

MORE BLESSED TO GIVE: Compassionate conservatives? Research says, 'Yes'

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By Frank Brieaddy

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. (RNS)—Syracuse University professor Arthur Brooks may be the newest darling of the religious right in America—and it's making him nervous. The child of academics, raised in a liberal household and educated in the liberal arts, Brooks has written a book that concludes religious conservatives donate far more money than secular liberals to all sorts of charitable activities, irrespective of income.

In the book, [*Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism*](#), he cites extensive data analysis to demonstrate that values advocated by conservatives—from church attendance and two-parent families to the Protestant work ethic and a distaste for government-funded social services—make conservatives more generous than liberals.

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Brooks

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When it comes to helping the needy, Brooks writes: “For too long, liberals have been claiming they are the most virtuous members of American society. Although they usually give less to charity, they have nevertheless lambasted conservatives for their callousness in the face of social injustice.”

For the record, Brooks, 42, has been registered in the past as a Democrat, then a Republican, but now lists himself as independent, explaining, “I have no comfortable political home.”

Since 2003, he has been director of nonprofit studies for [Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs](#).

Outside professional circles, he’s best known for his regular op-ed columns

in [*The Wall Street Journal*](#) on topics that stray a bit from his philanthropy expertise.

One column noted that people who drink alcohol moderately are more successful and charitable than those—like him—who don't. Another observed that liberals are having fewer babies than conservatives, which will reduce liberals' impact on politics over time because children generally mimic their parents.

Brooks is a behavioral economist by training who researches the relationship between what people do—aside from their paid work—why they do it, and its economic impact.

He's a number cruncher who relied primarily on 10 databases assembled over the past decade, mostly from scientific surveys. The data are adjusted for variables such as age, gender, race and income to draw fine-point conclusions.

His *Wall Street Journal* pieces are researched, but a little light, he admits. His book, on the other hand, is carefully documented to withstand the scrutiny of other academics, which he said he encourages.



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The book's basic findings are that conservatives who practice religion, live in traditional nuclear families and reject the notion that the government should engage in income redistribution are the most generous Americans, by any measure.

In contrast, secular liberals who believe fervently in government entitlement programs give far less to charity. They want everyone's tax dollars to support charitable causes but are reluctant to write checks to those causes, even when governments don't provide them with enough money.

Such an attitude, he writes, not only shortchanges the nonprofits but also diminishes the positive fallout of giving, including personal health, wealth and happiness for the donor and overall economic growth.

All of this, he said, he backs up with statistical analysis.

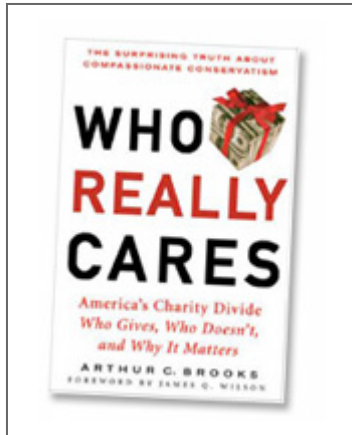
"These are not the sort of conclusions I ever thought I would reach when I started looking at charitable giving in graduate school, 10 years ago," he writes in the introduction. "I have to admit I probably would have hated what I have to say in this book."

Still, he says it forcefully, pointing out that liberals give less than conservatives in every way imaginable, including volunteer hours and donated blood.

In an interview, Brooks said he recognizes the need for government

entitlement programs, such as welfare. But in the book, he finds fault with all sorts of government social spending, including entitlements.

Repeatedly, he cites and disputes a line from a [Ralph Nader speech](#) to the NAACP in 2000: “A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity.”



[Harvey Mansfield](#), professor of government at Harvard University and 2004 recipient of the National Humanities Medal, does not know Brooks personally but has read the book.

“His main finding is quite startling, that the people who talk the most about caring actually fork over the least,” he said. “But beyond this finding, I thought his analysis was extremely good, especially for an economist. He thinks very well about the reason for this and reflects about politics and morals in a way most economists do their best to avoid.”

Brooks started the book as an academic treatise, then tightened the documentation and punched up the prose when his colleagues and editor convinced him it would sell better and generate more discussion if he did.

To make his point forcefully, Brooks admits he cut out a lot of qualifying information.

“I know I’m going to get yelled at a lot with this book,” he said.

“But when you say something big and new, you’re going to get yelled at.”

Frank Brieaddy writes for The Post-Standard of Syracuse, N.Y.

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