

Religion and Attitudes toward Redistributive Policies among Americans

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Abstract

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding how individuals' political and economic attitudes shape their views toward government policies designed to alleviate growing income inequality in the United States. However, much less attention has been paid to the question of how religion shapes Americans' attitudes toward income inequality and redistributive policies. Using data drawn from the 2013 Economic Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), we explore the role that religion—including religious affiliation, the degree and nature of religiosity, the nexus of politics and religion, and interpretations of biblical text—plays in structuring individuals' attitudes toward government redistribution policies. We find that religious affiliation and participation do not meaningfully shape attitudes toward redistributive policies; however, identification with the “religious right” and specific interpretations of scripture do influence how Americans think about redistribution. These findings provide evidence that standard treatments of religion focusing primarily on affiliation and religiosity may have somewhat limited explanatory power with regard to attitudes about issues that fall outside of the standard “culture wars” framework, at least relative to the explanatory power of more specific expressions of religious belief.

Keywords

religion and politics, income inequality, religious right

Rising income inequality in the United States has generated considerable scholarly interest in how people perceive such inequality and various policies designed to redress the growing income gap. For example, scholars have considered the degree to which people accurately perceive that income inequality has grown (Bartels 2008; Xu and Garand 2010). Others have examined variation in perceptions of whether income inequality is a serious social problem and the factors related to support for (and opposition to) redistributive policies designed to alleviate income inequality (Bartels 2008; McCall 2013).

Collectively, this body of scholarship shares a general emphasis on the effects of socioeconomic status, demographic attributes, and political attitudes on Americans' attitudes about income inequality. Fewer scholars, however, have considered the role that individuals' religious orientations—for example, religious affiliation, commitment, and doctrinal belief—might play in structuring attitudes about income inequality and its causes, significance, and potential solutions. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and members of various other religious traditions have a long history of undertaking activities designed to ameliorate poverty, and such actions are typically motivated by scriptural and other religious teachings. Indeed, for many

centuries, Christianity—the dominant religious tradition in the United States—has had a great deal to say about how individuals and society should treat the poor and disadvantaged segments of society.

In this paper, we explore the effects of religious variables on Americans' attitudes regarding three major policies designed by their advocates to reduce income inequality: higher taxes for the wealthy, federal health care reform (i.e., the Affordable Care Act), and an increase in the minimum wage. Using the Public Religion Research Institute's (PRRI) 2013 Economic Values Survey, we develop and test a series of models to analyze how several dimensions of religion influence how Americans think about government policies designed to alleviate income inequality. We find that, although religious affiliation and participation do not have significant direct effects on attitudes about redistributive policies, identification with the

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“religious right” and particular interpretations of scripture and beliefs about the role of religion in society are significant determinants of redistributive attitudes. Our findings provide evidence that standard (but blunt) treatments of religion that focus primarily on affiliation and religiosity have limited power in explaining attitudes about issues that fall outside of the standard “culture wars” rubric. To the contrary, we suggest that when analyzing issues that are not usually framed as traditional moral issues, we need to consider the effects of more finely tuned measures of religious belief.

Previous Scholarship on Religion and Redistributive Policy Attitudes

In recent years, the effect of religion on American public opinion has attracted scholarly attention because of the increased influence and visibility of religious groups in American politics (for a review, see Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009). Beginning with the emergence of the religious right and the broader ascendancy of conservatism in American politics in the early 1980s, a thoroughgoing partisan realignment of conservative Protestants to the Republican Party has had major downstream political consequences. At the elite level, religion has had an effect on policy agendas and the positions policymakers take regarding how to solve public problems (Oldmixon 2009). At the mass level, religion influences ideology and partisanship (Patrikios 2008), political participation (McTague and Layman 2009), and public opinion on a range of issues (e.g., Jelen 2009; Wilson 2009). In short, evangelical Protestants and the most devout adherents of other Christian traditions tend to be conservative and Republican, while religious liberals, members of non-Christian religions, people who are nominally religious, and seculars tend to be liberal Democrats (Kellstedt, Smidt, and Kellstedt 1991; W. E. Miller and Shanks 1996; A. H. Miller and Wattenberg 1984; Patrikios 2008; Wilcox 1992). The emergence of this “religion gap” in American politics also has been a result of a natural ideological migration of southern and rural whites (many of whom happen to prioritize religion highly) into the Republican Party since the 1970s (Kellstedt 1989; Kellstedt and Green 1993; W. E. Miller and Shanks 1996).

Scholars of public opinion primarily have explored the effects of religion on attitudes about social and moral issues (e.g., Gaines and Garand 2010; Jelen 2009; Koopman 2009; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006), although a few also have examined how religion influences economic attitudes (Barker and Carmen 2000; Scheve and Stasavage 2006; Wilson 2009) and social policy attitudes (Jelen 2009). As a general rule, liberals and conservatives appear to have sorted themselves into religious traditions that match their prevailing ideological

worldviews (Putnam and Campbell 2010), which helps explain polarization between liberals and conservatives across a range of policy issues (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). In these studies of how religion shapes public opinion, scholars have focused largely on the roles that religious affiliation and religiosity play in the development of social and economic attitudes. A growing body of research has explained these attitudinal differences by considering the varying core moral foundations and intuitions upon which liberals and conservatives draw (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Lakoff 2002, 2008; Weber and Federico 2013). With some notable exceptions (Barker and Carmen 2000; Scheve and Stasavage 2006; Wilson 1999, 2009), few scholars have examined how such religious orientations might affect economic policy preferences, particularly with regard to redistributive policy.

