

# Faith and Access: Personal Religiosity and Religious Group Advocacy in a State Legislature

DAVID YAMANE<sup>†</sup>

*This note uses systematic data gathered on state legislators in Wisconsin to present an empirical test of Allen Hertzke's suggestion that there is a connection between legislators' faith and the access they give to religious groups. It does so by regressing dependent variables which measure the extent of contact between legislators and religious advocacy organizations on various demographic background and personal religiosity variables. The analysis confirms Hertzke's contention that characteristics of legislators — including religious factors — matter for religious group access. But the relationship between faith and access is not the same for all groups. The connection is strongest for conservative religious groups. The strategy of the Christian Right to elect religious candidates seems wise in light of this finding. Although access to legislators on the basis of their faith was only positive for conservative religious advocacy organizations, liberal and Catholic organizations did have higher levels of access to legislators with higher levels of education, which may be of more consequence since the more highly educated legislators tend to be in more influential positions in the legislature.*

## INTRODUCTION

Although the Constitution of the United States prohibits religious tests for elected officials, there is no constitutional prohibition against religious persons holding office and drawing upon their religious beliefs in fulfilling their obligations as elected officials. And yet, Americans are uncomfortable with the idea that elected officials might be moved not simply by their personal religious beliefs but by religious organizations as well. It is one thing to “vote one’s conscience,” and quite another to be a “puppet” for some church (notably in America, for the Vatican). A Pennsylvania state senator expressed this sentiment well in declaring: “My religion will not interfere with what I perceive to be my role in government. I did not take the oath as an ambassador for the Catholic Church” (quoted in Gelm 1994: 24–25). Certainly a major fear of the contemporary “religious right” is that they will help “true believers” get elected who will then help the religious right control politics and pave the way for a de facto establishment of religion.

In his studies of religious lobbying in Washington, Allen Hertzke has considered the issue of the connection between the personal religiosity of legislators and the involvement of religious advocacy organizations — in his terms, the relationship between “faith and access” (Hertzke 1989). Building on interviews with seven members of Congress and 20 congressional aides, Hertzke (1989: 264) argues that elites “are not empty vessels responding solely to ‘pressures’ from constituents or lobbyists.” With Benson and Williams (1982), Hertzke (1989: 260) finds that “elites bring to their work highly integrated world views that color their interaction with religious leaders. Indeed, my interview research suggests that elites’ religious values or worldviews are a vital, and at times dominant factor in determining the extent of access they provide to religious constituencies.”

<sup>†</sup> David Yamane is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556 E-mail: yamane.1@nd.edu.

The question Hertzke raises of the relationship between "faith and access" is important, and his findings are suggestive. Unfortunately, the cases on which he bases his conclusion are limited both in number and representativeness. More sophisticated statistical analysis of more systematically collected data can, therefore, help to flesh out Hertzke's preliminary findings. I provide such an analysis in this note by regressing dependent variables which measure the extent of contact between legislators and religious advocacy organizations on various demographic background and personal religiosity variables gathered on legislators in a survey of members of the Wisconsin state legislature.

### DATA

The analyses in this paper are based on a closed-ended survey delivered to all members of the legislature ( $N = 131$ ) in July 1996. Since the goal was to take a census of the state legislature, one important concern is whether the 62 percent of legislators who responded differ somehow from the legislature as a whole, thereby biasing conclusions drawn from the survey sample. A demographic overview of the 81 respondents shows them to be highly representative of the population as a whole on many key variables, including party affiliation, gender, age, level of education, and year first elected. Two slight divergences are the under-representation of African-Americans among the respondents (this despite a special appeal to African-American legislators), and the over-representation of legislators with graduate or professional degrees among the respondents. Even those differences, however, are not overwhelming.<sup>1</sup>

*Dependent Variables.* The dependent variables in these analyses are created from a question about relationships between legislators and interest groups. Legislators were asked to "name up to five groups or organizations which are most likely to contact you in your capacity as a Legislator on three important issues: abortion, capital punishment, and welfare reform." For the purposes of this analysis, "access" to legislators is measured by the frequency of contact with legislators, as reported by legislators themselves in answering the survey question.

