

# Religion can both hurt and enhance democratic attitudes.

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What effect does religion have on democratic attitudes? **Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom** and **Gizem Arikan** outline the results of three studies they have conducted into the relationship between religion and democracy. They note that while religious belief can undermine democracy by generating more conservative values, religious social behaviour enhances support for democracy by fostering greater trust in institutions and engagement in politics.



Does religiosity hinder or enhance democratic attitudes? Results from the current literature are mixed. Starting with Adorno *et al.*'s (1950) theory of the **authoritarian personality**, which suggested a psychoanalytical connection between tendencies toward religious and undemocratic attitudes, many scholars have argued that religion has the effect of challenging democratic values and socialisation. Much of this literature has contrasted religion and democracy as systems of belief and has focused on the challenge religious extremism and loyalties pose for democratic institutions, showing that religiosity is associated with political intolerance and other non-democratic norms. Additionally, democratic values are argued to stress universality, striving for global implementation of civil rights for every person, whereas the religious public typically considers itself as superior to other groups, and usually entitled to more rights than others.



However, at the same time religiosity was found to have a positive impact on democratic norms and values. Evidence shows that churches hold great potential for deliberative democracy, as religious activity leads to the development of civic skills and civic norms, and provides organisational and philosophical bases for a wide range of social movements. In fact, church attendance is found to increase electoral turnout, party membership, protest activism, and support for democracy. Accordingly, empirical and theoretical scholars alike increasingly note the “political ambivalence of religion”; that is, the fact that it can be either a source of undemocratic values or a contributor to the development of democratic skills.

These contradictory findings can be reconciled when considering the multifaceted nature of religiosity. The literature views religion as involving three dimensions – *belief*, *behaviour*, and *belonging*. The *belief* component encompasses an understanding of the divine and humanity's relationship to it, and may refer to belief in God, heaven, hell, life after death, or tendencies of people to characterise themselves as religious. The *behaviour* component consists of two factors: the social practice of religion, involving participation in organised religious communities and attendance at places of worship, and private practice such as prayer. *Belonging* consists of denominational affiliation, that is, identification with a particular organised denomination and/or a religious movement, and private practice, such as



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prayer or the reading of sacred texts. The belonging component includes identification with a specific denomination and trends within a denomination.

Accordingly, [our research](#) argues that religious beliefs, such as the belief in God, heaven, and life after death, and social religious activities, such as attendance at places of worship and participation in organised religious communities, often have contrasting effects on democratic attitudes and norms. First, religious belief is positively associated with conservative-traditional values and negatively associated with openness to change values across religions and contexts. In contrast democratisation is positively related to openness to change, emphasising independent thought, universalism, natural rights, and equality, but negatively related to values such as conformity, tradition, and security. This makes for an inherent and systematic value conflict between the religious and democratic values systems. At the same time, social involvement in places of worship leads to the development of civic skills and norms as well as political efficacy, positively affects electoral turnout, party membership, protest activism, and involvement in other civic organisations, and thus holds great potential for deliberative democracy. Further, the religious social institution makes for an active minority group which benefits from the democratic framework, consequently mobilising overall support for a democratic regime.

Indeed, using [heteroskedastic](#) maximum likelihood models and data from the fourth wave of the World Values Survey for forty-five democratic countries, we start by [showing](#) that as a belief system, religiosity generates abstract opposition to democracy, while increasing ambivalence towards democratic principles; however, the social-behavioural aspect of religiosity leads to greater endorsement of the democratic system and generates stronger support for democracy. Theoretically, this work argues that different mediating mechanisms underlie the differential effects that the two dimensions of religiosity have on attitudes towards democracy. While religious belief is associated with traditional values and an emphasis on material and physical security that generates opposition to democracy, religious social behaviour improves social capital in the form of institutional trust and political engagement, which have positive effects on support for democracy.

In a [second study](#), we used multilevel path analysis models and data from fifty-four countries from Waves 4 and 5 of the World Values Survey to directly test the mechanisms hypothesised to underlie the differential effects of religious belief and behaviour on abstract support for democracy. Consistent with the expectations in our [earlier article](#), we find that the negative effect of religious belief on democratic attitudes is to a large extent mediated by personal values, and the effect of social religious behaviour is mediated by the generation of social capital in the form of political involvement and trust in institutions. These results are robust across a variety of religious traditions and contextual effects, and thus make a convincing case that the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of religious belief and social religious behaviour on democratic attitudes extend above and beyond a specific political context.

Still, while these two studies confirm that religiosity affects democratic support through values, involvement, and trust in democratic institutions, it could be argued that democratic norms and attitudes increase the likelihood of political participation via places of worship, and not the other way around. Therefore, an experimental test will help improve our understanding of the nature of the relationship between the two dimensions of religiosity and democratic attitudes, and establish their causal effect.

To test the causal effect of religious belief and religious social behaviour on abstract support for democracy, [our third study](#) builds on an experimental priming framework. A priming framework suggests that a subject's exposure to certain cues increases the accessibility of related objects in their memory, consciously or unconsciously. Thus, even relatively subtle religious cues can activate religious beliefs or values and experiences, which, in turn, can affect political cognition. Using a comparative experiment among Turkish Muslims and Israeli Jews, we find that priming religious belief led to a lower degree of abstract support for democracy among respondents, while a religious social behaviour prime led to an increase in abstract support for democracy when compared to the no-prime group.

Together, these three studies confirm that different dimensions of religiosity have differential causal effects via different psychological mechanisms on democratic attitudes. While religious belief undermines democracy by

leading to more conservative values, social religious behaviour boosts democratic attitudes by fostering trust in institutions and engagement in politics. Our findings therefore suggest that it is not religious belief and religious behaviour in and of themselves that affect democratic attitudes, but the values and behaviours they teach to the religious individual. This is an optimistic finding in the sense that it leaves room for interventions, and particularly for educating people about democratic norms and for attenuating the value conflict underlying the non-democratic proclivities often reported for the devout.

*For a longer discussion of the topic covered in this article see:*

**Ben-Nun Bloom, Pazit and Arikan, Gizem. (2013). Religion and Democratic Attitudes: A Cross-National Test of the Mediating Mechanisms. *British Journal of Political Science*. 43(2):375-397.**

**Ben-Nun Bloom, Pazit and Arikan, Gizem. (2012). The Differential Effect of Religious Belief and Religious Social Behavior on Opinion and Ambivalence in Democratic Attitudes. *Political Behavior* 34(2):249-276.**

**Ben-Nun Bloom, Pazit and Arikan, Gizem. (Forthcoming). Priming Religious Belief and Religious Social Behavior Affects Support for Democracy. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*.**

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