

# **The Effects of Religion on the Political Engagement of Young People**

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### INTRODUCTION

In Cliff Zukin's "A New Engagement," he affirms that "religious attendance is a factor for civic engagement," meaning that people become involved in various activities because of the activism of their churches, synagogues, or mosques (Zukin 151). While it is clear that there is a connection between religion and civic engagement, the relationship between religion and political engagement is much more gray. Zukin analyzes young people's attitudes on issues on which religion and politics mix, and finds it is difficult to summarize them. Yet he does not measure the relationship between religiousness and political engagement. This paper explores whether and how these factors are related. My hypothesis is that young people who are very religious are more likely to be engaged politically, whether this engagement is manifested in voting, wearing campaign buttons, or talking about political issues with friends and family.

Churches have traditionally engaged people in their communities and have "served as organizing venues for many of the nation's social movements (Lopez 1)." Churches instill values in young people and encourage community participation. In Mark Hugo Lopez et al.'s CIRCLE fact sheet from April 2007 entitled "Religious Service Attendance and Civic Engagement among 15-25 year olds," he breaks civic engagement into three categories: civic activities, electoral activities, and political voice. He then analyzes these categories with regard to religious participation. However, unlike Zukin and Lopez, I will look only at political activities, disregarding the civic. I will use the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I) data to analyze my hypothesis. The NCES

I is a 25-minute telephone survey conducted in April and May 2002. Of the 3,200 respondents, 1,000 were DotNets (people aged 15-25). I limited my analysis to this cohort.

## CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

Religion has always played a large part in United States politics. From the Puritan foundations of our country to the fervently religious born-again Christians of today, religion has consistently influenced Americans' political views. Many Americans choose candidates based on their views on moral and social issues. It would be nearly impossible for a presidential candidate to be elected today if he claimed he did not believe in God. Youth in America are remarkably religious compared to the youth in most wealthy, industrialized nations. Few American youth today are irreligious (Zukin 166). Yet youth today also are the least politically active cohort in our society. This raises the question- is there a certain group of religious young people who are much more active than the others?

The connection between civic engagement and religion has been explored, and both Zukin's and Lopez et al.'s research shows that religiosity does affect civic engagement. This relationship seems to be almost intuitive. Churches have long been centers that encourage community involvement, and young people who attend church regularly are likely to be influenced by the activism and values of their churches. Religiosity rivals education as one of the most positive correlates of civic engagement (Lopez). While churches encourage volunteering and other forms of civic engagement to further social causes, does this lead to more political involvement? Does religiosity

affect young people's political behavior? Will young people be more likely to vote, participate in political campaigns, and talk about politics with friends and family?

## HYPOTHESIS

My hypothesis is that religious young people are more likely to participate politically than non-religious young people. Since religion influences people's values, and values and social issues are a large part of political candidates' platforms, it seems plausible that young people who attend church regularly or consider themselves very religious are more likely to have a strong feeling towards certain candidates and issues. For example, many churches have clear views on women's reproductive rights and homosexuality, as well as distinct views on the importance of community involvement and helping others. This leads me to believe that religious young people are likely to be politically active. However, this may prove to be untrue or at least partially untrue. There are many pathways to political participation, and some may be influenced by religion, while others may not. While religious young people may be more likely to vote than non-religious young people, they may not participate in other ways, such as helping with a campaign, attending a rally, or wearing buttons. Also, there may be other factors that influence young people's political participation more than religion does, such as socioeconomic status, gender, education, and upbringing. Nevertheless, since religion is so often intertwined with politics, it is likely it will influence political participation.

## METHODOLOGY

To examine my hypothesis, I chose the National Civic Engagement Survey I

("NCES I") data. As stated in the introduction, the NCES I was a 25-minute telephone survey conducted in April and May 2002. Of the 3,200 respondents, a disproportionately large sample of 1,000 were DotNets (people aged 15-25.) I chose this survey because it not only questioned a large number of young people; it also had a significant amount of questions pertaining to religiousness and political participation.

For my independent variable, I chose three questions relating to religiosity. These were as follows:

1. Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?
2. Aside from weddings and funerals how often do you attend religious services... more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never?
3. How important would you say religion is in your own life - very important, fairly important, or not very important?

These questions measure how religious young people feel they are, and how often they actually attend services. I chose one question that relates solely to born-again or evangelical Christianity. While there are many different religions represented in the United States, Christianity has the largest number of members. This group of Christians was important to my study because activism and missionary work are a characteristic of evangelism. This paper does not explore whether different religions have different effects on political participation. Most of the questions refer to religiousness in general, and one of them focuses solely on evangelical Christianity. Respondents who answered "Don't know," "Refused," or "Other" were omitted.

For my dependent variable, I chose the following five questions:

1. In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too

busy or move around often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your election district, or not?

2. We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?

3. When there is an election taking place do you generally talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates, or not?

4. Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?

5. In the past twelve months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party or any organization that supported candidates?

These questions explore different aspects of political participation. I will break political participation into three categories- electoral participation, talking to others about politics, and campaign participation. The first two questions explore how many young people are registered to vote and how many actually vote, the third question explores discussion of politics with others, and the fourth and fifth explore campaign activism. Respondents who answered “Don’t know” or “Refused” were omitted.