Four religious group access variables were constructed: one global access variable (the total number of religious organization contacts across the three issues), and one each for three broad theological families (number of conservative religious, liberal religious, and Catholic organization contacts across the three issues). These variables are described further in Table 1.

*Independent Variables.* Of primary interest here is the relationship between legislators' personal religiosity and the access that religious advocacy organizations have to them. For control purposes, four secular background variables are included in these analyses: political party, age, education, and gender. These background variables are described in Table 1.

Individual religiosity is measured in two ways. (1) For *religious affiliation*, dummy variables are calculated for Roman Catholics and conservative protestants, the two most theologically distinct of the major religious families active in Wisconsin. Coding of conservative protestants follows Roof and McKinney's (1987) groupings. The following religious self-identifications are coded as conservative protestants: Christian and Missionary Alliance, Evangelical Free, Fundamentalist, Nondenominational/Independent, and Pentecostal. (2) *Personal religiosity*, or *salience* of religion, is operationalized as the sum of legislators' responses to three questions about the role of religion in their lives: church attendance, prayer, and self-reported "importance of religion." These three measures together constitute a highly reliable index of religiosity ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**VARIABLES INCLUDED IN THE REGRESSION ANALYSES OF RELIGIOUS GROUP ACCESS**

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Description	Coding
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
Total Religious Organization Contacts	2.49	2.03	N of organizations contacting R on abortion, capital punishment, and welfare reform which are religious groups	Range: 0–9
Number of Conservative Religious Organization Contacts	1.80	1.10	N of organizations contacting R on abortion, capital punishment, and welfare reform which are conservative religious groups	Range: 0–6
Number of Liberal Religious Organization Contacts	0.36	0.82	N of organizations contacting R on abortion, capital punishment, and welfare reform which are liberal religious groups	Range: 0–5
Number of Catholic Organization Contacts	1.34	1.22	N of organizations contacting R on abortion, capital punishment, and welfare reform which are Catholic	Range: 0–4
<i>Independent Variables: Secular Factors</i>				
Party	.463	.502	R's political party affiliation	Democrat = 1 Republican = 0
Age	46.3	11.08	R's age on January 1, 1995	Range: 24–68
Education	5.01	1.73	R's educational attainment	< HS Diploma = 1 HS Diploma = 2 Some College = 3 Assoc/Tech Degree = 4 Bachelor's Degree = 5 Some Postgrad = 6 Grad/Prof Degree = 7
Gender	.207	.408	R's gender	Female = 1 Male = 0
<i>Independent Variables: Personal Religiosity</i>				
Catholic	.329	.473	"Do you have a religious preference?"	Catholic = 1 Else = 0
Conservative Protestant	.159	.135	"Do you have a religious preference?"	Conservative Protestant = 1 Else = 0
Religiosity	9.57	3.62	Sum of R's response to "frequency of attendance at religious services," "frequency of prayer," and "importance of religion" questions	Range: 0–14

**LEGISLATORS' PERSONAL RELIGIOSITY: A DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW**

In a society which places considerable emphasis on religion as the *private* concern of individual believers (Bellah et al. 1985, ch. 9), it should not be surprising to find very high levels of *individual religiosity* among legislators. The survey, therefore, includes a series of questions which tap various dimensions of individual religiosity. As might be expected, compared to widely-known poll data on the general population (from the General Social Survey, Gallup and Roper Polls, among others), Wisconsin state legislators claim exceptionally high levels of religiosity for themselves (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

## PERSONAL RELIGIOSITY OF WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATORS (n = 73)

	% Responding
<i>Religious Preference</i>	
Roman Catholic	32.1
Jewish	3.7
Protestant	49.4
Other	7.4
None	7.4
<i>Attend Religious Services</i>	
More than once/week	7.4
About once/week	44.4
Several times a month	19.8
About once a month	7.4
Several times a year	11.1
Once a year or less	4.9
Never	4.9
<i>Frequency of Prayer</i>	
More than once a day	25.6
Daily	25.6
Several times a week	16.7
About once a week	11.5
Less than once a week	12.8
Never	7.7
<i>Importance of Religion</i>	
Very important	61.3
Somewhat important	27.5
Not very important	6.3
Not at all important	5.0

