

Assessing public support for International Religious Freedom: Evidence from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey

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Abstract

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) provides the U.S. government with additional tools and information in order to promote the rights of religious minorities around the world. In addition to mandating annual reporting from the State Department, the law created an independent watchdog agency to monitor religious freedom around the world and provides the executive with additional sanction powers for states which abuse religious minorities. Little is known, however, about the scope and intensity of American knowledge and support for these policies. Most studies to date have focused on the influence of religious affiliation (using the tri-partite schema of “believing,” “belonging,” and “behaving”) on respondent preferences for discrete US policies. This paper investigates the contours of American public opinion on international religious freedom. It relies on original data from the 2018 CCES survey and attempts to identify the level of support for international religious freedom among the American electorate. The data suggest that many respondents are unaware of the law. But among those who are knowledgeable about the scope of IRFA, support for international religious freedom remains strong. The data also suggest that US respondents who believe US-China competition is among the most important national security concerns are among the most likely to believe that IRFA policies strengthen US national security.

Introduction

In 1998, the US Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), by overwhelming margins, which provided the President of the United States broad powers to defend international religious freedom in US foreign policy.¹ Since then, the law has been modified several times, including as recently as 2016 when a Republican controlled Congress passed—

1. US Pub. Law 105–292, October 27, 1998.

and a Democratic President signed—provisions that added atheism as one of the protected religious classes and elevated the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom to report directly to the Secretary of State. The provisions of IRFA mandated that the State Department produce annual reporting on the status of religious freedom for every country in the world. Moreover, IRFA established the US Commission on International Religious Freedom which is tasked, among other things, with evaluating and critiquing the State Department’s report from the previous year. As recently as 2018, the US State Department held the first ever ministerial—a high level diplomatic conference—on international religious freedom, and held the second the following year.

Given the long history of religion and politics in American history (Morone 2004), and given the breadth of international engagement in US foreign policy (Snyder 2018), none of those developments are all that surprising. What is surprising, however, is how little is known about public attitudes about these policies. To date, no extant study has undertaken to study what Americans actually think about *international* religious freedom, and whether they approve, disapprove, or don’t care about their government’s pursuit of these ends. The US is unique in this regard. For although nearly every developed country in the world has an office of international human rights, only the United States has office inside its foreign affairs institutions for both international religious freedom and human rights. Maintaining two such offices raises internal costs, and congress could easily have subordinated or collapsed the two. Even a casual glance at these empirical facts suggests that there is a genuine interest in US politics to make international religious freedom a core objective of US foreign policy.

This paper explores the link between public knowledge and support for international religious freedom. Testing the American electorate on this issue is a first step for the larger religious freedom field because of the magnitude of influence the US has on global affairs. The original data for this project are drawn from a survey in the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES). The data find that traditional predictors of respondent attitudes such as gender, education, and partisanship influence support for international religious

freedom foreign policy. Support is also found among those who tend to be more religious, and those who think long-term competition with China is the most important foreign policy issue in the US.

Literature Review

International Religious Freedom as policy objective in US foreign policy

Even a cursory reading of the history of US foreign relations reveals a tight coupling of religion and politics. What has remained less well understood is the inverse of that relationship, namely, the independent influence of foreign policy decision-making on religion, religious freedom, and related ideas. Although the passage of IRFA suggests that religious freedom foreign policy emerged late in America history, policy antecedents can be found throughout the twentieth century and even into the nineteenth. As Philip Hamburger (2002) demonstrates, Americans used to think of religious freedom narrowly in the nineteenth century, then, the twentieth century public beliefs toward religion became more inclusive, first for Catholics, then Jews, then others (Hamburger 2002).² One important watershed in the 20th century development of US foreign policy and religious freedom occurred during the American annexation of the Philippines. President William McKinley's justification for annexing the Philippines was, in part, framed as Christian duty to evangelize, but then American policy-makers were faced with the task of ensuring religious freedom for Muslims and Catholics against indigenous violence (Preston 2012, 207–32; Su 2016, 11–35). Other such junctures can be found, such as Woodrow Wilson's (eventually aborted) effort to add a religious freedom clause in the League of Nations Charter (Su 2016, 46–47).

