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Impact of Religion and Politics on Pro-Environmental Behavior and Views about Climate Change

Desiree Clemons

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to analyze how religion and politics impact peoples' opinions about climate change and likeliness to engage in pro-environmental behavior. The study conducted was a non-experimental, correlational research design, using a survey methodology. Fifty-eight participants, all over the age of 18, were recruited to participate in this study. The participants were asked to complete five questionnaires: *The Centrality of Religiosity Scale* (CRS) (Huber & Huber, 2012), *The Climate Change Attitude Survey* (CCAS) (Christensen & Knezek, 2015), *The Political Participation Scale* (PPS), *The Environmental Behavior Scale* (EBS), and a demographic questionnaire. Two research hypotheses guided this study. The first predicted that there is a significant negative relationship between conservative religious ideologies and environmental concern. The second predicted that there is a significant negative relationship between conservative political ideologies and environmental concern. Neither hypothesis yielded statistically significant results. However, interesting findings included a statistically significant, weak positive correlation between scores of political liberalism and environmental concern. In other words, as political liberalism went up, environmental concern went up. There was not a statistically significant difference between high scores of religious liberalism and environmental concern. The topic of how ideologies like religion and politics impact pro-environmental behavior and climate change views is important because it can help shed light on what drives climate change skepticism and willingness to engage in pro-environmental behavior.

Since the late 19th century, the average surface temperature of the earth has risen 2.05 degrees Fahrenheit (NASA, 2020). Around 97% of actively publishing climate scientists agree there is a strong probability that climate-warming trends over the past century are due to human activities (Cook et al., 2016). Scientists predict that the impact of climate change will get progressively worse if carbon emissions are not reduced (NASA, 2021). Despite this information, however, some Americans remain skeptical about climate change, and just below half of the population still rejects the evidence that scientists are in agreement about climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2019).

Specifically, climate change refers to a long-term change in the average weather patterns that have come to define Earth's local, regional and global climates (NASA, 2022). Threats posed by climate change include increased drought, storms, heat waves,

ocean warming, glacial retreat, rising sea levels, deforestation, and more. These effects directly harm animals, destroy habitats, and distress many communities (WWF, n.d.). The fight against climate change requires people to recognize it as a problem and understand the way it affects the planet. The purpose of this study was to explore how political and religious views impact peoples' opinions on climate change and influence engagement in pro-environmental behavior. If the motivation behind pro-environmental behavior is understood, perhaps it can be encouraged. This research could benefit the general public, since climate change affects everyone. This study could also benefit future researchers who are interested in this topic and seek to add to the discussion.

The following literature review provides a background for the current study by evaluating the recent information on the variables that influence views on climate change and engagement in pro-environmental behavior. This literature review is organized using a thematic principle and uses the following headings: Religious Impact, Political Impact and Where Religion and Politics Intersect. The majority of the sources cited in this literature review are peer-reviewed and were collected using EBSCO-Host through the McKee Library. A few other sources were collected from government websites for basic definitions of certain terms. The key terms used to locate sources were *climate change*, *environmental behavior*, *pro-environmental behavior*, *views on climate change*, *political affiliation*, and *religious affiliation*.

Religious Impact

Religion has been frequently referenced in the climate change debate for its influence on climate change views. The articles examined in this literature review will focus on specifically Christianity's influence on climate change views and pro-environmental behavior. Researchers have continued to report that major Christian traditions, particularly those that are theologically conservative, generally express less concern about the environment compared to nonreligious people (Clements, 2014). In addition, a Pew Research Center (2015) study found that people unaffiliated with religion were more likely than those affiliated with religion to agree that global warming is occurring. This varied, however, depending on age, race, and other demographic factors. Results from studies that analyzed how religion shapes environmental concern showed that religion may promote pro-environmental behavior amongst members when it cultivates value based environmental beliefs, such as stewardship or self-sacrifice, along with habit-based practices. However, participants reported that neither the environment, nor environmental action was frequently talked about by religious leaders when addressing their congregations (Baylor, 2015; Jones, 2014; Vaidyanathan, 2018). Furthermore, Vaidyanathan (2018) found evidence that religion may inhibit environmental concern when respondents believe environmental commitment conflicts with their religious commitment.

