



What drives charitable donations of time and money? The roles of political ideology, religiosity, and involvement

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ABSTRACT

We use data from the first wave of the *Panel Study on American Religion and Ethnicity* to estimate a multivariate sample selection model of charitable giving of time and money highlighting the roles of political ideology, religiosity, political and social involvement, and diversity in personal relationships while controlling for other factors commonly identified in the scholarly work on philanthropic behavior. Our findings provide no evidence that political conservatives are more charitable than political liberals as advanced by Brooks (2006). To the contrary, our results suggest that at least in terms of volunteering, political conservatives are less charitable than political liberals. We also find evidence that the adverse impacts of political conservatism on charitable behavior are exacerbated by the increasing importance of religion/religious faith in one's life. These results, together with robust findings of significant and positive independent effects of other participation, involvement, and diversity variables, imply that charitable actions are both practice-driven and ideology-driven and somewhat at odds with the findings of Vaidyanathan et al. (2011).

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1. Introduction

The publication of *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism* by Arthur C. Brooks in 2006 sparked a debate regarding the importance of political conservatism to the philanthropic behavior of the American populace. Brooks, a researcher who has authored and co-authored numerous scholarly papers on the factors affecting charitable donations of time and money, relied on ten databases the most important of which included the General Social Survey, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, Giving USA, and Giving and Volunteering in the United States. In Appendix, Brooks provides the important details of all the databases and the statistical analyses leading to his findings. By and large, he estimates models of monetary giving and volunteering with controls for political ideology, religious attendance, and commonly used socioeconomic and demographic characteristics using standard probit and Tobit techniques. His main conclusion that politically conservative individuals are more charitable than liberals does not rest on the virtues of conservatism per se. It results because the forces

which drive charitable behavior—religion, skepticism of government redistributive programs, strong two-parent families, and personal entrepreneurship—are more consistent with the worldview and lifestyles of conservatives rather than liberals.

Ironically, previous research by Brooks provides only mixed evidence on his “surprising truth”. In particular, Brooks (2004) reports estimates that suggest overall money donations rise comparably for conservatives and liberals but that liberals volunteer more than conservatives. Brooks (2005) provides evidence that religious gifts increase (decrease) for conservatives (liberals) but secular gifts are unaffected by both. Recently, Forbes and Zampelli (2013) have provided fairly strong evidence that the levels of religious giving by very conservative individuals are higher than for any other ideological group. This does not, however, extend to secular giving where it is moderately liberal individuals who give more than others. The authors also find that those who identify themselves as Republican give more to both religious and secular causes than those who identify themselves as Democrat. If one is willing to tie Republican Party affiliation to political conservatism and Democratic Party affiliation to political liberalism, then the latter finding is also supportive of Brooks’ surprising finding.

Motivated by recent work in cultural sociology and social psychology that emphasizes the causal importance of practices rather than ideas in stimulating action (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny, 2001; Swidler, 2001; Lizardo and Strand, 2010), Vaidyanathan, Hill,

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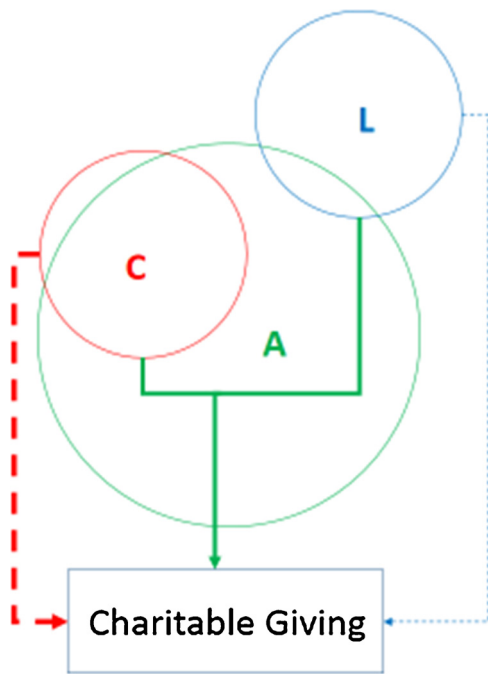


Fig. 1. C: conservative population, L: liberal population, A: activities promoting charitable behavior.

and Smith (2011) address the question of whether political ideology has a direct effect on charitable giving or whether its effect is “largely mediated by active participation in religious and civic associations?”. In particular, if political conservatives are more likely than political liberals to participate regularly in worship services and other religious activities that advance/reinforce the habit of charitable giving, then political conservatives will be observed to be more charitable than political liberals. Practice theorists, however, would argue that it is not the difference in ideologies that causes the difference in charitable giving, but rather the difference in the practices of conservatives and liberals.¹ This implies that conservatives and liberals who participate regularly in activities that promote charitable behavior will behave similarly in terms of charitable giving, *ceteris paribus*. Correspondingly, conservatives who participate regularly in activities that promote charitable behavior will give more to private charity, *ceteris paribus*, than conservatives who do not.