Wilson (2009) explores the diversity of economic attitudes among various religious groups. He notes that major sociopolitical movements in the United States—many of them designed at least partly in an effort to increase economic equality—have been sparked by religious conviction (cf. Noonan 1998). Christian theology and support for policies directed toward the economic uplift of the poor have a long history of informing one another (Bartkowski and Regis 2003; Trattner 1999). Wilson (2009) notes that for most of the twentieth century, the “religious left”—comprised of modernist mainline Protestants, progressive Catholics, black Protestants, and Jews, and sometimes, but hardly always, working in coalition—led the way in the struggle for what they describe as economic and social justice. Elsewhere, Wilson (2009) shows that black Protestants and mainline Protestants are significantly more supportive of “people on welfare” than are of evangelical Protestants; mainline Protestants are less likely to differentiate their evaluations of “people on welfare” and “the poor” than are members of other Protestant groups. Barker and Carmen (2000) also show that cultural conservatives who are born-again Protestants are significantly less likely to support government policy activism, taxes, and spending. Moreover, in their study of data from eleven advanced democracies, Scheve and Stasavage (2006) show that religiosity is negatively related to support for “social insurance”—a finding that extends to data from the United States. More recently, Gaskins, Golder, and Siegel (2013) present evidence that economic conservatism is differentially structured by religiosity according to income stratification.

Religion and Redistributive Policies

Why would one expect religious affiliation, participation, and belief to have any influence on how Americans think about income inequality and the redistributive policies designed to reduce inequality? We posit several

mechanisms through which religion might have an effect on attitudes about income inequality and policies designed to alleviate it.

Religious Affiliation

Huddy (2013, 737) notes that “group identities are central to politics” because they may “generate political cohesion through a shared outlook and conformity to norms of political activity.” Religious affiliation constitutes one form of politically consequential sociopolitical identity by providing a group-specific ideological framework that ostensibly guides political attitudes.¹ Although a majority of Americans continue to affiliate (at least nominally) with one or another branch of Christianity, members of the mass public nevertheless vary considerably in their religious affiliations (Pew Research Center 2015; Steensland et al. 2000).² Each of these religious traditions expresses somewhat different views about how individuals should relate to one another in society and their corresponding obligation to support political remedies for poverty and income inequality. This variation in attitudes derives from the fact that each religious tradition in the United States tends to have different views about politics, or “social theologies” (Guth et al. 1997). As Alexis de Tocqueville ([1840] 2003, chap. 17) observed long ago, “by the side of every religion is to be found a political opinion, which is connected with it by affinity.”

Politics, then, is presented to Americans through religious filters in a variety of ways. Basic political socialization in childhood plays an important role (Acock and Bengtson 1978). Many individuals are born into families that devoutly practice one or another religion, so social theologies are passed from one generation to the next (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 2014). Parents whose religious traditions promote a social justice worldview may pass their religious views (and any associated political worldview) to their children; such views may remain in place as children move into adulthood. Moreover, individuals who actively practice a specific religious tradition attend worship services with others who practice (and presumably believe the teachings of) that same religious tradition. In adulthood, the social theology championed by one’s religious tradition is reinforced by sustained contact with like-minded adherents and clergy (Djupe and Gilbert 2008). For instance, individuals who belong to a congregation that sponsors a soup kitchen and partners with local government to feed the homeless may be socialized into a social theology that prioritizes more progressive views about the appropriate role of government in alleviating poverty and income inequality. Meanwhile, there is the possibility of self-selection. In the competitive American religious marketplace, individuals may simply seek out religious contexts that promote their

preferred political orientation (e.g., Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). Individuals who have a strong preference for social justice ministries may seek out religious traditions—or even specific congregations—that promote social justice teachings while avoiding others that do not prioritize such values.

The social theologies of some religious traditions are more likely to advocate strongly in favor of an active government role in solving problems relating to poverty and economic inequality (Guth et al. 1997). Elites and congregations within these traditions may work to mobilize their adherents to support redistributive policies, or they may work less directly by emphasizing social justice-oriented religious teachings (Harder 2014). Specifically, we hypothesize that religious traditions other than evangelical Protestantism (which is by far the most politically conservative of the major U.S. traditions)—namely, black Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and secularism—will favor government action to alleviate poverty (including economic redistribution), although there is some evidence that this hypothesis might be exaggerated or stereotypical (Regnerus, Smith, and Sikkink 1998).

Some religious traditions, in particular evangelical Protestantism, take a more neutral—or, in some cases, negative—view of government antipoverty and redistributive efforts. Adherents of these religious traditions are encouraged to participate in private charitable efforts instead of supporting government programs to address inequality. Priority is placed instead on supporting individuals’ efforts to improve their economic circumstances on their own, and the public sector is not viewed as the appropriate source of relief for the problems caused by economic hardship (Bartkowski and Regis 2003). As noted, evangelical Protestants are most often associated with this more conservative, *laissez-faire* approach to poverty and income inequality (Guth et al. 1997), in part because evangelicals tend to draw upon moral intuitions that place less emphasis on nurturing and care and instead place equal or greater emphasis on personal restraint and the maintenance of law and order (Graham and Haidt 2010; Lakoff 2008; Weber and Federico 2013; but also see Hart 1992).

We hypothesize that evangelicals will be more likely to favor private charity over government as the primary provider of antipoverty and redistributive efforts. We suspect further that mainline Protestants fall between the two positions. Despite sustained advocacy for economic justice among mainline elites (Steensland 2002), members of mainline congregations often are not swayed by their religious leaders’ social theology (Guth et al. 1997). Moreover, mainline Protestants continue to be somewhat better off financially than the average American (e.g., Smith and Faris 2005), which should point them in a more conservative direction with regard to redistributive

policy. Thus, mainline Protestant affiliation may have a weak effect on economic attitudes because mainline Protestants themselves are not politically monolithic.

