

Curt Raney
Introduction to Data Analysis
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On the Relationship between Religiosity and Ideology

Abstract

This paper reports the results of a survey of students at a small college showing that religiosity and political ideology are weakly related.

Introduction¹

*Well, the thing about life is. . . . it gets weird.
People are always talking to you about truth.
Everybody always knows what the truth is, like it
was toilet paper or somethin', and they got a supply
in the closet. But what you learn, as you get older, is
there ain't no truth. All there is, is bullshit. . . .
layers of it. . . . one layer of bullshit on top of
another. And what you do in life, like when you get
older, is, you pick the layer of bullshit you prefer,
and that's YOUR bullshit, so to speak. You got that?
No? Well it's complicated. Maybe when you go to
college.*

from the film *Hero*
screenplay by David Webb Peoples

¹ In this section, the focus of the paper is presented, including the theoretical reasoning that leads up to the hypothesis.

Ronald Reagan once remarked to journalists that religion and politics have always been connected. The press reacted vigorously, excoriated him for seeming to license the activities of the religious right. Our nation's principle of separation of church and state is not only a constitutional requirement, it's deeply cultural, as well. Reagan appeared indifferent to the doctrine. However, he claimed that he was merely admitting a simple truth. Of course, a president must be careful not to open the smallest wedge between the ideal and the real when sacred ideals are at issue. Perhaps the press did the right thing in reacting to the mere suggestion of the contamination of politics with religion. But sociology can't shy away from looking closely, however necessary sacred cows may be to the political order. Our primary task is understanding.

Religion and politics should be related because they both deal with basic values. Therefore, as one's religiosity² increases, the importance one attaches to politics should also increase. Also, because strong feelings are inconsistent with moderate, middle-of-the-road opinions, one's political beliefs should shift toward the left or right end of the political spectrum, the stronger one's religious concerns become.

In recent years, religiosity has increased dramatically among a group referred to as the *religious right*. This segment of our population is made up primarily of Christian fundamentalists who are alarmed about the decline of the family. Their social concerns find powerful expression in religion because they believe that religion is the foundation of family life.

Religiosity is not known to have increased among other groups in recent decades. Rather, it seems that religion has generally declined. The apparent decline figures prominently in the anxiety manifested among the religious right. If these trends are evenly distributed across different age and economic groups, religiosity and political ideology should be related to each other among college students. Students high in religiosity should also be more politically conservative.

Methods³

*The Study*⁴ — The data were collected in the Spring of 1993 using written questionnaires administered by student members of a 300-level college course

² For this study, religiosity is defined as the importance one attaches to religious matters, as seen in one's own eyes.

³ In this section, a precise description of the operational meaning of the variables is spelled out. Also, the sample and data collection methods are described in some detail to allow the reader to understand the various ramifications of the methodology of the study.

⁴ This subsection under the methods section should contain a brief description of the study to

called *Introduction to Data Analysis*. The questionnaire contained 38 questions covering a wide variety of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral topics. The respondents were college students attending a 4-year liberal arts college in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States that is unaffiliated with any religious group. The college draws students primarily from within the state in which it is located.

*Sample*⁵ — The sample was not systematically constructed, though an effort was made to include various types of students in terms of sex, college class level, residential status, and so on. Whether the sample accurately represents the entire student body at the college, or represents college students in the United States can not be determined. We shall proceed on the unverifiable assumption that they do. Readers should keep this fact in mind at all times.

*Measurement*⁶ — The variables RELIGUS and BELIEFS were measured by asking respondents the following questions. Note that the religion question has no category for *no opinion*. Respondents were instructed to leave blank any question they felt they couldn't or didn't want to answer. This makes the interpretation of any large number of missing responses problematic. Fortunately, approximately 89 percent of the respondents answered these two questions. Had the response rate been significantly lower, we would worry about whether the sample was biased by self-selection. Whenever a significant proportion of a sample chooses not to respond, we can't be certain that those not responding are similar to those who responded. For example, the 11 percent of the respondents who did not answer might have been offended by the questions precisely *because* of their high religiosity. Their absence from the sample would constitute a serious bias in the study. However, response rates as high as roughly 90 percent are widely considered by sociologists to be sufficiently free of this form of sample bias as to permit drawing valid conclusions from the data.

RELIGUS was measured by asking:

*How religious are you? Please indicate your answer by choosing
the number on the scale that best fits you. (chose one number)*

not at all religious 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 very religious

orient the reader to what, when, where, why, and by whom it was done.

⁵ This section is for describing the manner by which the sample was selected, and for evaluating any potential sources of misrepresentation of the population, as is with our sample that was not randomly selected.