## RESULTS

Table 1. Influence of Evangelical Christianity on Registering to Vote\*

	Evangelical Christian	Not Evangelical Christian	Total
Registered to vote	70.2%	65.7	67.5
Not registered	29.8	34.3	32.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

\*Question wording: Would you describe yourself as a born again or evangelical Christian, or not? In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your election district, or not?

Table 2. Effect of Attendance of Religious Services on Registering to Vote\*

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once or twice a month	A few times a year	Seldom	Never	Total
Registered	69.2%	67.4	70.2	61.0	57.9	54.5	63.6
Not registered	30.8	32.6	29.8	39.0	42.1	45.5	36.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* Aside from weddings and funerals how often do you attend religious services... more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never?

Table 3. Influence of Religion on Registering to Vote\*

	Very important	Fairly important	Not important	Total
Registered	67.5%	59.8	59.2	63.5
Not registered	32.5	40.2	40.7	36.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* How important would you say religion is in your own life - very important, fairly important, or not very important?

Table 4. Influence of Evangelical Christianity on Voting\*

	Evangelical Christian	Not Evangelical Christian	Total
Always	36.3%	23.7	26.8
Sometimes	28.8	33.1	31.4
Rarely	11.3	11.0	11.1
Never	23.1	28.2	26.2
Other (eligibility problems)	.6	4.1	2.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half

of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?

Table 5. Influence of Church Attendance on Voting

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once or twice a month	A few times a year	Seldom	Never	Total
Always	50.7%	39.8	14.3	23.4	20.5	14.8	26.8
Sometimes	28.4	29.0	45.1	30.5	26.5	35.2	32.3
Rarely	7.5	11.8	9.9	12.1	13.3	14.8	11.5
Never	13.4	15.1	28.6	30.5	37.3	29.6	26.3
Other (eligibility problems)	.0	4.3	2.2	3.5	2.4	5.6	3.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 6. Influence of Religion on Frequency of Voting

	Very important	Fairly important	Not important	Total
Always	33.0%	21.3	19.4	26.8
Sometimes	29.6	33.1	37.9	32.3
Rarely	10.5	10.0	16.5	11.5
Never	24.0	32.5	23.3	26.4
Other (eligibility problems)	3.0	3.1	2.9	3.0
total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 7. Influence of Evangelical Christianity on Discussing Politics with Others\*

	Evangelical Christian	Not Evangelical Christian	Total
Yes	38.3%	35.8	36.8
No	61.7	64.2	63.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* When there is an election taking place do you generally talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates, or not?

Table 8. Influence of Church Attendance on Discussing Politics with Others

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once or twice a month	A few times a year	Seldom	Never	Total
Yes	40.0%	41.2	35.2	29.7	42.2	33.0	36.8
No	60.0	58.8	64.8	70.3	57.8	67.0	63.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 9. Importance of Religion on Discussing Politics with Others

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Total
Yes	40.7%	32.8	33.5	36.8
No	59.3	67.2	66.5	63.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 10. Influence of Evangelical Christianity on Wearing Buttons, Placing Signs in Yard\*

	Evangelical Christian	Not	Total
Yes	23.3%	17.7	20.1
No	76.7	82.3	79.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?

Table 11. Influence of Church Attendance on Wearing Buttons, Placing Sign in Yard

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once or twice a month	A few times a year	Seldom	Never	Total
Yes	28.0%	29.4	18.7	13.2	14.2	12.1	19.8
No	72.0	70.6	81.3	86.8	85.8	87.9	80.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 12. Importance of Religion on Wearing Buttons, Placing Sign in Yard

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Total
Yes	24.8%	17.4	11.0	19.8
No	75.2	82.6	89.0	80.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 13. Influence of Evangelical Christianity on Donating Money to Campaigns\*

	Evangelical Christian	Not Evangelical Christian	Total
Yes	6.6%	3.8	5.0
No	93.4	96.2	95.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

\* In the past twelve months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates?

Table 14. Influence of Church Attendance on Donating Money to Campaigns

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once or twice a month	A few times a year	Seldom	Never	Total
Yes	7.6%	4.8	6.1	4.1	2.0	2.0	4.5
No	92.4	95.2	93.9	95.9	98.0	98.0	95.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 15. Influence of Religious Importance on Donating Money to Campaigns

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Total
Yes	4.9%	6.3	1.0	4.5
No	95.1	93.8	99.0	95.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

## DISCUSSION

### **Electoral Participation**

Tables 1 through 6 deal with electoral participation. My hypothesis was proven true for this aspect of political engagement. Electoral participation is the aspect of political participation in which a person's religiosity appears to have the greatest influence. With regard to registering to vote, 70.2 percent of young people who considered themselves born-again or evangelical Christians were registered to vote, while only 29.8 percent were not. Among those youth who did not consider themselves to be evangelical Christians, only 65.7 percent were registered to vote. (Table 1). Young people who attend church more than once a week, once a week, or once or twice a month are approximately 10 percent more likely to be registered to vote than those who seldom or never attend church. While 69.2 percent of those who attend church more than once a week are registered to vote, only 54.5 percent of those who never attend church are registered to vote (Table 2).