Religiosity: Participation, Salience, and Orthodoxy of Belief

There are important differences between one's religious affiliation and the degree and manner in which one practices religion. People who claim the same religious affiliation often vary considerably in their attendance at worship services, adherence to doctrinal teachings, and extent to which religion is salient to their political and social views. For instance, among individuals who identify as Catholic, some attend Mass every Sunday (or even daily) and take the Vatican's religious, social, and political teachings closely to heart; other individuals who say they are Catholic rarely attend Mass, express skepticism (and sometimes even hostility) toward church teachings, and do not prioritize Catholic identity or strict Catholic belief in living their lives. What should be the effect of increased religious commitment on support for redistributive policies? On one hand, we speculate that individuals who are most religiously active and who report that religion is important in their lives will be less inclined to support government action in the area of poverty alleviation and income redistribution. Such an expectation reflects the general conservatism—and attendant skepticism about government activism in redistributing wealth—of the most religious Americans. Studies show that the politics of people who are highly devout and active in religious life differ from the politics of people who are less embedded in religious networks (Leege and Kellstedt 1993); specifically, increased religiosity is highly correlated with increased political conservatism (Duriez 2003; Layman 2001; Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009), particularly on moral issues (Gaines and Garand 2010).

On the other hand, the effect of religiosity on support for redistribution policies hinges on the content of religious beliefs and the resulting social theology that religiosity activates and translates into political attitudes and behavior. The social theologies of some religious traditions may map onto a left–right ideological dimension, but active and regular participation in religious services and the development of a strong faith life consistent with the teachings of one's religious tradition may not necessarily map onto that same ideological dimension. It may well be that the effect of religiosity is not limited to its direct effect on support for government redistribution but rather is magnified by its catalytic effect in converting the social theology associated with specific religious traditions into attitudes about government action. For instance, individuals who are only loosely affiliated with a specific

religious tradition—and who are hence not regular and active participants in religious services and who do not look to religious teachings in guiding their lives—may not be motivated to apply the tenets of that tradition in shaping their attitudes toward government redistribution policy; on the contrary, individuals who are devout adherents to the teachings of their religious tradition and who are active in the faith life of their church communities may be more likely to look to church teachings for guidance on social theological matters and translate church teaching into their own attitudes toward government policy relating to poverty and inequality. This means that the effect of religious affiliation on attitudes toward redistribution policy varies systematically as a function of religiosity, suggesting an interaction for religious affiliation and religiosity.

When Religious and Political Beliefs Overlap

In addition to religious affiliation and religious participation, it is possible that overlap in the ideological content of individuals' religious and political beliefs might shape attitudes about economic redistribution policies. This mutual conservatism between religious belief (e.g., the strict moral conservatism of evangelicals) and political ideology has been a force in American politics since the birth of the “religious right” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although space precludes a full accounting of this most recent American convergence between religious and political thinking—see Harder (2014) for a thorough review—a variety of factors (e.g., disappointment with the *Roe v. Wade* decision, perception of moral disintegration in American public life, anger over Internal Revenue Service [IRS] investigations of the tax-exempt status of private Christian schools during the Carter administration) helped map conservative religious beliefs rather neatly onto a broader political conservatism that chafes against liberal politics and policy (e.g., Wilcox and Robinson 2010). Today, this overlap between religious and political conservatism continues to be an important component of Republican partisanship (Patrikios 2008).

How specifically might religious beliefs shape economic preferences? Someone who believes that Jesus' teachings compel Christians to confront poverty and income inequality by supporting private charity—but not government action—is connecting a religious belief (i.e., an interpretation of Jesus' teachings) with a political belief (i.e., a belief that solutions to problems associated with poverty and income inequality are better managed by the private sector than the public sector). Likewise, a Christian who interprets Jesus' teaching as advocating for a just society (and, by extension, a government that works to promote a particular view of social justice) is connecting a religious belief (i.e., an interpretation of Jesus'

teaching) with a political belief (i.e., a belief that poverty and income inequality are best addressed by government action).

There are a few ways in which this cognitive process might work. First, individuals might develop broad belief systems that connect their religious and political ideologies through identification with the so-called “religious right” or “religious left,” broad-based sociopolitical movements that explicitly link religious and political beliefs (cf. Olson 2011; Wilcox and Robinson 2010). Those who identify with the religious right would be expected to hold conservative positions on both social and economic issues, and we would expect these individuals generally to oppose redistributive policies. On the contrary, adherents of the religious left should be expected to hold progressive issue positions and support redistributive policies designed to promote social justice. Meanwhile, some people might identify with *both* the religious right and religious left; these could be individuals who perceive themselves to be socially liberal (conservative) and economically conservative (liberal). An example might be a person who holds conservative views about moral issues (e.g., pro-life, opposed to same-sex marriage) and progressive views on economic and redistributive policies (e.g., supportive of an increased minimum wage and tax increases on the wealthy).

These considerations are, by their nature, symbolic forms of ideology. However, it may be the case that instrumental—or, in the parlance of Ellis and Stimson (2012), “operational”—religious ideology is more closely connected to redistributive attitudes, which are themselves forms of operational political ideology. This distinction is not a trivial one. A growing body of research notes the odd disconnect between the ideological character of a respondents’ policy preferences and their symbolic sense of political ideology—namely, that measures based on the former generate outcomes that are substantially more liberal than the latter (e.g., Cantril and Cantril 1999; Stimson 2004). For instance, Americans prefer government-based solutions to address social problems, yet they also say they identify with an ideological label that opposes such interventions (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Our data offer a unique opportunity to test how religious attitudes about biblical justice and the interpretations of Jesus Christ’s mission affect redistributive policy attitudes, independent of symbolic forms of religious-political identification. Thus, we are able to undertake a specific examination of whether there is a disconnect between the ideopolitical character of operational and symbolic religious considerations (on one hand) and redistributive policy attitudes (on the other). We expect that “conservative” religious attitudes—that is, that the church should preserve its traditional beliefs and that Jesus’ sentiments about caring for the poor highlight the

role of charity rather than a wider societal (governmental) mandate—should be strongly related to specific attitudes regarding economic redistribution, while symbolic ideological identification—religious right, left, and both—may be more weakly connected to these attitudes.

