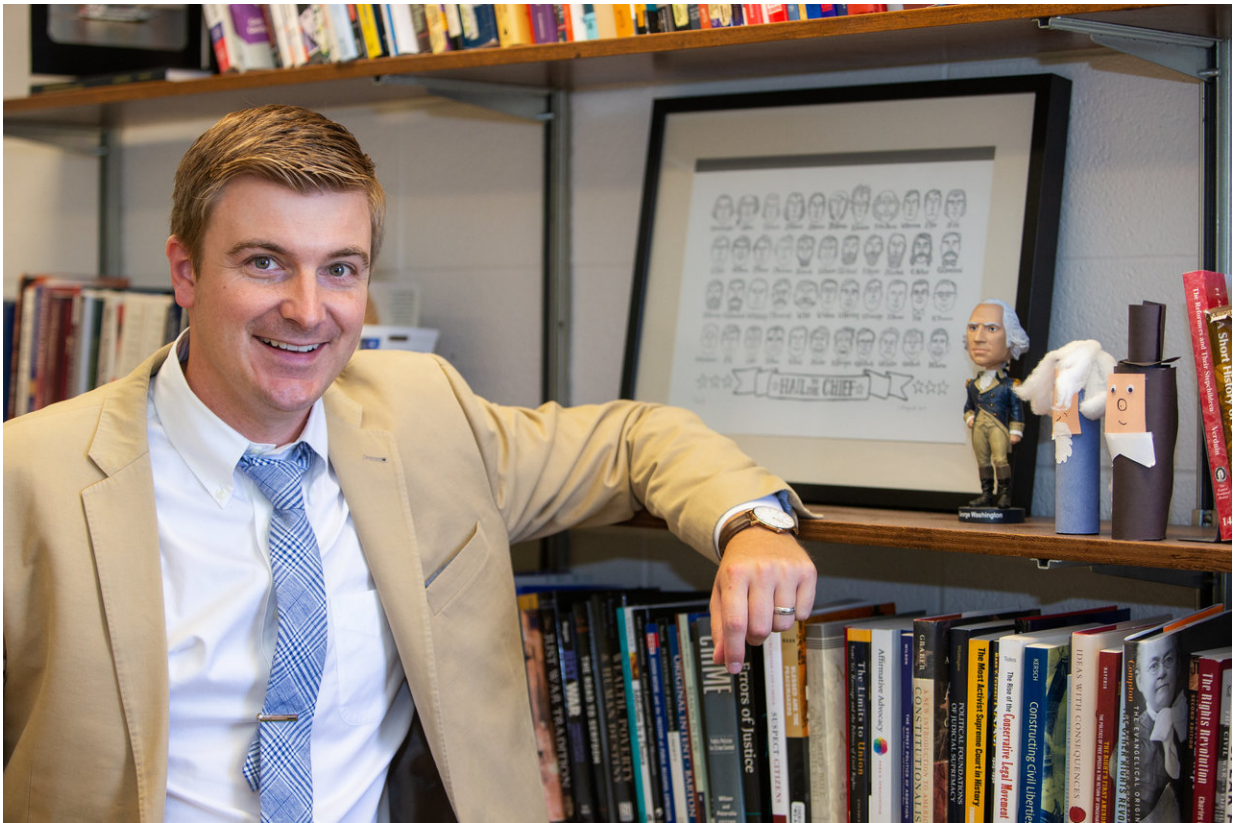


UC political scientist reveals surprising answers about religious freedom

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Andrew Lewis, associate professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati. Credit: Andrew Higley/UC Creative Services

At a moment when boundaries of religious rights are in conflict and prominent in American conversation, Andrew Lewis looks at

perspectives often unconsidered.

Lewis, a University of Cincinnati political scientist and award-winning author, focuses his research on the nexus of American politics and religion and sees a potential shift in Christian conservative political strategies, especially for religious rights advocacy.

To get an accurate picture of hot-button [religious freedom](#) issues and their broad cultural implications, Lewis surveyed a random but equal sampling of 1,100 men, women, liberals and conservatives across all demographics and political affiliations in 2018. He presented the results of this research titled, "Reciprocity and the Politics of Religious Liberty in the U.S." at the American Political Science Association conference in September.

"The primary objective was to understand whether the general public is more receptive to evangelicals' claim for religious [freedom](#) exemptions if they see evangelicals supporting Muslims' religious freedom exemptions," says Lewis.