Religious Impact on Confidence in Scientific Consensus

A separate, but important component of the climate change debate is whether human activity or natural causes are to blame. Cook et al. (2016) reports that about 97% of actively publishing climate scientists agree that climate change trends over the past century are likely due to human activity. The level of confidence in scientific

information on climate change may influence views on climate change and pro-environmental behavior. According to a study by Pew Research (2015), 42% of frequent churchgoers said climate change was caused mainly by human activity, compared with 53% among those who attend services less regularly. The same study reported that over a third of evangelical Christians stated they believe there is “no solid evidence” that climate change is happening (Pew Research, 2015). Pew (2015) also reported that views about climate change vary by specific religious affiliation as well as race and other factors.

Political Impact

Views on climate change have become more and more influenced by political affiliation. Political ideologies have a reported influence on people’s views on climate change and environmental behavior (Funk & Hefferon, 2020; Mildenerger 2017; Jones, 2014; Pew Research, 2019). Various studies have observed that the relationship between the climate change debate and political affiliation is influenced by increasing political polarization (Chinn et al., 2020; Pew Research Center, 2016b). Results from the Gallup polls show that political polarization on global warming beliefs increased rapidly from 1997 to 2008 (Dunlap, 2008). Since then, political polarization has nearly tripled. Recent studies have shown that 80% of Americans report unfavorable feelings towards the opposing political party (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). In accordance, a study looking at American’s views on climate change from 1994 to 2016 reported that views once shaped by sociodemographic predictors such as age, education, income, sex, race, or size of residential area are now better explained by variables of political affiliation (Driscoll, 2019). This suggests that polarization and its impact on how people think about certain issues has increased. The literature shows that Democrats and political liberals tend to express more concern about climate change, and that there is a strong consensus among them that the government needs to do more to reduce the effects of climate change. Republicans and political conservatives in general are more divided along ideological, generational and gender lines, but overall tend to be less concerned about and more skeptical of climate change (Arbuckle, 2017; Mildenerger 2017; Jones, 2014; Pew Research, 2019).

Political Impact on Confidence in Scientific Consensus

The level of confidence in scientific information on climate change may influence views on climate change and environmental behavior. Jones (2014) reported that about 61% of Democrats believe scientists generally agree that humans are responsible for rising global temperatures, in contrast with only 34% of Republicans. This suggests that Democrats may be more likely to place confidence in scientific consensus about climate change than Republicans. Similarly, Pew Research (2016) gathered that 13% of conservative Republicans agreed with the scientific consensus that climate change is largely due to human activity in contrast with 55% of Democratic liberals. The gap between moderate Democrats and Republicans was much narrower, placing Republicans at 16% and Democrats at 29%. This suggests that Democrats may be less likely than Republicans to be skeptical about the scientific consensus on climate change.

Where Religion and Politics Intersect

The literature mentioned in the above paragraphs suggests that religion and politics influence how people view climate change. Researchers have sought to determine where the two variables intersect. Gerber et al. (2016) reported a positive association between attending religious services and political participation. This suggests that the two variables may have an influence on each other. Building on this, Hirschl et al., (2009) concluded that there is a link between political behavior and religious identity, but that the impact of religious identity depends on an individual's race, class, and gender. This suggests that although the two variables may influence each other, other variables may mediate that influence. Similarly, McCarthy et al. (2019) concluded that when controlled for demographic variables, important differences in religio-political identification among religious affiliations were very small for every affiliation except evangelical protestants. Evangelical Protestants were found to be significantly more likely to identify with the religious right (McCarthy et al, 2019). Researchers observed that church attendance and religious embeddedness, instead of religious affiliation, had a more powerful influence on political identification. Individuals who reported low levels of religious participation were the least likely to identify with either the left or the right (Hirschl, 2009, McCarthy et al., 2019). This may be because individuals who prioritize religious participation become a part of a social network of fellow believers, which may have a greater influence on ideology. Furthermore, Arbuckle (2017) reported that religious affiliation has the most impact on political liberals, with very little impact on conservatives. It was theorized that this may be because where a political policy conflicts with religious beliefs, an otherwise political liberal might take a less liberal position, which in this case would be less concern about climate change.

Critique of the Literature

The biggest limitation of the literature was the lack of studies combining information on the influence of both political and religious affiliation on climate change views specifically. Other limitations were that some of the studies included sample sizes that were smaller than desired and did not include enough representation of ethnic, age, and gender diversity so that their impact could be properly observed. Overall, the literature supports that both political affiliation and religious affiliation influence views about climate change and engagement in pro-environmental behavior. Research also supports that politics and religion influence each other and, more specifically, the ideologies held within each group. However, more research needs to be done in order to observe the strength of this influence as well as what other variables impact this influence.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore how religious and political views impact peoples' opinions on climate change and likeliness to engage in pro-environmental behavior.