Modeling Attitudes about Redistributive Policies

To explore the effects of religious affiliation, religiosity, and the nexus of religious and political beliefs on attitudes about income inequality and redistribution, we rely on data from the 2013 Economic Values Survey conducted by PRRI. The survey was conducted between May 30 and June 16, 2013, with a sample of 2,002 adults (eighteen years and older). This dataset is unique in that it includes a wide range of variables relating to (1) respondents’ religious orientations and beliefs, (2) their attitudes about income inequality, and (3) their demographic, socioeconomic, political, and attitudinal attributes. Our strategy is to estimate a series of models in which we depict attitudes about redistributive policies as a function of religion variables (variously defined), controlling for the effects of a series of control variables representing other factors that are likely to be related to both respondents’ religious attributes and/or their attitudes about the redistribution of wealth. We focus our attention primarily on the effects of different components of individuals’ religious orientations and beliefs.

A brief description of the variables used in this analysis can be found in the Online Appendix Table A1, and descriptive statistics for these variables are reported in the Online Appendix Table A2 at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>. We also report the results for additional supplementary analyses in Appendix 3.

Dependent Variables: Support for Redistributive Policies

We measure attitudes about redistribution using three survey items: (1) support for tax increases on the rich; (2) support for repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA); and (3) support for an increase in the minimum wage. All three of these variables reflect support for policies that transfer resources to those at the lower end of the income distribution. In addition, we combine these three variables to create a comprehensive redistribution scale that represents individuals’ general support for redistributive policies.

Our first variable, support for tax increases on the rich, is based on a survey item in which respondents were asked about the degree to which they support increasing “the tax rate on Americans earning more than \$250,000 a year.” This item reflects support for a “top-down” approach to

alleviating income inequality, insofar as respondents indicate their support for lowering the incomes of those at the top end of the income distribution and hence making the revenues generated available for public use. This variable is measured on a scale from 0 (*strongly oppose*) to 3 (*strongly support*), so a high score indicates support for greater redistribution. Second, we measure attitudes regarding redistribution in terms of respondents' support for repeal of the ACA; individuals are asked about the degree to which they support "repealing and eliminating the 2010 health care law." Here again, this variable is measured on a scale ranging from 0 (*strongly oppose*) to 3 (*strongly support*). The ACA is considered to be a pro-redistribution policy, insofar as advocates tout the law as leveling the playing field for access to health care; given this, a high score (reflecting support for repealing the ACA) indicates an antiredistribution position. Third, we include as a dependent variable a measure of support for an increase in the minimum wage. This variable is based on a question asking respondents about their degree of support for "increasing the minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$10.00 an hour." This item reflects a "bottom-up" approach to alleviating income inequality: respondents indicate their degree of support for increasing the incomes of those at the bottom end of the income distribution. Responses to this question range from 0 (*strongly oppose*) to 3 (*strongly support*), so higher scores indicate greater support for redistribution. Finally, we create a general measure of support for redistribution in the form of a scale based on principal components factor analysis of the three aforementioned items. The items load on a single factor (Eigenvalue = 1.704; variance explained = 0.568), and each of the variables comprising the scale load on the single factor at a level of at least $r = .70$.

Independent Variables: Religion

We include a range of independent variables in our models that measure four major components of religious orientation; hence, we operationalize "religion" more broadly—and thoroughly—than has been the case in previous research on attitudes about income inequality and redistribution. Specifically, we include measures of religious affiliation, religiosity, the overlap of religious and political belief, and beliefs about the role of religion in society to analyze how each of these dimensions of religion relates to individuals' preferences for economic redistribution.

Our first set of religion variables measures religious affiliation. Roughly following Steensland et al. (2000), we divide survey respondents into six groups: (1) Roman Catholics, (2) black Protestants, (3) evangelical Protestants, (4) mainline Protestants, (5) adherents of other faiths, and (6) seculars. We create binary dummy variables for each of

these six religious affiliations. Black Protestants are black respondents who identify as Protestant; evangelical Protestants are nonblack Protestants who report being "born again"; mainline Protestants are nonblack Protestants who are not "born again"; and seculars are individuals who report being agnostic, atheist, "nothing in particular," or that they "don't know" their religious affiliation. In estimating support for redistributive policies designed to alleviate income inequality, we designate mainline Protestants as the excluded (contrast) group against which other religious affiliations are compared. We hypothesize that evangelical Protestants should be less inclined than mainline Protestants to support government action to reduce income inequality, largely because of the close attachment to conservative ideology among evangelical Protestants. By controlling for political ideology, we estimate the degree to which evangelical identification has a "religious" effect beyond political conservatism. Moreover, we speculate that black Protestants, Roman Catholics, seculars, and adherents of other faiths will be more inclined to support redistributive government activity than mainline Protestants.