So, for example, fully 71.6% of Wisconsin state legislators claim to attend religious services at least several times a month (among the U.S. population as a whole, only about 40% typically report attending services this frequently).<sup>2</sup> Only 9.8% of legislators claim service attendance of once per year or less. In addition, over half (51.2%) report praying once per day or more, and only 7.7% reported never praying. Finally, fully six in ten legislators affirm that religion or spirituality is "very important" in their lives. Adding those who maintain that it is "somewhat important," we find that almost nine in ten legislators (88.8%) report placing at least some importance on religion or spirituality in their own lives. A mere 5% of legislators claim religion or spirituality is "not at all important" to them personally.

These data demonstrate very clearly that, at the level of the individual legislator, religion is present — even if not established — in the Wisconsin statehouse. This raises the question taken up in the following section: Do higher levels of individual religiosity translate into higher levels of access for religious advocacy organizations in the statehouse?

## FINDINGS

Table 3 reports the results of the regression of the religious group access variables on various religious and secular independent variables.

Considering the global contact variable first, the regression analysis contains a number of significant findings. Perhaps not surprisingly, Democrats are less likely to give access to religious groups than Republicans. That this has to do with the alignment of the religious

right with the Republican party is born out when the theological families are disaggregated in the other models. In those models, being a Republican is strongly, positively, and significantly associated with conservative religious organization contacts, but not with liberal religious or Catholic organization contacts.

TABLE 3

STANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS FOR OLS REGRESSION OF RELIGIOUS GROUP ACCESS VARIABLES ON SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES, STANDARD ERRORS IN PARENTHESES (\*  $p < .10$ ;  $n = 73$ )

Variables	Total Religious Organization Contacts	Liberal Religious Organization Contacts	Conservative Religious Organization Contacts	Catholic Organization Contacts
<i>Individual-Level</i>				
Party	-.227	-.068	-.307*	-.090
(Democrat = 1)	(.481)	(.201)	(.247)	(.299)
Age	-.201*	-.102	-.169	-.157
	(.021)	(.009)	(.011)	(.013)
Education	.307*	.265*	-.016	.327*
	(.152)	(.063)	(.078)	(.094)
Gender	-.053	-.137	.029	.016
(female = 1)	(.561)	(.234)	(.288)	(.348)
<i>Personal Religiosity</i>				
Catholic	.026	-.278*	.192	.083
	(.555)	(.232)	(.285)	(.344)
Conservative Protestant	-.036	-.156	.001	.032
	(.711)	(.297)	(.366)	(.442)
Religiosity	.201*	.124	.275*	.104
	(.067)	(.028)	(.035)	(.042)
Constant	1.71	.093	2.03	.590
ADJ-R <sup>2</sup>	.116	.057	.201	.056

Age and education are also significantly related to total religious organization contacts, though they have different valences. Older legislators have less contact with religious organizations, while those with higher levels of education have more contact with them. Why? Perhaps because older legislators have more firmly established political positions and may therefore be seen as a waste of time by lobbyists. Highly educated legislators, by contrast, may be more likely to seek out more and better information from interest groups. Given the liberalizing effect of education, it is not surprising that when the theological families are disaggregated, we see that education is related to contact with liberal religious and Catholic but not conservative religious organizations. It is interesting to note that gender has no significant effect on any of the four dependent variables.

In line with Hertzke's claim that there is a connection between faith and access is the significant positive coefficient for legislator's religiosity in the global contact model. The more salient religion is for an individual legislator, the more contact the legislator is likely to have with religious groups. Religiosity displays a relationship similar to party with these four dependent variables. The disaggregated models show that the effect of religiosity on global access is largely due to its strong, positive relationship to conservative religious organization contacts. However, why should religious salience be associated with conservative religious organization contact, especially when conservative protestant affiliation is not?