Subproblems

Five problems guided this study:

1. The first subproblem examined the relationship between conservative

religious ideologies and environmental concern.

2. The second subproblem examined the relationship between conservative political ideologies and environmental concern.

3. The third subproblem examined climate change views and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of religious affiliation.

4. The fourth subproblem examined climate change views and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of political affiliation.

5. The fifth subproblem examined climate change perspectives and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of religiosity.

6. The sixth subproblem examined climate change perspectives and environmental behavior differences as a function of political participation.

Hypotheses

Two research hypotheses guided this study:

1. There is a significant negative relationship of conservative religious ideologies in correlation with environmental concern.

2. There is a significant negative relationship of conservative political ideologies in correlation with environmental concern.

Research Questions

Four research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Are there climate change perspectives and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of religious affiliation?

2. Are there climate change perspectives and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of political affiliation?

3. Are there climate change perspectives and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of religiosity?

4. Are there climate change perspectives and pro-environmental behavior differences as a function of political participation?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are operationally defined for this study:

1. Participants' average level of religiosity was self-reported using a modified questionnaire consisting of questions from *The Centrality of Religiosity Scale* (CRS) (Huber & Huber, 2012). Items on this questionnaire were measured on a 5-point Likert scale indicating how often they participated in a certain religious behavior or to what extent they agreed with a statement. For example, one item asked, "To what extent do you believe that God or something divine exists?" Also, the demographic questionnaire included an item asking what religion, if any, the participants identify with. For example, 1 = *Christian*, 2 = *Jewish*, 3 = *Muslim*, 4 = *Buddhist*, 5 = *Hindu*, 6 = *Unaffiliated*, 7 = *Agnostic*, 8 = *Atheist*, and 9 = *Other*. It also contained an item asking them how conservative or liberal they consider themselves. For example, 1 = *very conservative*, 2 = *slightly conservative*, 3 = *slightly liberal*, and 4 = *very liberal*.

2. Participants' average level of political participation was measured using *The Political Participation Scale*, which was created by the researcher. The questionnaire included questions such as, "I voted in the last national election," to which participants

were to respond 1 = *no*, or 2 = *yes*. Also, the demographic questionnaire included an item asking what political party they best identify with. For example, 1 = *Republican*, 2 = *Democrat*, and 3 = *Independent*. It also contained an item asking them how conservative or liberal they consider themselves. For example, 1 = *very conservative*, 2 = *slightly conservative*, 3 = *slightly liberal*, and 4 = *very liberal*.

3. Participants' average level of engagement in pro-environmental behavior was self-reported using a questionnaire that was created by the researcher. The survey included questions such as: "I make an effort to recycle properly," to which participants answered, 5 = *always*, 4 = *usually*, 3 = *sometimes*, 2 = *rarely*, and 1 = *never*.

4. Participants' average climate change views were self-reported using a modified questionnaire consisting of questions from *The Climate Change Attitude Survey (CCAS)* (Christensen & Knezek, 2015). The survey included questions such as, "I am concerned about global climate change. Items on this questionnaire were measured on a 5-point Likert scale indicating to what extent participants agree with a statement: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *undecided*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

5. Gender was measured using a portion of the demographic questionnaire that was created by the researcher. For example, 1 = *male*, 2 = *female* and 3 = *other*.

6. Race was measured using a portion of the demographic questionnaire that was created by the researcher. For example, 1 = *White*, 2 = *Black or African American*, 3 = *Hispanic or Latino*, 4 = *Asian*, 5 = *American Indian or Alaska Native*, 6 = *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander*, and 7 = *Other*.

7. Age was measured using a portion of the demographic questionnaire that was created by the researcher. For example, 1 = *18-25*, 2 = *26-35*, 3 = *36-45*, 4 = *46-60*, and 5 = *61 or older*.

8. Level of education was measured using a demographic questionnaire that was created by the researcher. For example, 1 = *Grade School*, 2 = *High School Diploma or Equivalent*, 3 = *Associate degree*, 4 = *Bachelor's degree*, 5 = *Master's degree*, and 6 = *Doctoral degree*.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This was a limited study on the impact of political and religious affiliation on pro-environmental behavior. There were 3 major limitations in this study:

1. This study utilized self-report questionnaires. Therefore, there is a possibility that participants may not have answered with full honesty.