Second, because self-reported *affiliation* with a religious tradition does not necessarily capture the *importance* of individuals' faith orientations in their daily lives—a substantial proportion of Americans report an affiliation with a particular religion but do not prioritize the strict practice of that faith—we also test for the effects of religiosity on attitudes toward redistribution. We hypothesize that individuals who report lower levels of religiosity will differ in their attitudes about economic redistribution from those who are active in the practice of their faith, ostensibly because they should more strongly connect their faith to their policy attitudes. We create a measure of religiosity based on three items in the PRRI survey: (1) worship attendance: a scale of how often individuals attend religious services, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*more than once a week*); (2) importance of religion in one's life, coded as a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*religion is not important in my life*) to 3 (*religion is the most important thing in my life*); and (3) belief in the Bible (or other Holy Book), coded 2 if the respondent believes the Bible (or other Holy Book) is the word of God and is to be taken literally, 1 if the respondent believes the Bible (or other Holy Book) is the word of God but is not to be taken literally, and 0 if the respondent perceives that it is not the word of God but written by men. We combine these three variables into a single scale based on a principal components factor analysis (Eigenvalue = 2.174, variance explained = 0.725); all three variables loaded onto a single factor with a correlation of at least $r = .825$. Controlling for the effects of other variables, we speculate that highly religious individuals should be less likely than those who score low on religiosity to support redistributive policies.

Third, the integration of religious and political beliefs—and the subsequent identification with groups based on the overlap of politics and religion—may affect economic policy attitudes. This may especially be the case for individuals who identify with the “religious right,” a movement of (mostly) Christian adherents who connect their religious beliefs to a socially conservative political agenda (Patrikios 2008). This agenda includes support for prayer in public schools, opposition to abortion, support for traditional marriage, opposition to same-sex marriage, and various other socially conservative positions (Martin 2005). Others have recognized the existence of a loose network of Americans who connect their religious beliefs to a liberal political agenda that emphasizes social justice, including opposition to the death penalty, support for less restrictive immigration policies, and strong support for the social welfare state (Lerner 2006). The PRRI asked respondents two questions gauging the nexus of their religious and political beliefs: (1) Do you consider yourself part of the religious right or conservative Christian movement? and (2) Do you consider yourself part of the religious left or progressive Christian movement? We create separate variables for the religious right and religious left, coded 1 for respondents who consider themselves part of the religious right or religious left, respectively, and 0 otherwise. In addition, a small number of respondents ($N = 155$, about 8%) identify with *both* the religious right and religious left (McCarthy, Garand, Davis, and Olson 2015); to capture the effects of being in this counterintuitive group, we create a variable coded 1 for respondents who report that they are part of both groups, and 0 otherwise. We hypothesize that respondents who identify with the religious right will be less supportive of redistributive government policies, while those who identify with the religious left should be more supportive of redistribution. The effects of identifying as being part of both the religious right and religious left are less clear.

Finally, the PRRI survey includes two items that address how individuals think about the role of religion in society. One of these items addresses the degree to which organized religion should work to preserve tradition. Respondents were asked whether churches and religious denominations should “preserve traditional beliefs and practices” (coded 2), “adjust traditional beliefs and practices in light of new circumstances” (coded 1), or “adopt modern beliefs and practices” (coded 0). We hypothesize that those who believe organized religion should work to preserve tradition will be less supportive of redistributive policy choices; we suggest that these individuals will hold traditional values that are unlikely to align with progressive redistribution policies. Hence, the coefficient for this variable should be negative in our models of support for tax increases on the rich and support for raising the

minimum wage, but positive in our model of support for repealing the ACA.

In addition, in the New Testament, Jesus often preached about the obligation of individuals to help the poor. A question was included in the PRRI survey designed to measure respondents’ perceptions of what Jesus meant in his teachings about the poor:

In the Bible, when Jesus and prophets talked about taking care of the poor, they were primarily talking about . . . (1) charitable acts by individuals, or (2) our obligation to create a just society.

Respondents selected one of these choices and were subsequently asked how strongly they adhered to their view. The result is a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (*respondent feels strongly that Jesus meant private acts of charity*) to 4 (*respondent feels strongly that Jesus meant our obligation to create a just society*). Individuals who answer on the low end of this scale are translating Jesus’ teachings into personal terms, while those placing themselves on the high end of the scale are saying Jesus’ teachings obligate Christians to support a society that attacks poverty (and, presumably, income inequality) at a broad societal level. We hypothesize that those individuals who interpret Jesus’ teachings to mean that there is a collective obligation to create a just society will be more supportive of government action in the area of redistribution and the alleviation of income inequality.

Control Variables

We include a variety of control variables that reflect individuals’ attitudes about politics, the role of government in redistribution, political attachments, and demographic attributes. A full description of these variables and their hypothesized effects on the dependent variables is found in the Online Appendix Table A1 at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>.

Empirical Results

In Table 1, we report results for the ordered logit models estimated for our three ordinal dependent variables—support for tax increases on the rich, support for repeal of the ACA, and support for an increase in the minimum wage—and the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model for our economic equality policy scale, which combines the three previous variables.

Religious Affiliation

At the simplest (bivariate) level, there are some important differences in support for redistribution across the

Table 1. Ordered Logit and Regression Estimates for Models of Support for Redistributive Policies, 2013 Economic Values Survey (PRRI).