But it was the Cold War which transformed religious freedom and elevated its role to

2. The constitutional jurisprudence of the First Amendment is a crucial piece to understanding American attitudes about religion. As Hamburger notes, the "Standard History" begins with a letter by Thomas Jefferson's Jefferson (1802) to the Danbury Baptists, a letter which is something on the level of American myth, but which still sets the tone for Americans thinking on the separation between church and state. James Madison's (1785) "Memorial and Remonstrance" is also important. There, the "Father of the Constitution," argued two years before the 1787 Constitutional Convention that religious freedom protects religion as much as government.

a core objective of national security. Both Presidents Truman and Eisenhower wasted little time ensuring the strategy of containment was matched with rhetoric to mobilize the American public (Herzog 2011). In doing so, they both relied heavily on theological rhetoric, casting the United States as defenders of Christendom or, at least, of religious freedom against the atheism of Soviet Communism (Inboden 2008). The religious freedom component of Cold War strategy reached its apogee in the 1970s when Henry “Scoop” Jackson successfully ushered his landmark bill which required that the Soviet Union permit Jews to emigrate before it could be granted Most Favored Nation trading status with the United States (Beckerman 2010; Feingold 2007).³ The networks of activists who formed during the closing decades of the Cold War to advance the goals of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment and the Helsinki Final Accords continued even after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Snyder 2011; Morgan and Sargent 2016; Morgan 2018).

These policies should not be thought of as isolated to the Cold War, either. Many of the arguments in support of IRFA’s original drafters pointed to the Jackson-Vanik Amendment as a template (Hertzke 2004). American policy-makers would continue to promote religion in the decades since. And although US policy would become distracted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Presidents Bush (Bumiller 2002), Obama (Mandaville 2013), and Trump (Schwartz 2019) continued promoting religious freedom as a core objective of US foreign policy.

Conceptualizing Mass Attitudes toward International Religious Freedom

Given the thoroughness of religion’s role in US foreign policy, the lack of a robust research literature investigating American attitudes about these policies is all the more curious. When scholars have looked at religion and foreign policy, the emphasis has focused on how religion influences voter preference on discrete policies (Guth 2009; Collins et al. 2011). And yet, US foreign policy is not made in a vacuum. Policy-makers are accountable, at least in principle,

3. Feingold observes that the Jackson-Vanik Amendment was “the first piece of human right legislation passed by congress aimed at ameliorating the condition of an oppressed foreign minority” (146), possibly making it the first ever international human rights law passed by a domestic lawmaking body.

to the general public which elects decision-makers, not isolated tribes of religious or secular groups to the exclusion of the others. The absence of a link between US foreign policy toward religious freedom would raise concerns over democratic accountability.

The work among scholars of US public opinion often conclude weak links between the public and policy-makers. As mentioned before, Jacobs and Page (2005) argue that foreign policy outputs often track with the attitudes of elites in think tanks and business than of the general public. This does not mean no signals reach policy-makers. What policy preferences do reach leaders does exert some influence, and that influence is measurable. But the link between opinion and policy is perhaps best understood as thermostat, wherein the electorate sends only rough signals of hotter/colder (Wlezien 1996). During periods of intensive international competition, this mechanism would often send clear and unambiguous signals leading to the maxim that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” In practice, however, even when the public signals do reach the highest offices, decision-makers can employ lumping or splitting interpretative strategies to defend the decisions they want to make (Druckman and Jacobs 2011). Additionally, as Mo Fiorina (2017) has argued, the polarization among elites has distorted the vote choice among the electorate. The result is that the standard linkage between voters and policy may be artificially weaker than it would under more optimal conditions.

The overall weakness in findings among scholars seems rooted in the underdeveloped theory of voter-elite linkages over foreign policy. In his description of the domestic sources of foreign policy, Hill (1993) discusses the “belief systems debate” which began with Philip Converse’s examination between the disparity of mass and elite opinion (Converse 1964). At issue is whether the horizontal range of beliefs of the general public constrains elite agency. If they do not, then what the public thinks matters little to policy-making. In contrast, the model developed by John Zaller (1992, 40–51) serves as a useful springboard to conceptualize respondents attitudes about international religious freedom policies. According to the Zaller, respondents accept (or resist) arguments commensurate with their level of

cognitive engagement and to the degree which the message confirms (or challenges) their priors. Voters who are more engaged will tend to have stronger opinions than those who are only tepidly engaged.

Those findings imply that a similar process may structure attitudes over religious freedom. Because of religion's tumultuous history in world and American politics, it is not altogether clear what researchers should expect to find. Religious freedom may be perceived as a domestic barrier to social progress (gay marriage, abortion), a human right (conscience, worship), or potential coalition partner for activism (civil rights, anti-sex trafficking). On these domains, political ideology greatly influences the perceptions (Goidel, Smentkowski, and Freeman 2016; Margolis 2018). Additionally, most of the scholarly research on foreign policy preferences focus on discrete issues rather than on a matrix of issues simultaneously. When issues are examined as a set, elite cues can influence voter attitudes, but, consistent with Zaller, only to the extent that it does not conflict with ideological polarization (Guisinger and Saunders 2017).