2. Given the time constraints and lack of resources for this study, the sample size was small and thus less representative of the population.

3. This was neither a comprehensive nor exhaustive study on the impact of political and religious affiliation on environmental behavior.

Assumptions of Study

Three assumptions were made explicit in this study:

1. This study has scientific merit.

2. The timeframe for completing this project is adequate.

3. Participants have a sincere interest in participating in the research study.

Importance of the Study

The topic of how ideologies like religious and political affiliation impact environmental behavior and climate change views is important because it will help shed light on what drives climate change skepticism. This subject is becoming increasingly more relevant. Scientists predict that the impact of climate change will get progressively worse if carbon emissions are not reduced (Leiserowitz et al., 2019). If the factors that make people reluctant to engage in environmental behavior are understood, perhaps they can be motivated otherwise. Climate change affects everyone, so this study could benefit the general public as well as future researchers who seek to build upon the information.

Methods

Participants

Fifty-eight participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Each participant was at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited through social media, specifically Reddit and Instagram. The social media platform Reddit was used in order to reach a wider range of participants with differing religious and political ideologies. All participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Materials

The instruments used for this research study included *The Centrality of Religiosity Scale* (CRS) (Huber & Huber, 2012), and *The Climate Change Attitude Survey* (CCAS) (Christensen & Knezek, 2015). In addition, a demographic questionnaire was created by the researcher to measure level of education, race, gender, age, political affiliation, and religious affiliation. A questionnaire measuring political participation (PPS) and a questionnaire measuring environmental behavior (EBS) were also created by the researcher. Each of these questionnaires was measured using a self-report method. The participants answered questions regarding their religious and political affiliation, levels of religiosity and political participation, environmental behavior, and views about climate change in order to determine the relationships among all six variables. The CRS had a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.96. The CCAS had a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.91. The EBS had a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.85. The PPS had a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.79.

Design and Procedure

This study is a descriptive non-experimental correlational research design using a survey methodology. Fifty-eight participants, ages 18 or older participated and filled out the given questionnaires. Participants were recruited through the social media platforms Instagram and Reddit. The researcher posted an explanation of the study with a link to the questionnaire, which included a more detailed explanation and informed consent. The researcher's email was included in the explanation of the study in order to be able to answer any general questions that potential participants had, as long as they did not compromise the possible results of the study.

The questionnaire contained questions from a demographic questionnaire created by the researcher regarding gender, race, and religious and political affiliation. It also contained questions from an environmental behavior scale and a political participation scale created by the researcher. In addition, it contained questions from *The Centrality of Religiosity Scale* (CRS) (Huber & Huber, 2012) and *The Climate Change Attitude Survey* (CCAS) (Christensen & Knezek, 2015). The data was then gathered, scored, coded, and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data was scored, coded, and entered into SPSS. Next, statistical analyses were run to test the hypothesis and answer the research questions. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all the major variables in the study. Pearson's r , one-way ANOVA, and a post-hoc were used to analyze the hypothesis and research questions.

Results

The study consisted of 58 participants (27 men, 29 women, and 2 identifying as other). Religiosity had an overall average of 57.60 ($SD = 16.05$). The average score for Political Participation was 15.38 ($SD = 2.83$). See Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Scores on the CRS and PPS

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Centrality of Religiosity Scale	57.60	16.05
Political Participation Scale	15.38	2.83

Hypotheses

A Pearson's r was conducted to analyze if there was a correlation between political liberalism and environmental concern. There was a statistically significant correlation between higher scores of political liberalism and higher environmental concern [$r(58) = .310, p = .018$]. This means that as liberalism went up, environmental concern went up. However, this is only a moderate correlation, and more research is needed. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to analyze if there were differences between levels of religious liberalism and environmental concern. There was not a statistically significant difference between higher scores of religious liberalism and environmental concern [$F(4,52) = 2.403, p = .061$]. Therefore, the results are inconclusive, and more research is needed.

Religiosity and Environmental Concern

A Pearson's r was used to determine if there was a correlation between level of religiosity and environmental concern. There was a non-significant, weak negative correlation between levels of religiosity and environmental concern [$r(58) = -.124, p = .352$]. As religiosity went up, environmental concern went down (though not

significantly). Since the correlation was not statistically significant, the results were inconclusive, and more research is needed.