Variable	Favor tax increases on the rich		Support repeal of ACA		Support increase in minimum wage		Government equality policy scale	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Religion variables								
Black Protestant	0.695	1.95*	0.214	0.58	0.085	0.23	0.078	0.52
Evangelical	0.133	0.73	0.083	0.44	0.401	2.20*	0.082	1.09
Catholic	0.063	0.37	0.149	0.83	0.260	1.50	0.034	0.47
Other faith	0.082	0.39	-0.179	-0.80	-0.139	-0.66	0.001	0.11
Secular	-0.105	-0.51	-0.061	-0.28	0.102	0.49	-0.008	-0.10
Religiosity scale	-0.104	-1.21	0.042	0.48	0.004	0.05	-0.011	-0.30
Religious left	0.052	0.23	-0.311	-1.37	0.014	0.06	0.010	0.11
Religious right	-0.319	-2.00*	0.286	1.68*	0.053	0.33	-0.125	-1.87*
Both religious left and right	0.521	1.61	0.249	0.76	0.401	1.24	0.189	1.44
Preserve traditional beliefs	-0.174	-2.05*	0.121	1.40	-0.289	-3.37***	-0.110	-3.14***
Jesus promotes just society	0.058	1.85*	-0.086	-2.63**	0.037	1.16	0.041	3.13***
Political attitude variables								
Income gap increasing	0.518	4.95***	-0.153	-1.41	0.259	2.44**	0.184	4.25***
Government too big	-0.319	-5.08***	0.393	6.11***	-0.230	-3.69***	-0.202	-7.69***
Capitalism working well	-0.115	-1.76*	0.198	2.88**	-0.149	-2.27*	-0.083	-3.10***
Partisan identification	-0.256	-6.02***	0.299	6.85***	-0.188	-4.44***	-0.164	-9.25***
Liberal-conservative ideology	-0.365	-5.14***	0.274	3.73***	-0.304	-4.26***	-0.191	-6.42***
Tea Party supporter	-0.671	-3.79***	0.421	2.16*	-0.503	-2.83**	-0.259	-3.54***
Socioeconomic/demographic variables								
Education	0.003	0.08	-0.059	-1.64	-0.030	-0.87	0.005	0.40
Family income	0.171	1.80	0.150	1.52	-0.094	-0.98	-0.003	-0.07
Family income ²	-0.057	-3.35***	-0.022	-1.29	0.011	0.68	-0.008	-1.14
Social class	-0.104	-1.33	-0.007	-0.09	-0.202	-2.56**	-0.056	-1.74
Gender	0.142	1.28	0.018	0.16	0.369	3.30***	0.124	2.70**
Age	0.057	3.58***	0.003	0.20	0.011	0.68	0.012	1.71
Age ²	-0.001	-3.38***	-0.000	-0.83	-0.000	-1.23	-0.000	-1.44
Black	-0.441	-1.60	-0.170	-0.58	0.999	3.34***	0.126	1.08
Asian	-0.232	-0.60	0.436	1.05	-0.044	-0.12	-0.109	-0.63
Mixed race	0.245	0.66	-0.446	-1.17	-0.364	-0.93	-0.036	-0.23
Other race	0.274	0.84	-0.105	-0.31	-0.192	-0.60	0.003	0.02
Hispanic	-0.244	-1.29	-0.201	-1.03	0.052	0.26	0.036	0.45
<i>n</i>	1,274		1,156		1,273		1,121	
Pseudo-R ² / R ²	.139		.130		.113		.477	
χ^2 / F	472.40		414.52		366.82		34.25	
Prob χ^2 / Prob (F)	.0000		.0000		.0000		.0000	
PRE	0.178		0.267		0.124		—	

PRRI = Public Religion Research Institute; ACA = Affordable Care Act; PRE = proportional reduction in error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

various religious groups in our study. In Figure 1, we report the mean score on the economic equality policy scale for each of our six religious groups, as well as difference-of-means tests for a comparison of the mean for each group and that of mainline Protestants. As one can see, black Protestants hold the most pro-redistribution attitudes, followed by secular respondents; both of these groups have means that are highly significantly different than the views of mainline Protestants. On the contrary, evangelical Protestants have the lowest support for redistribution, followed by mainline Protestants. Catholics and adherents of other faiths are in the middle and are significantly more moderate on redistribution policy than

are mainline Protestants. Without controls for other variables, we do find significant effects of religious affiliation on the government equality policy scale.

What about the effect of religious affiliation on attitudes toward redistribution policies in a model with a full set of statistical controls? Across the first set of analyses modeling specific policy attitudes regarding taxation of the rich, support for the repeal of the ACA, and support for raising the minimum wage, we find little evidence that religious affiliation shapes attitudes on these matters and virtually no evidence that affiliation is related to the general index regarding economic equality. Nevertheless, among the insignificant coefficients, there are two

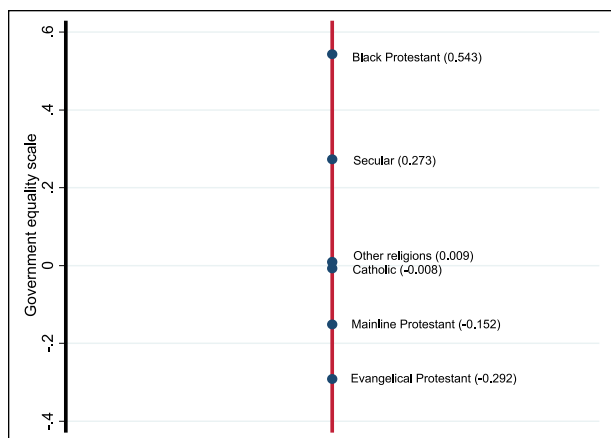


Figure 1. Mean placement of adherents to different religious traditions on government equality scale.

The government equality scale is coded so that a high score reflects support for redistributive policies. Z scores for difference of means tests: black Protestant = 5.80***; Evangelical Protestant = -1.77*; Other faith = 1.66*; Catholic = 1.79*; Secular = 5.19*; Mainline Protestant is the excluded (contrast) group.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

noteworthy exceptions. First, black Protestants are both statistically and substantively more likely to favor tax increases on the rich ($b = 0.695, z = 1.95$). Translating the logit coefficient of this variable into a more interpretable change in marginal effects, black Protestants are about 0.14 more likely than members of other religious traditions to strongly favor increased taxes on the wealthiest Americans. A second finding of note is that evangelical Protestants are modestly more likely to support an increase in the minimum wage ($b = 0.401, z = 2.20$). Holding all else equal, evangelicals are roughly 0.08 more likely to support strongly such laws relative to non-evangelical identifiers. This finding is substantively surprising given evangelicals’ general propensity toward conservative politics.

