

Religion follows patterns of politicization during COVID-19

April 8 2021



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Research shows people turn to religion in times of fear and uncertainty—and March 2020 was one of those times.

To find the impact of religion during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, Landon Schnabel, the Robert and Ann Rosenthal Assistant Professor of Sociology in the College of Arts and

Sciences, analyzed responses from 11,537 Americans surveyed March 19-24, 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global [health](#) pandemic.

Religion protected mental health of members of several faith groups, Schnabel reports in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, but also constrained crisis response among some of the same groups, ultimately undercutting the overall effectiveness of public health efforts to contain the virus.

"Religion limited the negative mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, with highly religious Americans and especially evangelicals experiencing less distress than more secular Americans," Schnabel wrote. "However, that mental health benefit came at the cost of less concern about and support for addressing an important real-world problem: saving lives during a pandemic."

According to Schnabel, "the most obvious explanation for this pattern is the politicization of the pandemic and the fact that ... Republicans and conservatives simply were not as concerned about the pandemic and less likely to think they needed to worry about social distancing, etc."

Intensely religious white people tend to hold conservative values and embrace Republican politics, Schnabel wrote—the same political positions that downplayed the threat of the virus, especially in the early days of the pandemic.

Schnabel based his conclusions on data from Pew Research's American Trends Panel (ATP), made available by the Cornell Roper Center for Public Opinion Research as part of a growing collection of public opinion data related to COVID-19.

The survey asked questions about mental distress, perceived health and

economic threats posed by the pandemic, and opinions on public health restrictions and social distancing behaviors. It also collected data about religious affiliation and behavior, and about political party affiliation.

Schnabel's analysis confirmed a documented benefit of religion: increased mental health.

"Regularly attending and evangelical Americans did not experience as much increased distress during the early stages of COVID-19 as Americans who attended less regularly or who were not evangelical," he wrote. "This suggests that religion, typically implicated in rates of distress, mitigated the increased anxiety most Americans were feeling in the early days of the pandemic."

Schnabel's analysis also confirmed previous research documenting the close alignment of religion and politics in the U.S. "In the contemporary United States, religion has become politicized and is now viewed as entangled with conservative politics," he wrote.

"In sum, religion therefore could paradoxically buffer the hardship caused by the pandemic yet structure attitudes and orientations about public health and science in ways that ultimately increase it," Schnabel wrote.

It is within the power of religious people and faith organizations to glean mental health benefits of religion without endangering public health, Schnabel said.

"Religious organizations should consider how they can promote the things that are helpful for mental health and not promote anything harmful for physical health," Schnabel said, such as building community through virtual gatherings and providing virtual tools to provide psychological resources without risk of exposure. "The ideal scenario

would be to figure out how to get the mental health benefits while avoiding the things that were unhelpful for containing the pandemic," he said.

The data for this study came from early in the pandemic, Schnabel wrote. "It remains to be seen the exact extent to which religion will continue to protect mental health as we enter the second year of the pandemic."

More information: Landon Schnabel et al, Religion Protected Mental Health but Constrained Crisis Response During Crucial Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/jssr.12720](https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12720)

Provided by Cornell University

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