Most young people who say religion is very important to them are registered to vote. Once again, it is the very religious young people who show a real difference in amount of them registered. Those who say religion is only fairly important or not important at all are registered and not registered in about equal numbers (Table 3).

Table 4 shows that when it comes to actually voting, those who consider themselves evangelical Christians vote in much higher numbers. Of young people who attend church more than once a week, 50.7 percent are registered to vote, an extremely large number. Of those who never attend church, only 14.8 percent always vote. Church attendance seems to have a stronger effect on voting than does importance of religion. It

is the young people who attend church one or more times per week who vote the most. Once again, the numbers in the middle of the table are muddled. The pattern does not work perfectly. It is only the young people who attend church once a week or more who always vote in high numbers (Table 5). Those young people who considered religion “very important” voted most often, and those who said religion was “not important” voted least often (Table 6).

### **Talking to Others about Politics**

Tables 7 through 9 deal with talking to others about politics. In general, most young people did not talk about politics with others, and their religiousness did not influence whether or not they talked to others. Only those who claimed religion was “very important” to them had slightly higher numbers with respect to discussing politics.

Table 7 shows that there is no real correlation between discussing politics with others and considering oneself to be a born-again or evangelical Christian.

Table 8 shows that there is no correlation between frequent church attendance and talking about politics with others. In general, most people did not talk to others about politics, whether they attended church services or not.

There was a slight correlation between importance of religion and frequency discussion of politics with others. Forty percent of those for whom religion was “very important” said they talked to people about politics. Approximately 30 percent of those who believed religion was only “fairly important” or “not important” reported talking to others about politics.

## **Campaign participation**

Tables 10 through 15 examine campaign participation and religiousness. Hardly any young people placed stickers on their car, wore campaign buttons, or placed a sign in their yard. Being an evangelical Christian affected this pattern slightly (Table 10).

Young people who considered themselves born again or evangelical Christians were more likely to wear a campaign button, place stickers on their cars, or place a sign in their yard. Also, those who attended church once a week or more were more likely to engage in this type of participation (Table 11). Those who claimed religion was “very important” in their lives were also more likely to engage in this type of participation, although the majority of young people, including the very religious, did not engage in these activities (Table 12).

It was expected that most young people do not donate money to political campaigns, as most are still in school or just starting out in the work force, and this was proven true. Table 13 shows that being a born-again or evangelical Christian had a positive correlation to donating money to political campaigns. Those who considered themselves Christians donated less frequently than those who did not. However, there is a slight positive relationship between those who go to church once or more per week, and those who donated money to political campaigns. Frequent churchgoers were the most likely to contribute money (Table 14). Table 15 demonstrates that young people who said religion was “very important” or “fairly important” were more likely to donate money than those who said religion was “not very important”.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, I believe my hypothesis worked out well. Not all of the correlations were as strong as I predicted they would be; yet my hypothesis was for the most part proven true. Instead of the number of people who participated politically getting smaller as the young people got less religious, it was only the very religious who showed differences in participation. Those who were only somewhat religious, and those who attended church every now and then, did not show real differences from those who were not religious and who did not attend church at all. It appears that the young people who attend church regularly and consider themselves very religious are those who participate most. Perhaps if one does not attend church regularly enough to absorb the activism and values of their church, they are not influenced enough to have an affect on their political participation. Those who considered themselves born-again or evangelical Christian participated more in each of the three categories. They were more likely to be registered to vote, to always vote, to discuss politics with others, to wear buttons, and to donate money to campaigns. Voting and campaign participation were the areas where religion seemed to influence political participation. When it comes to discussing politics with others, religion had little to no effect.

Not only did my study show that the very religious are more likely to participate politically in general, it showed that there are different ways in which young people participate, and some ways are much more favored than others. In general, there were more young people registered to vote, and who claim to always vote, than young people who put stickers on their cars, wear buttons, or place signs in their yards. This was surprising to me, as it can be difficult for young people to vote. Many young people are extremely mobile and have trouble obtaining absentee ballots or deciding where to vote.

Hardly any young people donated money to political campaigns, regardless of whether they were religious or not.

Potential ways to improve my study would be including only 18-25 year olds, rather than 15-25 year olds, as those in the 15-17 age range are not eligible to vote, and voting constitutes an important measure of political participation. Also, the question “Would you consider yourself evangelical or born again Christian, or not?” could have been removed from the study, as it is problematic. Not being a born-again Christian does not necessarily make one irreligious. However, I did find this question interesting, as those who considered themselves born-again or evangelical did participate more than those who did not. This study should be repeated with different surveys and different questions, as this would make the results more credible. Other independent variables should also be tested, such as education, race, gender, and socioeconomic status, to see if they influence political participation more than religion does. The results of my analysis show that there is a positive relationship between religiousness and political participation, yet to draw any stronger conclusion, it is necessary to rule out other explanations for this relationship.

## Works Cited

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