Nonetheless, our results provide scant evidence that religious affiliation by itself has a discernible effect on our dependent variables. The effects observed in bivariate analyses and in multivariate models including just the various religion variables largely disappear in a full model with controls for political attitudes and socioeconomic and demographic variables. Even for the two religious affiliation coefficients that are statistically significant, the marginal effects are quite modest. It would appear that any simple differences in support for redistribution policies across religious affiliations are due to the effects of other independent variables.

Religious Participation (Religiosity)

A second dimension of religion that is ostensibly consequential for redistributive policy attitudes is religiosity—defined here as a combination of the frequency with which

individuals attend worship services, the importance of religion in their lives, and interpretation of the Bible. Counter to our expectations, our religiosity variable is not strongly related to any of the three policy-specific attitudes. The coefficients for religiosity are statistically nonsignificant for attitudes about taxation of the wealthy, repeal of the ACA, and the minimum wage. Neither do we find evidence that religiosity is related to our general economic equality policy scale. Taken as a whole, our results strongly suggest that attitudes about redistributive policy attitudes are simply independent of religiosity.

Identification with the “Religious Right” and “Religious Left”

In light of the powerful alignment that has developed between socially conservative religious and political interests since the early 1980s, scholars and the popular media alike have a tendency to personify American Christians as belonging to the so-called “religious right.” As a matter of group ideology, the religious right decries government intervention in economic policy, instead preferring that charities shoulder the burdens of the less fortunate (Harder 2014). Meanwhile, over the course of the last decade, a small response to the tight congruence between Christians and Republicans has grown out of dissatisfaction with the politics of the religious right. More left-leaning individuals from a variety of religious traditions have developed their own social movement, which places greater importance on the role that government plays in redressing social inequality. By no means does the “religious left” have the grassroots strength, scope, or political clout enjoyed by the religious right, but it exists nonetheless. Moreover, before the religious right emerged in the early 1980s, it would be fair to say that progressivism was the dominant political tone of religious groups active in public life (Harder 2014).

We find that individuals who identify with the religious right are predictably less supportive of increased taxes on the rich ($b = -0.319, z = -2.00$) and more supportive of repealing the ACA ($b = 0.286, z = 1.68$). Although belonging to the religious right is not significantly related to attitudes about the minimum wage ($b = 0.053, z = 0.33$), we do observe that such identification *is* related to the general equality policy scale ($b = -0.125, z = -1.87$). Meanwhile, the coefficients for religious left identification are statistically nonsignificant in our models of support for tax increases on the rich ($b = 0.052, z = 0.23$), support for repealing the ACA ($b = -0.311, z = -1.37$), and support for increasing the minimum wage ($b = 0.014, z = 0.06$). It is unsurprising, then, that we find religious left identity to have virtually no effect on the economic equality policy scale ($b = 0.010, z = 0.11$). These findings likely reflect the fact that the religious right recently has had much more

success than the religious left has in articulating its policy positions and priorities to the general public.

As we note above, some respondents to the PRRI indicated that they identify with both the religious right and the religious left (McCarthy et al. 2015). The variable “both religious right and religious left”—which we interpret as some sort of middle ground between the two different identities—has little systematic effect on our economic redistribution variables. The coefficient for this variable falls just short of conventional levels of significance in our model of support for increasing taxes on the rich ($b = 0.521, z = 1.61$) and is nonsignificant in our models of support for repealing the ACA ($b = 0.249, z = 0.76$) and increasing the minimum wage ($b = 0.401, z = 1.24$). Furthermore, the coefficient for this right/left dual orientation is not statistically significant in the general policy model ($b = 0.189, z = 1.44$), suggesting that balancing the religious right and religious left perspectives is unrelated to how individuals think about general government redistributive policies.

Perceptions of Biblical Imperatives

We extend our analysis of how various dimensions of religion shape attitudes about redistributive policies by examining the two most consistent predictors of these attitudes: (1) perceptions of the appropriate role of organized religion in society (particularly in terms of preserving traditional beliefs) and (2) interpretations of Jesus Christ’s actions regarding social justice. It is in these variables that we find strong evidence of the role of religion in shaping redistributive policy attitudes. We find that respondents who believe that the church should work to preserve traditional beliefs (as opposed to adapting to shifting cultural value orientations) are significantly more likely to oppose increasing taxes on the rich than are those who believe the church should adopt contemporary beliefs and practices ($b = -0.174, z = -2.05$). Moreover, although the coefficient for this variable is not statistically significant in the model for repealing the ACA ($b = 0.121, z = 1.40$), a preference for preserving traditional beliefs and practices has a strong and significant effect on attitudes about the minimum wage ($b = -0.289, z = -3.37$). Similarly, we find the view that churches should work to preserve tradition to be strongly and negatively related to general support for government redistributive policies ($b = -0.110, z = -3.14$). Respondents who want churches to preserve traditional beliefs are far less likely to support government intervention to redress inequality.

