

The Influence of Religious Beliefs on Political Participation

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This study aimed to explore the influence of religious beliefs on political participation, focusing on the various ways in which faith motivates, shapes, and sometimes hinders political engagement among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. Employing a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 participants representing a broad range of religious affiliations and political ideologies. The interviews sought to uncover the nuanced relationships between participants' religious beliefs and their political participation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with a focus on identifying recurring themes, categories, and concepts that illustrate the intersection of religion and politics in the participants' lives. Five main themes emerged from the analysis: Religious Motivations for Political Participation, Barriers to Political Participation, Influence of Religious Leaders, Community Engagement and Solidarity, and Impact of Religious Beliefs on Policy Preferences. These themes encompassed various categories and concepts, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which religious beliefs influence political actions. Key findings include the role of religious teachings and leaders in guiding political engagement, the impact of faith-based activism and community projects on societal issues, and the ways in which religious convictions shape policy preferences. The study underscores the significant and complex role of religious beliefs in political participation. It reveals that religious motivations for political engagement are deeply intertwined with personal faith, societal influences, and the actions of religious leaders. However, barriers such as perceived political efficacy and discrimination can hinder this engagement. The findings suggest a need for further exploration into the dynamic interplay between faith and politics, particularly in the context of increasing political polarization and evolving religious landscapes.

Keywords: Religious beliefs, Political participation, Faith-based activism, Religious teachings, Political engagement.

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1. Introduction

The intersection of religion and politics has long been a topic of keen scholarly interest, provoking debate across various disciplines. This complex interplay offers profound insights into how religious beliefs shape political attitudes, participation, and policy preferences, influencing the very fabric of democratic societies. Religious belief has historically played a pivotal role in

shaping political landscapes. From the moral underpinnings of law and policy to the mobilization of social movements, faith traditions have contributed significantly to political discourse and action (Djupe & Grant, 2001; Driskell et al., 2008). The influence of religion on politics extends beyond mere personal conviction, affecting voter behavior, policy advocacy, and even the political climate of nations (Glazier, 2012, 2015; Morgan et al., 2010). Understanding this influence



requires a comprehensive examination of the mechanisms through which religious beliefs translate into political participation and the various factors that may facilitate or impede such engagement.

In the aftermath of significant global events, such as the September 11 attacks, the role of religion in politics has gained renewed attention, particularly among minority religious groups in the United States (Ayers & Hofstetter, 2008). These events have underscored the importance of examining the political participation of religious minorities, whose experiences and contributions to political life often reflect broader dynamics of social inclusion, exclusion, and interfaith dialogue. Similarly, the politics of marginalized groups, such as the queer religious communities, further illuminate the complex ways in which religious and political identities intersect and interact within public discourse (Cravens, 2018).

Recent research has sought to integrate the study of religion, political ideology, and social psychology, exploring how religious beliefs align with or diverge from political ideologies and how this alignment influences attitudes towards authority, outgroups, and policy preferences (Cuevas & Dawson, 2020; Jost et al., 2003). These studies have highlighted the role of religious conviction in shaping moral and political worldviews, pointing to the deep psychological underpinnings that drive political behavior and attitudes.

Furthermore, the concept of providential religious beliefs, or the belief in divine intervention in human affairs, has been identified as a significant predictor of political engagement and policy attitudes (Glazier, 2015). This notion suggests that individuals who perceive political events and outcomes as influenced by a higher power may be more inclined to engage in political activities, motivated by a sense of divine mandate or mission. This perspective not only enriches our understanding of the motivational bases of political participation but also opens new avenues for exploring the ways in which religious and political narratives are intertwined.

Education plays a critical role in mediating the relationship between religion and politics. Schwadel (2011) found that higher levels of education are associated with nuanced views on religious practices, beliefs, and affiliations, potentially influencing how individuals engage with political issues and ideologies.

This finding points to the importance of considering the interplay between education, religion, and politics in shaping civic engagement and political participation (Schwadel, 2011). The impact of religion on political participation is not uniform across all contexts. In some cases, religious and ethnic discrimination can have differential effects on civic involvement and political consciousness (Ysseldyk et al., 2014). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the barriers to political participation faced by religious minorities and for developing strategies to enhance inclusivity and representation in political processes.

