on the part of the religious, it leads us to explore what appears to be the powerful influence of religious beliefs on political and voting activities.

Previous Research

Earlier literature on this subject brings conflicting findings in regards to the relationship between religion and politics. Johnson (1994) found no significant correlation between religious preference and voting but did find correlations between religious affiliation and positions taken on social issues such as abortion and capital punishment. Miller and Watttenberg (1984) also found a relationship between attitudes on social issues and religious affiliation, finding that strong fundamentalists tended to gravitate towards the Republican Party and suggested that a new Christian Right was highly active in American politics. Leege and Welch (1989) found that while beliefs about individualism vs. communitarianism were a very strong predictor of political liberalism/conservatism, they also discovered a correlation between religious liberalism and political liberalism. Woodrum (1988) studied the effect of moral conservatism, that is traditional absolutes in lifestyle, personal relations, and sexuality, on political behavior and found that moral conservatism had its greatest effect among older, less educated voters, usually belonging to churches. Kellstedt et al. (1994) examined the voting patterns of three religious groups: evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Roman Catholics over the period of 1960 to 1992. They found that evangelicals have replaced mainline Protestants as the “bedrock” of the Republican Party and that the Democratic Party solidified its base of seculars and Catholics over the same period. These studies demonstrate the complexity and nuances involved in the relationship between religion and politics. Also, a number of these studies do find some form of correlation between conservative religious affiliation/behaviors/values/beliefs and political beliefs/affiliations.

We hypothesized that religious beliefs and affiliations profoundly shape political belief and affiliations. That is, religious conservatives (i.e.: evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants) tend to be Republican in their affiliations and beliefs while on the other hand; religious liberals (i.e.: liberal Protestants) tend to be Democratic in their affiliations and beliefs.

Data and Methods

We tested and explored this hypothesis by way of analyzing the data collected from the 1996 General Social Survey. The key variables involved in our study were religious identity (i.e.: fundamentalist, evangelical, mainline, liberal, Catholic, Jewish and other), frequency of attending religious services, interest in politics, political party affiliation, liberal or conservative political ideology and demographic variables, such as geographic location, sex, etc. We used Pearson two-tailed correlations, which are bivariate statistics comparing the correlation of variance between two variables, and regressions, which are multi-variate models which test the relative influence of two or more independent variables or a dependant variable, to find statistically significant relationships between the selected variables. In the regressions, the effects of each variable are narrowed, or controlled for.

Results

Table 1 displays correlations, or relationships between two variables, between political party affiliation, interest in politics, political ideology and various religious identities and church attendance. The data shows that self-identified evangelicals are more likely to be Republican, think of themselves as conservatives, and interested in politics. Self-identified fundamentalists are more likely to be a Republican and more likely to think of themselves as a conservative. Self-identified liberals are more likely to be Democrats and more likely to think of themselves as a liberal. Self-identified mainline Protestants also have Republican and conservative leanings. Members of other religions are more likely to think of themselves as a liberal. Those who identify themselves as protestant are more likely to be affiliated with the Republican party, more likely to think of themselves as a conservative, and less likely to be interested in politics. Jews are more likely to think of themselves as Democrats and as liberals.

Table 2, a set of two statistical regression models, which attempt to isolate the influence of individual variables by controlling for the influences of other variables, specifically shows how a series of factors affect political party affiliation. Model 1 shows significant correlations between religious identity and political parties. In Model 1, being evangelical, fundamentalist, mainline, liberal, Catholic, Jewish or a member of another religion does, controlling for all other variables, influence political party affiliation. Model 2, like Model 1, describes the significance between religious identity and political parties, but takes into account interest in politics and identification as liberal or conservative. Model 2, however, finds that, while thinking of oneself as a liberal or conservative does influence political part affiliation, being an evangelical, fundamentalist or liberal protestant is no longer significant in determining political part affiliation. Thus, in comparing Model 1 and Model 2, being an evangelical, or fundamentalist protestant affects one's political ideology in such a way that makes one more disposed to affiliation with the Republican Party.

Discussion

We hypothesized that one's conservative or liberal leaning, in regards to religious preference, does in fact affect one's choice in political affiliation. So, we feel that an individual who is religiously conservative will align themselves with a political party that is similarly conservative. Much of that data that we collected supported this hypothesis. Our data shows that relationships exist between religions conservatism and political conservatism and party affiliation. Evangelicals and fundamentalists, two of the more conservative Christian groups, are more likely to be Republican and Conservative. In addition, liberal Christians were more likely to be liberal and Democratic, along with Jews, Catholics and members of other religions.

Our second regression model complicated our results. This model demonstrates that a complex relationship exists between religious identity and political party affiliation among evangelical and fundamentalist liberal Protestants. We must note that we are skeptical of the results of Model 2, which found that political ideological considerations made insignificant religious identity when examining political party affiliation for these protestant groups. Other studies (Smith et al 1998) have shown that there are many aspects of evangelical Christianity, for instance, that could make one more pre-disposed towards joining the Republican Party outside of political ideology, such as social network ties. Thus, we believe the relationship between conservative religion and conservative politics could be further studied in this area.

References

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