

Congregants make better citizens, says new study: Research by Robert Putnam and David Campbell

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First, the silver lining: people of faith are better citizens and better neighbors, and the U.S. is “amazingly” religious compared to other countries, says Harvard University professor Robert Putnam.

Now, the cloud: young Americans are “vastly more secular” than their older counterparts, according to Putnam.

“That is a stunning development,” Putnam said. “The youth are the future. Some of them are going to get religious over time, but most of them are not.”

A celebrated political scientist, Putnam has long been concerned with declining participation in American civic life, as described in his best-selling book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. When Elks clubs and parent-teacher associations lose members, the ties that bind civil society unravel, Putnam argues.

But religious people may be God’s gift to civic engagement, Putnam and University of Notre Dame scholar David Campbell contend in their book *American Grace: How Religion Is Reshaping Our Civic and Political Lives*, which is scheduled to be released next year.

Putnam and Campbell unveiled some of their research at a recent conference in Key West, Florida, hosted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

The scholars say their studies found that religious Americans are three to four times more likely to be involved in their community than nonreligious Americans. They are more apt to work on community projects, belong to voluntary associations, attend public meetings, vote in local elections, attend protest demonstrations and political rallies and donate time and money to causes—including secular ones.

At the same time, Putnam and Campbell say, their data show that religious people are “nicer”: they carry packages for people, don’t mind folks cutting ahead in lines and give money to panhandlers.

The scholars say the link between religion and civic activism is causal, since they observed that people who hadn’t attended church became more engaged after they did. “These are huge effects,” Putnam said.

The reason for the increased civic engagement may come as a surprise to religious leaders. It has nothing to do with ideas of divine judgment or with trying to secure a seat in heaven. Rather, it’s the relationships that people make in their churches, mosques, synagogues and temples that draw them into community activism.

Putnam calls them “supercharged friends,” and the more such friends people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic events, he says. The theory is that if someone from your “moral community” asks you to volunteer for a cause, it’s really hard to say no. “Being asked to do something by a member of your congregation is different from being asked to do something by a member of your bowling league,” Putnam said.

The effect of these friendships is so strong, the scholars found, that people who attend religious services regularly but don’t have any friends there look more like secularists than like fellow believers when it comes to civic participation.

“It’s not faith that accounts for this,” Putnam said. “It’s faith communities.”

But many of those faith communities are dwindling, according to numerous studies of religious membership in the U.S., and those pews are not being replenished by young Americans, Putnam and Campbell said.

The 1950s were “probably the most religious period in American history,” according to Putnam, when 55 percent of Americans attended religious services regularly. Cultural changes led to a massive decline in religious observance in the 1960s, the scholars said.

Religion—particularly evangelicalism —bounced back in the 1970s and ’80s, but began to drop off again in the ’90s with the political ascendance of the religious right, according to Putnam and Campbell.

“That so-called politicization of religion triggered great hostility toward religion,” leading to a “dramatic growth in secularism and ‘nones’”—sociologists’ term for people who claim no religious affiliation.

As many as a quarter of young people would be in church—many say they still believe in God—but they’re turned off by how political American religion has become, Putnam said.

But not everyone thinks that’s a bad thing, or agrees with the proposition that religious people are better citizens. Ron Millar, acting director of the Secular Coalition of America, said that non theists are just as likely to volunteer for worthy causes as believers. For example, he noted that the Secular Student Alliance went to New Orleans to help build homes with Habitat for Humanity a few years ago.

“We’re out there,” Millar said. “We just don’t say we’re driven by our nonbelief in God to do good work.” *-Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*