Moreover, the relationship between religious beliefs and environmental attitudes highlights the potential of faith-based motivations to drive pro-environmental behavior and policy advocacy (Zeng et al., 2020). This connection underscores the broader implications of religious convictions for public policy and social action, beyond traditional political arenas.

This manuscript builds upon the rich foundation laid by previous scholars, employing a qualitative research design to explore the contemporary influence of religious beliefs on political participation. Through semi-structured interviews, this study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the personal narratives and experiences that link faith to political action. By focusing on the individual level, this research endeavors to capture the complexity and diversity of religious influences on political engagement, offering nuanced insights that quantitative analyses may overlook.

In summary, the intersection of religious beliefs and political participation represents a vital area of inquiry that touches upon fundamental aspects of social and political life. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue among scholars by offering a qualitative exploration of how religious convictions shape political engagement, informed by the lived experiences of individuals navigating the intersections of faith and politics. Through this approach, the manuscript aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion and politics, enriching the scholarly conversation and offering implications for policymakers, religious leaders, and activists alike.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the nuanced ways in which religious beliefs influence political participation. Recognizing the complexity of personal beliefs and their potential impact on political actions, we chose semi-structured interviews as our primary method of data collection. This approach allowed us to delve deeply into individual perspectives, uncovering rich, detailed insights into the interplay between religion and politics.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, aiming for a diverse representation of religious affiliations, political ideologies, ages, and genders to capture a wide range of experiences and beliefs. We sought individuals who were actively engaged in religious practices and had demonstrated some level of political participation, ranging from voting to more active roles within political campaigns or movements.

Theoretical saturation was reached after conducting 23 interviews, at which point no new themes were emerging from the data, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both in-depth exploration of predetermined topics and the flexibility to pursue emerging themes. The interview guide was meticulously designed to include open-ended questions on participants' religious beliefs, their political involvement, and perceived connections between the two. Questions were pilot tested to ensure clarity and effectiveness in eliciting meaningful responses.

Interviews, lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted by researchers trained in qualitative methods

to ensure a consistent and empathetic approach. All interviews were carried out in locations chosen by the participants to foster a comfortable and secure environment, which ranged from private homes to quiet public spaces. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews underwent thematic analysis using a grounded theory approach. Initial coding was performed by multiple researchers to enhance reliability, with codes then discussed and refined to ensure consistency. Through iterative rounds of coding, key themes were identified, allowing for the development of a nuanced understanding of the influence of religious beliefs on political participation.

3. Findings and Results

In the study, a total of 23 participants were interviewed to explore the influence of religious beliefs on political participation. The demographic breakdown of the participants was diverse, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of religious affiliations and political perspectives. Among the participants, 13 identified as male and 10 as female, ensuring a balanced gender representation. The age range of the participants was broad, spanning from 21 to 65 years, with 5 participants aged between 24-30, 6 participants aged between 31-40, 7 participants in the 41-50 age range, and 5 participants aged 51 and above, providing insights across generations. The participants represented a variety of religious backgrounds, including 8 Christians, 5 Muslims, 4 Hindus, 3 Buddhists, and 3 participants identifying with other or no specific religious affiliations, to reflect a wide range of religious perspectives. Politically, the participants identified across the spectrum, with 9 identifying as conservative, 8 as liberal, and 6 as moderate or unaffiliated with a specific political ideology, indicating a diverse set of political beliefs and practices among the study's participants.