Likewise with partisanship, Republicans in the US tend to be more religious than Democrats, on average. One might then expect Republicans to be more supportive of international religious freedom, but this too might not be the case. While it is true that religious conservatives were instrumental in the passage of IRFA in the 1990s, Republicans might tend to think of religious freedom narrowly for their domestic life, but not something which should be exported.⁴ Conversely, Democrats tend to favor human rights more than Republicans, as well as view international cooperation as a way to avert military force.

Whatever the base opinions shaped by ideology might be, there are additional confounding stimuli which might also shape respondent opinion, but, as above, filtered through partisanship, education, and other primary worldview. For instance, Republicans more often interpret foreign affairs in security terms (hard power) over humanitarian or economic terms (soft power). We might therefore expect them to characterize their support as making

4. I'd like to thank the anonymous reviewer for help in thinking through this logical connection.

America safer. Those with higher education should, *ex ante* more informed about foreign policy and may already be aware of such policies. But it is an open question how education might influence their thinking. Finally, if respondents are knowledgeable about national security issues, they may view religious freedom in positive or negative terms to the extent that they believe those policies make the US safer.

Data

Because no data exist on this topic, I designed a survey for the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is run nationally in the US every two years during the election year, and its primary aim to allow public opinion scholars research voter attitudes in relation to congressional elections. Participants in the survey are asked a battery of regular questions, such as about their level of ideological partisanship (often referred to as “Party ID” or “PID”), socioeconomic status (ses), and level of education, to name a few. Along side these questions, election related questions inquire how frequently they vote. Survey modules are then introduced to gather more discrete data that researchers design. One strength of the CCES for political survey research is that everything is tied to the upcoming election, linking the practical reality of US politics to the theoretical nature of survey questions. Each module is a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents. Finally, the survey is conducted both in the summer of the election, and again in the fall. (Commonly referred to as the “pre” and “post.”) Although some research designs must be asked in either, or both, the pre-election and post-election version of the survey, my data are not as sensitive since the assumption is few respondents are familiar with laws and policies promoting international religious freedom.

The dependent variable under investigation is whether respondents think that these US foreign policies make the US safer. It can be difficult to impossible to grasp what respondents think about international religious freedom as a concept for value because many of them may have different definitions of what religious freedom could mean. This survey

instead informs survey participants about IRFA as a law and related policies, and then asks whether they think such laws and policies make the US safer. The survey set includes two questions to determine whether or not respondents have high or low levels of knowledge. Additional questions help situate their responses in foreign policy terms by asking whether or not participants support economic sanctions or military intervention to protect human rights, religious freedom, and ethnic genocide. Finally, the survey also asks what participants think is the most important foreign policy issue when voting.

Overall, the responses from the survey reveal broad support. 431 respondents somewhat or strongly agree with proposition that international religious freedom makes America safer. Comparatively only 135 responds somewhat or strongly disagree. The largest group of responses, however, 432 in total, did not know. Of the respondents, 617 correctly identified congress as the branch of government which declares war, and only 257 incorrectly choose another option. Table 1, below, shows total proportional responses broken down by gender, education, and 3-level IRFchinaParty-ID scale.⁵ The null hypothesis specifies no correlation between any independent variable and beliefs that IRFA policies make the United States safer. A Pearson's Chi-squared test between responses for "IRF security" and Party-ID produces the following: $\chi^2 = 84.817$, $Df = 16$, $p = 0.001525$. For Gender, the results were $\chi^2 = 17.529$, $Df = 4$, $p = 0.001525$, and Education, they were $\chi^2 = 39.209$, $Df = 20$, $p = 0.006279$. These are sufficient to reject the null that the variables are uncorrelated.

An empirical model examines the relationship between the dependent and explanatory variables. Because the responses are ordered categorical variables, the model relies on ordered probit regression.⁶ The main explanatory variables considered are gender, education, and the 3-level party ID. Models 1–3 are presented in table 2. The same models were again re-run on a subset of those respondents who answered correctly to the first knowledge question.

5. For space, 48 "Not sure" and 57 "Other" were dropped from this summary table.

6. Recent scholars have argued that the possibility of "Don't Know" and "No Opinion" in survey responses on foreign policy should not be thought of as missing data or otherwise in an ordered position relative to other responses in a question. See, Kleinberg and Fordham (2018) for a detailed treatment of this methodological debate. The author thanks the anonymous reviewer who brought this his attention.

