

Does religion make a difference in politics?

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From Barack Obama's controversial pastor to Sarah Palin's "secret religion", religious values have continued to play a dominant role in the presidential election since John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic elected to president in 1960. Hoping to answer the question of which political party has a monopoly on the "best" values and how religion affects these values, Kennon Sheldon, a University of Missouri professor, compared the "extrinsic" values (financial success, status, appearance) with "intrinsic" values (growth, intimacy, helping) of self-declared Democrats and Republicans in four different samples.

Past research shows that extrinsic values undermine both personal well-being (mood and satisfaction) and collective well-being (cooperation and congeniality). Sheldon, a professor of psychology in the College of Arts and Science, found Republicans to be consistently higher on the extrinsic value of financial success and lower on the intrinsic value of helping others in need. Closer examination showed that only non-religious Republicans (presumably economic conservatives) differed from Democrats on the value of helping those in need. However, even religious Republicans exceeded Democrats in valuing financial success. Religious and non-religious Democrats did not differ in their values.

Sheldon also wondered whether the primarily economic-oriented values of Republican politicians can allow them to work for large changes that seem needed, such as shifting to an alternative and sustainable energy economy in the face of increasing climate change, or shifting toward greater inclusiveness in the face of increasing racial diversity. These challenges may require more intrinsic values, in which connection and

cooperation are emphasized rather than wealth and consumption.

"The one thing that struck me the most was that the value differences were rather small – really, people were more alike than different, in that almost everybody favored intrinsic values more than extrinsic values," Sheldon said. "It was just a small relative difference between the two parties. Still, these data suggest that economic conservatives have been 'drafting' on the values of religious conservatives, using conservative Christians' willingness to care for less fortunate others as a cover for their own willingness to exploit the situation."

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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