Table 1
The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
Religious Motivations for Political Participation	Faith-Inspired Activism	Grassroots movements, religious duty, moral obligations, prophetic engagement, social justice
	Political Sermons and Teachings	Political endorsements, moral guidance, religious teachings, scriptural interpretations, community leadership
	Prayer and Politics	Prayer meetings for political causes, spiritual support for leaders, divine guidance for voting, intercessory prayer campaigns
	Religious Identity and Voting	Religious affiliation influencing party choice, faith-based voting, religious group solidarity, denomination-specific political issues
	Faith-Based Policy Advocacy	Religious doctrines shaping policy views, church lobbying, religious leaders in political advocacy, faith-driven policy initiatives
Barriers to Political Participation	Perceived Political Efficacy	Feeling powerless, disillusionment with politics, skepticism about change, belief in divine control, resignation to fate
	Conflict Between Religious & Political Ideologies	Clash of values, prioritizing religious over political, moral dilemmas, scripture vs. policy, religious abstention from politics
	Discrimination & Marginalization	Religious discrimination, minority status, marginalization in political discourse, exclusion from policy-making
	Lack of Political Knowledge	Uninformed about political processes, confusion over policies, need for religious guidance, ambiguity in political engagement
	Accessibility and Inclusivity	Physical access to polling places, language barriers, cultural sensitivities, inclusivity in political campaigns
Influence of Religious Leaders	Moral and Ethical Guidance	Moral compass, ethical standards, religious doctrine, personal integrity, stewardship
	Political Mobilization	Encouraging voter registration, organizing political rallies, activism encouragement, social movement leadership
	Influence on Political Opinions	Shaping political views, interpretation of religious texts, doctrinal influence, persuasive sermons
	Conflict Resolution	Mediating political disputes, peace-building initiatives, interfaith dialogues, reconciling differences
	Role Models and Authority Figures	Spiritual leadership, role model behavior, authority in moral and political realms, embodiment of religious principles
Community Engagement and Solidarity	Faith-Based Community Projects	Community service, social welfare projects, religious charity, volunteerism, community development
	Interfaith Collaborations	Joint community initiatives, cross-religious dialogues, cooperative social action, unity in diversity
	Political Advocacy Groups	Faith-based political organizations, religious coalitions, advocacy for social causes, communal lobbying efforts
	Social Justice Movements	Participation in protests, advocacy for marginalized groups, religious motivations for justice, solidarity movements
	Voter Mobilization and Education	Voter registration drives, educational workshops, information dissemination, community meetings
Impact of Religious Beliefs on Policy Preferences	Social Policies	Abortion, marriage, family values, drug policies, education
	Economic Policies	Poverty alleviation, wealth distribution, charity, economic justice, stewardship of resources
	Environmental Policies	Stewardship of the earth, climate change, conservation efforts, environmental justice, sustainable practices
	Foreign Policies	Humanitarian aid, peace initiatives, international relations based on religious principles, moral diplomacy
	Public Health Policies	Healthcare access, bioethics, pandemic response, vaccinations, religious exemptions

Our thematic analysis revealed five primary categories influencing the nexus between religious beliefs and political participation: Religious Motivations for Political Participation, Barriers to Political Participation, Influence of Religious Leaders, Community Engagement and Solidarity, and Impact of Religious Beliefs on Policy

Preferences. Each category comprises various subthemes that elucidate the intricate relationship between faith and politics.

3.1. *Religious Motivations for Political Participation*

Participants expressed that their faith-inspired activism was deeply rooted in a sense of religious duty and moral obligation. One interviewee stated, "My involvement in grassroots movements isn't just activism; it's living out my faith." This sentiment was echoed across discussions on political sermons and teachings, where another participant noted, "Our pastor's guidance doesn't just end with spiritual matters—it extends to how we view our political responsibilities."

The concept of prayer and politics merging was highlighted by a participant who shared, "We hold prayer meetings specifically to seek divine guidance for our leaders and the political direction of our country." Religious identity also played a significant role in voting behavior, with one respondent commenting, "I find myself looking for candidates who reflect my religious values and beliefs."

3.2. *Barriers to Political Participation*

Despite strong motivations, participants identified significant barriers. Perceived political efficacy emerged as a concern, with one interviewee explaining, "Sometimes, I feel like my vote doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things, but my faith encourages me to participate regardless." The conflict between religious and political ideologies was another barrier, as one participant observed, "There are moments when my political beliefs clash with my faith, leading to difficult choices."

3.3. *Influence of Religious Leaders*

The role of religious leaders in providing moral and ethical guidance was underscored, with one participant stating, "Our religious leaders are not just spiritual guides; they help shape our views on morality and politics." These leaders were also pivotal in political mobilization, as another interviewee shared, "Our church organized a voter registration drive that was incredibly effective."