This model runs both ordered logit and ordered probit regressions on the dependent variable, against several independent variables: gender, education, 3-level party ID. I also tested the Dependent Variable against two control variables which measure political sophistication of foreign policy. One of my control variables asks survey respondents which branch of government declares war and another asks which branch of government ratifies international treaties. These questions should help sort which respondents are answering based on a prior knowledge or understanding of foreign affairs and which are not. For the question on declarations of war, 617 respondents answered correctly, and 546 answered correctly on the question on treaty ratification. When combined, the number of respondents which answered both correctly is 420. The Chi-squared test of the two is 342.06, $df = 9$, $p\text{-value} < 2.2e - 16$, suggesting that knowledge of the correct answers are correlated.

The results for the tests are significant in a handful of cases. Gender is negatively correlated with support for international religious freedom. Education is statistically significant only in some cases. Specifically those with a high school diploma or a 2-year degree are more likely than those with no high school degree to be more supportive of international religious freedom. Although the results were not significant, it is worth noting that the correlation for those with some college, a 4-year degree, and post-graduate degree are negative whereas the statistically significant correlation for a high school diploma and some college are positive. These results could be due to a lack of sufficient numbers since there are fewer individuals with 2-year degrees (89) and post-graduate degrees (140) than the other variables. Party ID is only significant, and positively correlated, for Republicans (measured against those who identified as “other”).

Analysis and Discussion

When taken as a whole, a complex picture of support for international religious freedom emerges. For instance, although women are less supportive of international religious freedom in US foreign policy than men in base model, once the data are filtered by high knowledge

respondents, those results lose statistical significance. Similarly, high knowledge respondents gain significance for those holding a 2-year degree. There are limits to these comparisons, however, since there are fewer numbers of high knowledge responders than the original data (615 vs 998). These results hold with party-ID. Independents are more supportive of IRF policies than Democrats and with statistical significance. Although Republicans are more supportive, there is no significance, but this too could be a limitation of the respondent sample. Nevertheless, it would that seem that political knowledge might be doing more of the explanatory power than gender, education, or party-ID.

Much turns on what really drive support for international religious freedom in US foreign policy. For instance, in this dataset women are both more religious and less religious than men. Women report attending church more frequently (more than once a week, once per week, or once or twice a month) than men. Women also report attending less frequently than men (seldom, never). This suggests that perhaps religiosity, not gender, drives support for religious freedom.

Education was shown to produce non-linear results relative to those who reported no high school diploma. Those with either a high school diploma or a 2-year college degree were more likely to support the idea that IRF policies make the US safer and with significance. But those with some college or a 4-year degree are less likely to do so. It is possible that education may be correlated with religiosity, i.e., that the more educated someone is, the less likely they are to be religious. To test this possibility (see table 4), survey participants were asked how often they attend church and were provided six possible levels of frequency ranging from seldom to more than once per week. These were grouped into low, medium, and high frequency. Another question asked respondents if they are Born Again Christians. The evangelical community although relatively new in American political history, nevertheless has distinct attitudes about foreign policy relative to their co-religionists (Amstutz 2014; Curtis 2018).

The final set of analyses shows a significant correlation between those respondents who

reported that competition with China as an important factor (see table 5). This result does seem to reinforce the view prominent in the Cold War that competition with authoritarian regimes leads respondents to associate the most egregious human rights violations with national security. Chinese suppression of churches is well known, and the forced conversion to atheism of Uighurs is well known (Bhattacharji 2008; Jonathan Matusitz 2016). The salience of this issue could therefore be driving support for international religious freedom among those who view the long-term competition with China as an important security concern. But more data are needed before much else can be said since other unobserved variables may be driving these results.

The empirical conclusion that strategy influences support for international religious freedom would influence future work on both strategy and public opinion. On the one hand, scholars may conclude yet again that the public, on the whole, lacks any real influence for policy. If true, democratic accountability remains in question on political issues of the utmost importance. On the other hand, it very well may be that strategy is a function of public opinion even if discrete policy is not. Writing in *Democracy and America*, Tocqueville ([1835] 2012 I, 13) once remarked that “... it is in the leadership of the foreign interests of society that democratic governments seem to me decidedly inferior to others.” This quip has often been taken to suggest that democratic states lack the ability to do genuine grand strategy because the electoral pressures perversely incentivize decision-makers for short-term, personal gain rather than the long-term gain of the nation. But the evidence here suggests that as previous scholarship has shown, policy-makers respond to large-scale signals from voters (“more”, “less”, “different”) but then rely on policies that reconcile as many of competing stimuli they receive from the electorate.