Moving to how people perceive Jesus’ role in creating a just society, we see a consistent pattern that highlights how interpretations of Jesus’ deeds and words structure attitudes about policies designed to redress inequality. For individuals who think Jesus preferred private acts

of charity over creating a more just society via public institutions (low scores on this variable), support for redistributive policy should be much lower than among individuals who believe that Jesus’ teachings about the poor obligate Christians to support (government) institutions that redress poverty and inequality (high scores on this variable). We find that this is generally the case. The view that Jesus advocated for a more just society is positively and significantly related to favoring a tax increase on the wealthy ($b = 0.058, z = 1.85$) and negatively and significantly related to support for repealing the ACA ($b = -0.086, z = -2.63$). While this variable is not significantly related to support for an increase in the minimum wage ($b = 0.037, z = 1.16$), it is strongly related to the general economic equality scale ($b = 0.041, z = 3.13$). As individuals move toward the view that Jesus supported a more just society, so too does support for greater governmental intervention in promoting policies designed to lower levels of income inequality.

Political Attitudes and Socioeconomic/Demographic Attributes

For the most part, our political attitude control variables have the expected effects on support for redistribution. Perceptions of a growing income gap are positively related to support for redistribution in three of four models. Moreover, the view that government is too large, the perception that capitalism is working well, Republican partisan identification, conservative ideology, and support for the Tea Party are all negatively and significantly related to support for government efforts to reduce income inequality in all of our models. On the contrary, the effects of our socioeconomic and demographic variables are much less consistent with expectations. Family income has a significant effect only on support for tax increases for the rich, while individuals who score high on the social class variable are significantly less likely to support an increase in the minimum wage and have modestly lower levels of support for redistributive policies in general. Black respondents are significantly more supportive of an increase in the minimum wage, as are women. Women also have higher pro-redistribution scores than men, though the null coefficients for the other variables suggest that gender’s effect on the general scale is driven primarily by gender’s powerful effect on support for a higher minimum wage.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we explore the effects of religion on attitudes regarding government policies designed to redistribute wealth and lower income inequality, including higher taxes on the rich, repeal of the ACA, and an increase in the minimum wage. In previous work on

attitudes about redistributive policy, scholars have focused attention on a small number of religious attributes, usually religious affiliation or religiosity (Wilson 2009). Our analyses significantly expand our understanding of how religion affects views on economic redistribution. We include a full range of religious variables (i.e., affiliation, participation, overlap of political and religious ideology, perceptions of biblical imperatives) in our analyses. We specifically ask whether individuals who identify with the religious right, the religious left, or both have different attitudes toward government redistributive policies, and we also include in our models perceptions of the proper role of churches in society and of the practical implications of Jesus' teaching about the poor.

We find little evidence that religious affiliation and religiosity influence how individuals think about redistributive policies. However, we do find considerable evidence that identification with the religious right, the perception that churches should work to preserve traditional beliefs, and the belief that Jesus promoted social justice contribute meaningfully to variation in attitudes on redistribution. People who identify with the religious right are less supportive of redistributive policies, as are those who support the idea that churches should preserve traditional beliefs; on the contrary, the belief that Jesus actively promoted social justice is positively related to support for economic redistribution policies.

It is interesting and noteworthy that "standard" religion variables have very little effect in our models. Although some of these traditional variables are strong predictors of individuals' attitudes on moral issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion (e.g., Gaines and Garand 2010), they fare much less well in models of redistributive policy preferences. It may be the case that such economic attitudes are more closely related to ideological considerations than they are to rote religiosity. Unfortunately, however, it is difficult to disentangle the underlying mechanism—that is, do political preferences create a compatible political theology, or does theology affect ideological and policy preferences? Although work in political psychology suggests that the moral intuitions used by conservatives and liberals are different (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Weber and Federico 2013), we can only speculate about the chain of causation at play. Nevertheless, that orthodoxy produces an independent effect beyond ideological and political orientations *and* economic preferences suggests that the belief patterns of the religious are essential to understanding interpretations of and preferences for certain economic policies that are touted as reducing inequality.

Authors' Note

A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2014 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association,

Chicago, April 3-6, 2014. The authors are solely responsible for any interpretations of the data.

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Notes

1. Drawing from a rich social psychology literature (e.g., Turner et al. 1987), there is an important caveat to the expectation that religious affiliation (identification) may shape attitudes regarding redistributive policies. If the political relevance of a group identity is predicated on the explicit politicization of a group's goals (Huddy 2013), then the significant heterogeneity in sociopolitical thought both among and, importantly, *within* religious traditions may mean that mere affiliation with a particular religious tradition does not result in the translation of its specific religious ideology into its social or political theology. Without additional information about the *subjective* strength of a religious identity—that is, an individual's "knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership" (Tajfel 1981, 255)—simple religious affiliation is unlikely to convey the degree to which denominational ideology is integrated into an individual's sociopolitical consciousness. As a result, affiliation with a specific religious tradition may not necessarily produce a strong effect on economic policy attitudes.
2. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), just under half of the American public is Protestant, a category that is itself characterized by tremendous diversity (doctrinal and otherwise): 25.4 percent are evangelical Protestant, 14.7 percent mainline Protestant, and 6.5 percent black Protestant. Two in ten (20.8%) Americans identify as Roman Catholic, a figure that has begun to decline somewhat after holding roughly steady for decades. Small but significant American religious minority groups include Mormons (1.6%), Jews (1.9%), and adherents of other non-Christian traditions (5.9%). Meanwhile, a sizable and rapidly growing sector of the American population (22.8%) is secular or unaffiliated with organized religion; among the religiously unaffiliated, 3.1 percent are atheist, 4.0 percent are agnostic, and most (15.8%) say they are "nothing in particular."

Supplemental Materials

Supplemental materials for replicating the analyses reported in this article are available at <http://www.nicholastdavis.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/PRQ-rep-files-Farizo-Davis-Garand-Olson.zip>. Supplemental materials include the replication data set (with original and recoded variables), a codebook for the original and recoded variables, the topline for the original PRRI data set, and the output (including Stata code) for the logit and regression models reported in the article.

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