3.4. *Community Engagement and Solidarity*

Faith-based community projects and interfaith collaborations were highlighted as crucial platforms for political engagement. One participant mentioned,

"Working together on community service projects with other faith groups showed me how much we can achieve when we stand united."

3.5. *Impact of Religious Beliefs on Policy Preferences*

Participants' policy preferences were deeply influenced by their religious beliefs, especially regarding social policies. One respondent remarked, "My faith informs my stance on social issues like marriage and family values." Similarly, views on economic and environmental policies reflected religious principles, with another adding, "My religion teaches stewardship of the earth, which is why I advocate for policies combating climate change."

4. **Discussion and Conclusion**

The qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted for this study revealed five main themes related to the influence of religious beliefs on political participation. These themes encompass Religious Motivations for Political Participation, Barriers to Political Participation, Influence of Religious Leaders, Community Engagement and Solidarity, and Impact of Religious Beliefs on Policy Preferences. Within these main themes, a variety of categories were identified, each comprising specific concepts that further elaborate on the nuances of how religion intersects with politics in the lives of the participants.

The first main theme, Religious Motivations for Political Participation, highlighted how participants' faith inspired them to engage in political activities. Categories under this theme included Faith-Inspired Activism, where concepts like grassroots movements, moral obligations, and social justice were prevalent, indicating that participants felt compelled to act on their religious convictions in the political sphere. Political Sermons and Teachings emerged as another category, with concepts such as political endorsements by religious leaders and scriptural interpretations influencing political views, suggesting that religious teachings often serve as a guide for political engagement. Additional categories like Prayer and Politics, Religious Identity and Voting, and Faith-Based Policy Advocacy further detailed the mechanisms through which faith encourages political participation.

Under Barriers to Political Participation, categories illuminated the challenges participants faced in translating their religious beliefs into political action. Perceived Political Efficacy, with concepts such as feeling powerless and skepticism about change, highlighted doubts about the impact of individual actions. Conflict Between Religious & Political Ideologies included concepts like clashes of values and prioritizing religious over political identities, illustrating internal conflicts faced by participants. Other categories, including Discrimination & Marginalization, Lack of Political Knowledge, and Accessibility and Inclusivity, addressed external barriers to participation, from social exclusion to practical obstacles.

The theme Influence of Religious Leaders explored how religious figures shape political views and actions. Categories such as Moral and Ethical Guidance and Political Mobilization included concepts like moral compass, ethical standards, and organizing political rallies, indicating leaders' roles in directing political engagement. Influence on Political Opinions, Conflict Resolution, and Role Models and Authority Figures further depicted leaders as pivotal figures in mediating the relationship between religion and politics, guiding followers in navigating their political environments.

Community Engagement and Solidarity highlighted how religious beliefs foster collective political action. Categories like Faith-Based Community Projects and Interfaith Collaborations encompassed concepts of community service, social welfare projects, and cooperative social action, showing how faith communities come together to address societal issues. Political Advocacy Groups, Social Justice Movements, and Voter Mobilization and Education underscored the communal aspect of political participation, driven by shared religious values.

Finally, the theme Impact of Religious Beliefs on Policy Preferences detailed how participants' faith influenced their stance on various policies. Categories under this theme, including Social Policies, Economic Policies, Environmental Policies, Foreign Policies, and Public Health Policies, covered a broad spectrum of issues from abortion to climate change. The concepts within these categories demonstrated the direct impact of religious convictions on policy advocacy and voting behavior, reflecting the profound and multifaceted ways in which religion informs political life.

Our research highlights the role of religious beliefs in motivating individuals towards political engagement, a finding that aligns with Djupe and Grant's (2001) observation of the pivotal role of religious institutions in facilitating political participation in America (Djupe & Grant, 2001). Similar to Ayers and Hofstetter's (2008) study on American Muslim political participation post-9/11, our findings also reveal how external socio-political events can significantly influence the political engagement of religious communities, underscoring the dynamic interplay between faith and politics (Ayers & Hofstetter, 2008). This interaction suggests that religious beliefs do not operate in isolation but are deeply intertwined with the socio-political context, influencing and being influenced by it.