To begin, it is important to note that students of religion and politics are increasingly aware that the exclusive use of religious affiliation to predict political behavior is quite problematic and limited. For example, the papers collected in Legee and Kellstedt (1993)

catalog a host of additional, more nuanced ways of measuring religiosity beyond religious affiliation, including devotionalism (e.g., prayer), participation (e.g., service attendance), orthodoxy, biblical literalism, broadly conceived religious tradition or “family,” and salience, among others. Of course, some students of religion have long recognized that religious affiliation is but one of the important dimensions of personal religiosity (see Stark and Glock 1968). Within any given religious tradition, there are consequential differences in religiosity. To take but one example, Kellstedt et al. (1994) document significant differences in political views and voting behavior between all “affiliates” of particular traditions (Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic) and those members who are regular church attenders. Guth and Green (1993: 157) suggest that a general measure of religious salience — i.e., the importance of religion to the individual — may be the core concept in understanding the socio-political impact of religion. They operationalize salience in much the same way as I do here, by creating a “religiosity index” which combines standardized scores for a guidance scale (how much guidance religion provides in day-to-day life), church attendance, and devotional behavior (prayer and Bible reading) (Guth and Green 1993: 168). The index proves to be highly reliable ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and predictive of attitudes on a host of political issues, including abortion, school prayer, capital punishment, AIDS spending, environmental policy, child care, social security, and unions. On all these issues, “high religiosity produces more conservative responses” (Guth and Green 1993: 169). Simply put, those who are “more religious” — i.e., those whose religious salience scores are higher — are more politically conservative. This salience-conservatism nexus, thus, accounts for the connection between religiosity and conservative religious group contact this analysis documents in the Wisconsin state legislature. It also lends support to Hunter’s (1991) argument that the major political divisions today take place *within* rather than *between* various religious traditions.

## DISCUSSION

These analyses confirm Hertzke’s contention that characteristics of legislators — including religious factors — matter for religious group access. But the relationship between faith and access is not the same for all groups. It is strongest for conservative religious groups. This finding once again highlights the tremendous importance of understanding the “religious right” in all aspects of American political life in this time period. For instance, the strategy of the Christian Right to elect religious candidates seems wise in light of this finding. Although access to legislators on the basis of their faith was only positive for conservative religious advocacy organizations, liberal and Catholic organizations did have higher levels of access to legislators with higher levels of education. This is no small consideration given the generally higher levels of education among the leadership and more influential members of the legislature compared to legislators as a whole. For example, while the mean level of education for all legislators is below the bachelor’s degree level (4.86), the mean level of education for legislative officers is above the bachelor’s degree level (5.3) (see Table 1 for coding categories for the education variable). Thus, it is possible that while conservative religious organizations have access to the faithful, liberal and Catholic groups have access to the powerful and are thus (potentially) more influential. Whether access actually translates into influence is a question I consider in a separate analysis (Yamane 1997). Suffice it to say here that in the world of interest group politics, access is a necessary precondition for influence (Wright 1996). Although they do so on different social bases, all three groups of religious advocacy organizations in Wisconsin satisfy that precondition.

A more general lesson of this analysis concerns the instrumentality of legislative decision making. As I extensively review elsewhere (Yamane 1997), students of legislative

behavior have long neglected the religious factor (e.g., Kingdon 1989). Indeed, Hertzke's (1988) and Benson and Williams's (1982) work on the U.S. Congress explicitly challenges this oversight and advances the idea that ignoring the salience of faith in legislators' lives neglects a crucial basis on which they make decisions. Any narrowly utilitarian understanding of the calculus legislators use is thus incomplete at best. Whether scholars who study legislative behavior adopt rational choice assumptions or not, the subjective utility associated with religious faith must play a role in any truly comprehensive model.

