

Views of God make Republicans more liberal and Democrats more conservative

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WACO—Republicans who perceive God as highly engaged with humanity are like Democrats when it comes to social and economic justice issues, and Democrats who see God as a strict judge are like Republicans on retributive justice issues, according to a Baylor University study.

“Partisanship explains only so much. Images of God reveal deep moral perspectives that affect the ways in which Americans understand justice, so much so that they can blur the lines of partisan politics,” said researcher Robert Thomson, a postdoctoral research fellow at Rice University.

Thomson and Paul Froese, Baylor professor of sociology, wrote “God, Party and the Poor: How Politics and Religion Interact to Affect Economic Justice Attitudes,” published in the journal *Sociological Forum*.

In previous research, Thomson and Froese found Republicans and Democrats who believe God is highly judgmental tend to agree about issues of retributive justice, such as capital punishment.

“Liberals with a ‘strict father’ image of God are more inclined to support harsher criminal punishments and military solutions to foreign conflicts because they adhere to a theology of retribution and just deserts,” Froese said. “It appears that Americans who see God as wrathful are quicker to support policies which seek an eye-for-an-eye outcome.”

In the latest round of research, Froese and Thomson found Republicans who view God as actively involved in the world tend to support more

generous welfare policies, in opposition to their party's platform.

"Conservatives who feel close to God tend to go to church more, volunteer more, but also are more likely to want help from the government to take care of the poor," Froese said. "Republicans with a distant God tend to be less compassionate."

Froese and Thomson used data from the 2007 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey, a national cross-sectional survey developed by Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and administered by the Gallup Organization. The sample size was 1,588 respondents, excluding atheists because they did not have an image of God to compare with other respondents' perceptions. The group's makeup included 41 percent Republicans, 37 percent Democrats and 22 percent Independent.

Respondents were asked:

- Whether the federal government should distribute wealth more evenly and improve the standard of living for ethnic minorities, with responses on each ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," as well as "undecided." The research found that 50.3 percent affirmed distribution of wealth, while 49.6 affirmed standard of living for ethnic minorities.
- How important it is to seek social and economic justice and take care of the sick and needy if one wishes to be a good person, selecting from answers ranging from "not important" to "very important." Results showed that 39.1 percent affirmed "seek justice," while 62 percent affirmed care for the sick and needy.
- What traits God possesses, with the options being options being distant, ever present, removed from the world, concerned with the world's well-being, concerned with personal well-being, directly involved in worldly affairs and differently involved in personal

affairs.

Additionally, respondents were asked to respond to how religious they were on a four-point scale. They also were asked how frequently they attended religious services, with answers ranging zero (“Never”) to 8 (“Several times a week”).

Researchers noted that typically, Republicans are consistently and distinctly more conservative on both issues of social justice and retributive justice than Democrats. Put simply, conservatism predicts negative views towards social justice, specifically (1) distributing wealth more evenly, (2) improving the standard of living for ethnic minorities, (3) seeking social and economic justice and (4) taking care of the sick and needy.

Conservatism also predicts positive attitudes towards retributive justice, specifically, (1) keeping the death penalty, (2) expanding authority to fight terrorism, (3) punishing criminals more harshly and (4) affirming the importance of serving in the military.

While the GOP opposes efforts to distribute wealth more evenly through taxation and welfare programs, some Republicans feel a personal obligation to assist in nongovernmental ways, researchers said. Because Republicans are more likely to be active Christians than Democrats when it comes to affiliating with a church, they are more likely to donate time and money to charity than more secular Americans.

“Republicans with a deeply engaged God are consistently liberal on issues of social justice,” Froese said. “And Democrats with a highly judgmental God are consistently conservative on issues of retributive justice.”