"As part of the survey, we presented the story of two Muslim [truck drivers](#) in a discrimination case. At the end of the story we asked participants to state whether they support the right of the truck drivers to refuse to deliver beer based on their religious beliefs or the company's right to fire them."

Overall, Lewis found only 28 percent of participants indicated support for the Muslim men's religious freedom claim while 48 percent claimed support for the business. The rest were unsure.

Religious liberty for all?

"Among the results there were clear partisan differences," says Lewis.

"While Democrats are still more likely to oppose religious freedom rights in general, they were much more supportive of those rights for the Muslim truck drivers than Republicans were.

More than a third of the support for the men's religious freedom came from Democrats and only a quarter of the support from Republicans.

"The takeaway here is that most of the movement toward increased tolerance was on the liberal left," adds Lewis.

"If Republicans want to garner support for religious freedom rights from the left and others outside evangelical Christian conservative groups, they may need to increase their tolerance for all religious freedoms."

As a result of his research, Lewis is considering a follow-up to his 2017 book "The Rights Turn in Conservative Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars."

"As the cultural politics of religious freedom explodes, a portion of Americans, particularly white Christians, view their religious freedoms as threatened," says Lewis.

"In fact, recent polls find that evangelicals now believe they face higher levels of discrimination than Muslims in the U.S., and Republicans see both whites and Christians facing more discrimination than blacks, immigrants and other minorities."

Since evangelical Christian conservatives no longer view themselves as the moral majority, Lewis says they have turned to successful political tactics often adopted by the liberal left. Those strategies have worked.

One example involved the legal case of Hobby Lobby v. Burwell for religious exemptions for corporations, and another Supreme Court win

required religious freedom claims to be respected when considering whether a Colorado baker had the right to refuse service for a same-sex marriage.

But does this mean religious freedom in this country is just for evangelical Christians who claim it or does the support of religious liberty apply more broadly?

Evolving perspectives

To look at the possible trajectory of religious liberty claims in the U.S., Lewis' survey presented the case of two Muslim truck drivers in Illinois, who were suddenly required to deliver beer and alcohol on their trucks. The drivers refused based on their religion, which forbids drinking or working with alcohol, and were subsequently fired for not participating.

After claiming they should have been given accommodation for their religious views, the men took their case all the way through the court system.

In fact, the Obama administration's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission actually supported these truck drivers and said they should have had more protection from being fired.

"What's fun about this case is that it turns some of the traditional arguments on their head," says Lewis. "Here you have a liberal who is asking for a religious exemption."

Survey participants received the story with varying degrees of details. They either got the story by itself or a version with an addendum at the end of the story from either the American Civil Liberties Union or the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a conservative Christian legal advocacy group—both wielding support for the men's religious rights but

from their own perspectives.

Respondents were asked whether they support the truck drivers or the company. They were also asked whether they favor or oppose allowing a small business owner to refuse products or services to gay or lesbian customers if doing so violates their religious beliefs.

"Ultimately, we found it tough for Republicans to support the Muslim truck drivers no matter which story version they read. Even after their ADF allies supported the men, the Republicans weren't willing to bend," says Lewis. "Evangelical Christian conservatives, however, can become primed to be more supportive when they see the issue in comparison to the same-sex marriage exemptions."

As he expected, Lewis found greater support for the truck drivers coming from liberals. What he found more remarkable, however, is how Democrats or liberals are less opposed to the Christian same-sex marriage exemptions once they see the issue through the perspective of the Muslims' religious freedom case.

"So liberals are essentially saying, 'Oh, I hadn't thought about that in this context. It's not just about the Christians, now it applies to all groups,'" says Lewis.

Inclusive solutions

When asked how they rank their favorite constitutional rights, such as freedom of speech, religious freedom, protections against cruel and unusual punishment, freedom from discrimination and others, Republicans and evangelicals ranked religious freedom lower after reading about the Muslim case. Seeing the issue from the others' point of view made them less supportive of that right, claims Lewis.

"While most of the increased tolerance was reflected on the left, Republicans and Independents basically stayed the same and were less willing to support the truck drivers' religious freedoms, even though they were campaigning for the same rights," says Lewis.

"In fact, when groups like the ACLU supported the Muslim religious freedoms, the right becomes less supportive of religious freedoms in general."

"Going forward, it would be in the rights' best interest to tie in the freedoms for all religions to gather more effective [support](#) from the left and those outside the evangelical Christian conservative groups," asserts Lewis.

"While the religious freedom rights issue will get highly publicized and problematic in the upcoming election, a pluralistic solution where we tolerate other groups would be ideal and is possible—but difficult."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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