Fig. 1 illustrates the basic premise. Circles C and L represent the conservative and liberal populations, respectively, while circle A represents the set of activities that promote/reinforce charitable behavior. Note that the intersection of C and A is larger than the intersection of L and A. If one ignores the difference in overlaps and measures charitable giving directly from the ideological circles, conservative contributions will be greater than liberal contributions, represented by the heavier dashed arrow from the circle C than from circle L. Practice theory argues that if one controls for the overlaps, then the charitable giving of conservatives and liberals will be comparable. This is represented by the lines from the

A–C and A–L intersections coming together to form the solid arrow that represents the resulting comparable charitable giving.

Using data from the *Panel Study on American Ethnicity and Religion* (PS-ARE), Vaidyanathan et al. (2011) estimate separate Tobit models for three categories of charitable giving: monetary donations to local religious congregations, to religiously affiliated charitable organizations, and to non-congregational and non-religious charitable organizations. Their findings indicate a positive and significant impact of political conservatism on giving to religious congregations and religious organizations *only in the absence of religiosity variables*. When controlling for the frequency of attendance at religious services, however, all statistically significant independent effects of political conservatism on monetary donations disappear. They report robust evidence of positive and significant impacts of greater civic involvement on monetary donations for all three philanthropic categories. The authors conclude that “. . . it is inaccurate to argue that conservative beliefs necessarily make people more generous or that liberal beliefs make people less generous; rather, among conservatives and liberals alike, it is the regular involvement in religious, political, and civic practices that explains differences in generosity” (Vaidyanathan et al., 2011, p. 467).

Though the findings of Vaidyanathan et al. (2011) might serve to temper the conclusions drawn from Brooks (2006) and his most ardent supporters, e.g., Willett (2007), along with those of Forbes and Zampelli (2013), there are elements of the empirical methodology that are a bit troublesome and consequently cast some doubt regarding reliability of their statistical estimates and inferences. At a minimum, the reported estimates may suffer from statistical inefficiencies due to the estimation of separate Tobit models by category of donation rather than a seemingly unrelated regression approach along the lines of Brown and Lankford (1992) or Andreoni, Gale, and Scholz (1996) to account for the possible correlations among error terms and, for that matter, for interactions among categories of donation.² More seriously, however, the Tobit specification, though widely used in applications where the dependent variable takes on zero values for a non-negligible portion of the sample, presumes that the stochastic process which determines the level of giving also determines the choice of whether to give or not (Tobin, 1958). As shown in the Appendix, variables having positive (negative) impacts on donation levels are forced to have positive (negative) impacts on the probabilities of donating. Furthermore, the relative effects of two continuous explanatory variables on the probability, conditional mean, and unconditional mean of the dependent variable are identical and equal to the ratio of the corresponding coefficients. Such presumptions are questionable in the context of charitable donations.³ Recent studies by Forbes and Zampelli (2011, 2013) using data from the Independent Sector's 2001 *Giving and Volunteering Survey* and the 2006 *Social Capital Community Survey*, respectively, provide formal hypothesis tests which demonstrate the general superiority of sample selection models, e.g., Cragg's (1971) ‘single-hurdle’ model and Heckman's (1979) bivariate selection model, over Tobit specifications for both time and money donations. Suggestive of this are the differences in the results of Vaidyanathan et al. (2011) and Forbes and Zampelli (2013). In the former, inclusion of religiosity variables

¹ Empirical support for questioning the motivational force of ideas/values can be found in studies that provide evidence that individuals who profess the same ideas/values often engage in very different types of behaviors (Hart, 1992) and that individuals are frequently incapable of providing any ideological basis for their actions (Chaves, 2010). That said, most practice theorists would not discard completely a motivational role for ideas/values, but rather view their role as more contingent and situation-specific (Vaisey, 2009).

² In those specifications where the authors include category *j* donations as an explanatory variable in the equation for category *i* donations, correlations between the error terms make the more serious problem of simultaneous equations bias likely.

³ For example, when using sample selection models Forbes and Zampelli (2011) find that though males are less likely to volunteer than females, males volunteer more hours than females. Such conflicting effects on probabilities and levels are disallowed within a Tobit framework.

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