One note of caution. If long-term support for international religious freedom is shaped by religiosity as measured by church attendance, then as the United States continues to secularize, we should expect our observation of support for IRF to decline in the years ahead. The data here show that women are both more and less religious by church attendance

and that contributed to differentiation among women's support for IRF. Education too may be picking up secularization. Although few respondents had post-graduate degrees, it nevertheless may still be the case that higher levels of education are correlated with either secularization or partisanship, or both.

Conclusion

This paper examined the factors which drive support for international religious freedom. It discussed the origin and development of international religious freedom in Cold War strategy, as well as briefly surveyed the literature in foreign policy public opinion to develop our understanding of the relationship between international religious freedom policies and public opinion. Measuring these potential relationships has heretofore not been possible because few data exist. By asking several questions about IRFA policies on the 2018 CCES, this paper is able to provide the first empirical look at public attitudes on this central and core objective of US foreign policy. The evidence suggests a rough, positive correlation between Party ID, and possibly church attendance and support for international religious freedom. Other potential links yield mixed results, but the issue of security completion with China tracks strongly with support for international religious freedom policies.

Although the general public often does not know much or anything about them, when they do learn of their existence, support seems to track with well known predictors such as partisanship. And although more work is needed, the early evidence here suggest that international religious freedom policies will not decline anytime soon. As strategic tools, they offer policy-makers flexibility in the press for the broad-based underpinning of liberal international order. Moreover, these policies have been enshrined in law on multiple occasions and are thus unlikely to be curtailed or otherwise rolled back any time soon. But if their support can be linked to security, it may be possible for savvy policy-makers to increase support for international religious freedom by linking the issues together on issue domains where possible. In short, religious freedom will continue to be a mainstay of US national

security strategy and scholars would be prudent to continue investigating public support for, or against, such policies.

Table 1: Proportional Support for IRF laws and policy & Policy by Gender, Education, and Party ID

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Don't know	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Observations
Male	0.42	1.38	5.50	4.67	2.46	334.00
Female	0.87	2.01	9.45	5.88	1.90	275.00
No HS	0.21	0.10	0.69	0.24	0.10	284.00
High School	0.45	0.66	4.47	2.53	1.35	417.00
Some College	0.14	0.76	3.43	2.28	1.11	581.00
2-year degree	0.10	0.42	1.25	1.00	0.31	334.00
4-year degree	0.17	1.11	3.22	2.73	0.87	275.00
Post-grad	0.21	0.35	1.90	1.77	0.62	284.00
Democrat	0.35	1.66	5.23	3.36	0.97	39.00
Republican	0.38	0.66	2.91	3.57	2.01	273.00
Independent	0.28	0.87	4.81	2.94	0.93	223.00

Table 2: IRF Models 1-3

	Dep. Variable: IRF laws and policy make the US safer		
	1	2	3
Gender (Female)	-0.421*** (0.119)	-0.406*** (0.120)	-0.384*** (0.128)
High School		0.481** (0.216)	0.618*** (0.237)
Some College		-0.322 (0.213)	-0.304 (0.233)
2-year		0.432** (0.169)	0.494*** (0.183)
4-year		-0.101 (0.143)	-0.164 (0.153)
Post		-0.027 (0.156)	-0.093 (0.165)
Independent			0.851*** (0.156)
Republican			0.136 (0.150)
Observations	998	998	893
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

Table 3: IRF Models 4–6

	Dep. Variable: IRF laws make the US safer (High Knowledge)		
	4	5	6
Gender (Female)	−0.155 (0.148)	−0.149 (0.149)	−0.162 (0.160)
High School		0.567* (0.294)	0.792*** (0.302)
Some College		−0.755*** (0.287)	−0.750** (0.295)
2-year		0.426* (0.227)	0.462** (0.235)
4-year		−0.139 (0.189)	−0.139 (0.198)
Post		0.006 (0.197)	0.022 (0.209)
Independent			0.909*** (0.202)
Republican			0.186 (0.188)
Observations	615	615	558
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

Table 4: Religiosity and support for IRF policies

Models 7–8: Religiosity and IRF Support		
	Dep. Variable: IRF laws and policy make the US safer	
	7	8
Born Again Christians	0.215*** (0.076)	
Medium Attendance		0.421*** (0.138)
High Attendance		0.005 (0.115)
Observations	994	417
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 5: IRF Support and China Competition

<i>Dependent variable: IRF Makes USA More Secure</i>	
1 - Not all Important	-0.113 (0.444)
2	-0.051 (0.314)
3	0.054 (0.292)
4	-0.359 (0.296)
5	-0.125 (0.215)
6	0.134 (0.267)
7	-0.034 (0.253)
8	0.731*** (0.248)
9	0.491 (0.322)
10 - Extremely important	0.764*** (0.255)
Observations	989
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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