Political Participation and Environmental Concern

A Pearson's r was used to analyze if there was a correlation between level of political participation and environmental concern. The analysis showed a statistically significant correlation between higher scores of political participation and environmental concern [$r(58) = .273, p = .038$]. As political participation went up, environmental concern went up. However, this was only a moderate correlation, so more research is needed.

Political Affiliation and Environmental Concern

A one-way ANOVA was run to determine the differences in pro-environmental behavior as a function of political affiliation. There was a statistically significant difference between participants' political affiliation and their scores on the EBS, [$F(2,54) = 3.417, p < .05$]. The post-hoc showed that Republicans ($M = 37.38$) scored significantly lower, on average, than Democrats ($M = 46.80$) and Independents ($M = 47.48$).

Religious Affiliation and Environmental Concern

A one-way ANOVA was run to determine the differences in the combined CCS and EBS as a function of religious affiliation. There was a statistically significant difference between religious affiliation and scores on the CCS [$F(5,52) = 2.516, p < .05$]. Unfortunately, there was a group with less than two responses so a post-hoc could not be run on the differences. Future research should expand the sample size to ensure there is enough variation to allow a post-hoc to provide accurate information on the difference between the various religious affiliations.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how ideologies of religion and politics impact peoples' opinions on climate change and engagement in pro-environmental behavior. Neither hypothesis was statistically significant. There was a weak positive relationship between political participation and environmental concern. As political participation went up, environmental concern went up. There was a weak negative relationship between religiosity and environmental concern. As religiosity went up, environmental concern went down. Since both these relationships failed to be statistically significant, no clear conclusions can be drawn about the correlation. There was a statistically significant difference between political affiliation and pro-environmental behavior. Results showed that Republicans ($M = 37.38$) scored significantly lower, on average, than Democrats ($M = 46.80$) and Independents ($M = 47.48$), [$F(2,54) = 3.417, p < .05$]. This suggests that Republicans are less concerned about the environment compared to other major political affiliates. There was also a statistically significant difference between religious affiliation and scores on the CCS. This provides some evidence that type of religious affiliation impacts level of environmental concern. However, since there was a group with less than two responses, a post-hoc could not be run to provide further insight into the differences. Larger sample sizes could be helpful in determining more significant findings. The results of this study were largely in accordance with the

current literature. The literature found that Republicans are generally less concerned about climate change. It also found that environmental concern tends to vary across religions.

Limitations and Weaknesses

The greatest limitation of this study was a small sample size. This could play a role in why the results were not found to be statistically significant. Another limitation was lack of diversity amongst responses. For instance, there were not many participants from the Republican party, and many participants filled out “Independent” for affiliation, which limited understanding of ideology. Furthermore, there was not enough diversity amongst age groups. Most reported they were ages 18-25. Race and level of education also showed a lack of diversity. Another limitation was potential sampling bias because social media platforms were used to recruit participants. This information could benefit future researchers, as well as people in general, who seek to understand what makes people doubt climate change and fail to participate in pro-environmental behavior. Future research could include a larger sample size, more regions of the country, and greater diversity among participants in terms of religious and political affiliation, race, age, and level of education.

Importance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how different ideologies impact peoples’ opinions on climate change and mediate their impulse to engage in pro-environmental behavior. If the motivation behind environmental action is understood, perhaps it can be encouraged. This study suggests that certain political affiliations could increase climate change skepticism by association. It adds support to the idea that climate change has become a topic affected by political polarization.

Furthermore, it supports the idea that religion can impact likelihood to engage in pro-environmental behavior and that it has the potential to either increase or decrease environmental concern depending on affiliation. This research opens new questions about how religion and politics shape environmental concern and how that impact is mediated by other variables.

Agenda for Future Research

Future research should use a larger sample size to measure how different variables factor into environmental concern. A larger sample size could result in greater diversity across all demographic responses in order to better represent the population and gather more insight into how the different variables function. There should also be a better scale used to measure political participation, preferably one not created by the researcher. Another adjustment could be how political affiliation was measured. A multiple-choice question of Republican, Democrat, or Independent resulted in too many responses for Independent, thus limiting insight. A Likert scale could have functioned as a better measure. Future research could also look more in depth at how different religious affiliations vary in environmental concern, as well as how level of religiosity mediates that concern. This would require more diversity amongst religious affiliations and a greater sample size.

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