⁶ Specify the exact question used to construct each variable in this section.

BELIEFS was measured by asking:

*Which label best characterizes your political beliefs?*⁷

*radical*____ 1
*extreme liberal*____ 2
*liberal*____ 3
*moderate*____ 4
*conservative*____ 5
*extreme conservative*____ 6
*reactionary*____ 7
*no opinion*____ 9

Hypothesis⁸

If the theory concerning the relationship between religiosity and ideology is valid, including if the social trends discussed in the introduction have occurred in the manner specified, RELIGUS and BELIEFS will be positively correlated with each other to a moderate degree.

⁷ *No opinion* was not included in the calculation of Spearman's coefficient, or in the construction of the table.

⁸ In this section, the hypothesis is stated operationally in terms of the expected relations between specific variables.

Results⁹

Table 1
Crosstabulation of RELIGUS by BELIEFS
Percent of Row¹⁰

	Radical	Extreme Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Extreme Conservative	Reactionary
1=Not Religious	5	9	41	26	14	5	0
2	3	13	42	26	13	0	3
3	0	7	43	27	14	7	2
4	2	9	40	40	9	0	0
5	2	2	33	31	28	2	2
6	0	0	29	47	15	6	3
7=Very Religious	20	5	10	10	35	20	0
All Respondents	4	7	37	31	17	5	1

Table one presents a crosstabulation of RELIGUS by BELIEFS. The data support the hypothesis that religiosity and political ideology are related. Spearman's correlation coefficient is weak, but very significant, statistically speaking ($r = .18$, $P < .01$). A close examination of the table reveals a relative lack of variation in the study variables. Note that only a few respondents classified themselves at either end of the political spectrum. Of those who responded, 83.9% chose one of the middle three categories. There were fewer *very religious* respondents than any other category (6.6% of those who answered the question). The data suggest that the sample does not represent the entire nation because numerous surveys by respected agencies show that there are proportionally more *very religious* people in the nation than at the college where the study took place. This may explain why the correlation between RELIGUS and BELIEFS is weak.

⁹ In this subsection, the results are presented and briefly discussed so as to point out significant aspects of the results that the reader should be noticing.

¹⁰ Rows do not all add to 100% due to rounding.

Discussion¹¹

The Data show that religiosity and political ideology are weakly related. One can't help but think about all the different ways the institutions of politics and religion are interconnected in people's hearts and minds, in spite of their outward, legal separation. A simple study such as this just scratches the surface of what has to be a very complicated topic. It's probable that such complications are the best explanation for the weak correlation.

Since the respondents were all college students at a liberal arts college, the sample probably underestimates the proportion of very religious college students, and underestimates even more the proportion of very religious people in general, given the fact that religiosity and educational attainment are known to be negatively related. The religious right is made up mainly of lower middle-class whites who are under-represented in America's colleges, especially in liberal arts colleges lacking religious affiliation.

The study is also flawed by its non-random sample within the college, and by the college's unusual nature. The same study conducted at a schools attended by a wider cross-section of our society would be more representative, assuming that it had to be conducted in an academic setting at all.

The study is further weakened by its dependence on recent, historical aspects of the religion-politics connection. That connection is probably influenced by many things that were not considered in this study, such as regional and class differences in religion and politics, and religious and political undercurrents in the population that haven't received national attention.

The variables were not measured optimally. The literature on religiosity has long indicated that religiosity is multidimensional. The religiosity measure could be improved by probing respondents' religious attitudes in greater detail, distinguishing between feelings about the importance of religion for society, and feelings about the content of religious teachings. Religiosity should be divided into various dimensions including beliefs, sentiments, and actions. All these suggestions apply equally to political beliefs.

If all the above suggestions were followed, and the connection between religiosity and political ideology was spelled out in detail, the next step would require

¹¹ In this section, the wider implications of the results are discussed, including an evaluation of the validity of the study, and recommendations for improvement and further study.

investigating how they interact with each other at the societal level, in addition to the level of individuals. This would require considerable historical and comparative study. We shouldn't let our national obsession with separation of church and state intimidate us into taking an ostrich-like posture by pretending they don't really influence each other. The state is that organization which has a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force to attain its goals. Surely, people's religious outlook affects their political opinions. The state is the mechanism of last resort in ordering peoples' lives, and religion is almost always concerned with the meaning of social order.

Acknowledgments¹²

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¹² In this section you tell the readers about any assistance you received on the study, no matter how trivial. If someone helped you code data, you acknowledge it. If someone read your paper and gave you feedback, you acknowledge it. Think hard about this. You don't want to leave anyone out, or take credit for anything you didn't accomplish all by yourself.