Finally, the significance of these findings from Wisconsin warrant further research on these issues in other state legislatures. While every state clearly has its own political culture and traditions which shape the making of public policy by the legislature, Wisconsin possesses some special characteristics which make it one of the better state legislatures to study if a scholar is choosing to study only one. First of all, the Wisconsin legislature ranks twelfth out of fifty states in the level of professionalization, as measured by member's salary, staff, and time spent in session (Squire 1992). Second, the population of Wisconsin — its progressive heritage notwithstanding — is ideologically middling, ranking twenty-second out of forty-nine states in the extent of conservatism as calculated from the percentages of the state's respondents who identified themselves as conservative in a series of surveys (Wright et al. 1985). Finally, considering the overall impact of interest groups on public policy (as compared to other political institutions such as the governor, political parties and the bureaucracy), on a five point scale which ranges from dominant to subordinate, Wisconsin is one of eighteen states which falls in the middle ("complementary") of the scale (Thomas and Hrebener 1990). Thus, while I make no claim that the findings here are simply generalizable to other states, I feel comfortable that the findings will not be heavily shaped by extremes of amateurism, ideology, or general interest group strength/weakness. In the end, I hope this research is suggestive enough to stimulate further research on other state legislatures and legislators, either alone or in comparison with one another.

## NOTES

The research was supported by a grant from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and a fellowship from the Louisville Institute for the Study of American Religion. Intellectual support was provided by Gerald Marwell, Mark Chaves, Mark Suchman, Robert Booth Fowler, Philip Gorski, Charles Camic, Josh Rossol, and Chris Fassnacht. The helpful comments of the *JSSR* Editor and reviewers is appreciated.

<sup>1</sup> A table comparing respondents to the legislature as a whole on these variables is available on the author's world wide web page (<http://www.nd.edu/~dyamane/research/research.html>).

<sup>2</sup> I say "claim" here because I am well aware of the recent studies of church attendance in the United States which have shown that *self-reports* of church attendance may be *double* the actual levels of attendance (see Hadaway et al. 1993). Indeed, the pressure to over-report actual frequency of church attendance may be even more extreme on elected officials in Wisconsin than on the population as a whole. Without directly observing the frequency of church attendance by legislators, we simply cannot know how accurate these self-reports are, and hence no claim is made here that the self-reported level of religious attendance — or prayer for that matter — accurately maps actual attendance (or prayer). What these figures do tell us is whether church attendance is *perceived* by legislators to be important, and that in itself tells us something significant about legislators' religiosity.

## REFERENCES

- Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Benson, Peter, and Dorothy Williams. 1982. *Religion on Capitol Hill: Myths and realities*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

- Gelm, Richard. 1994. *Politics and religious authority: American Catholics since the Second Vatican Council*. Westport, CA: Greenwood Press.
- Guth, James, and John Green. 1993. Saliency: The Core Concept? In *Rediscovering the religious factor in American politics*, edited by David Leege and Lyman Kellstedt, 157–74. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Hadaway, C. Kirk, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves. 1993. What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look At U.S. Church Attendance. *American Sociological Review* 58: 741–52.
- Hertzke, Allen. 1989. The Role of Religious Lobbies. In *Religion in American politics*, edited by Charles Dunn, 123–36. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kellstedt, Lyman, John Green, James Guth, and Corwin Smidt. 1994. Religious voting blocs in the 1992 election: The year of the evangelical? *Sociology of Religion* 55: 307–26.
- Kingdon, John. 1989. *Congressmen's voting decisions*, 3rd edition. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Leege, David, and Lyman Kellstedt. 1993. *Rediscovering the religious factor in American politics*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Roof, Wade Clark, and William McKinney. 1987. *American mainline religion: Its changing shape and future*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Squire, Peverill. 1992. Legislative professionalization and membership diversity in state legislatures. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17: 69–72.
- Stark, Rodney, and Charles Y. Glock. 1968. *American piety: The nature of religious commitment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thomas, Clive, and Ronald Hrebemar. 1990. Interest groups in the states. In *Politics in the American states*, edited by Virginia Gray, Herbert Jacob, and Robert Albritton, 123–58. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Wright, Gerald, Robert Erikson, and John McIver. 1985. Measuring state partisanship and ideology with survey data. *Journal of Politics* 47: 469–89.
- Wright, John R. 1996. *Interest groups and Congress: Lobbying, contributions, and influence*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Yamane, David. 1997. "Religion in the statehouse? Religion and roll call voting in the Wisconsin state legislature." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Toronto, Canada.