The nuanced relationship between religious identity and political ideology observed in our study resonates with the findings of Cuevas and Dawson (2020), who integrated various research strands to explore how religious belief intersects with political ideology, authoritarianism, and prejudice (Cuevas & Dawson, 2020). Our study adds to this body of knowledge by providing qualitative insights into how these intersections manifest in individuals' lived experiences, highlighting the complexity of navigating religious and political identities.

Consistent with Glazier's (2015) research on the impact of providential religious beliefs on political activity, our participants often referenced divine guidance as a factor in their political decision-making and activism (Glazier, 2015). This suggests that for many, political engagement is seen not just as a civic duty but as part of a broader divine plan, indicating the profound depth of religious influence on political perspectives and actions.

Echoing Schwadel's (2011) findings on the effects of education on religious practices, beliefs, and affiliations, our study suggests that education also plays a critical role in mediating political engagement among the religiously affiliated. Educated individuals in our study were more likely to articulate nuanced views on the intersection of religion and politics, suggesting that education serves as a crucial factor in shaping the ways in which religious beliefs translate into political participation (Schwadel, 2011).

The experiences of religious and ethnic discrimination impacting civic engagement and political consciousness, as discussed by Ysseldyk et al. (2014), were also

reflected in our findings. Participants highlighted how facing discrimination influenced their political consciousness and activism, pointing to the dual role of religion as both a source of community support and a basis for exclusion or discrimination within the political sphere (Ysseldyk et al., 2014).

Lastly, our findings regarding the influence of religious beliefs on environmental policy preferences align with Zeng, Wu, and Liu's (2020) study on the mediating role of environmental risk perception between religious beliefs and pro-environmental behavior (Zeng et al., 2020). This connection underscores the potential of religious motivations to foster a broader engagement with global challenges, such as climate change, through political avenues.

This study has elucidated the complex interplay between religious beliefs and political participation, revealing a multifaceted relationship that is shaped by a variety of factors including individual motivations, societal contexts, and external events. Our findings underscore that religious beliefs can significantly motivate individuals to engage in political activities, with motivations deeply rooted in personal faith, perceived divine mandates, and the ethical and moral imperatives espoused by their religious traditions. Additionally, the intersection of religious identity with political ideology, the influence of providential beliefs on political engagement, and the impact of education on articulating and acting upon these beliefs were prominent themes. Experiences of discrimination based on religious and ethnic identities also emerged as significant factors influencing political consciousness and activism, while environmental concerns motivated by religious beliefs highlighted the potential for faith to drive policy advocacy and action on global issues.

The nuanced understanding gained from this study contributes to the broader discourse on the dynamics of religion and politics, affirming the profound impact of religious convictions on political participation. This exploration not only enriches the academic conversation but also has practical implications for policymakers, religious communities, and activists seeking to navigate the complex landscape of faith and civic engagement.

This study, while offering valuable insights, is not without its limitations. The qualitative nature of the research, focused on semi-structured interviews, provides depth and richness of data but limits the

generalizability of the findings. The sample size, though sufficient for thematic saturation, represents a relatively small fraction of the diverse spectrum of religious beliefs and political orientations, potentially overlooking nuances present in broader populations. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases related to participants' willingness to disclose or reflect accurately on their beliefs and political activities.

Future research could build on this study by employing mixed-methods approaches to combine the depth of qualitative insights with the generalizability of quantitative data. Expanding the sample size and diversity, including a wider range of religious affiliations and political ideologies, could uncover additional nuances in the relationship between religion and politics. Longitudinal studies might also provide insights into how this relationship evolves over time, especially in response to changing socio-political contexts. Furthermore, exploring the role of digital media in shaping religious-political engagement could offer critical insights into contemporary dynamics of faith and civic participation.

The findings of this study have practical implications for religious leaders, political activists, and policymakers. Recognizing the significant role of faith in motivating political participation suggests that engaging religious communities in political discourse and action can be a powerful tool for mobilization. However, it also calls for sensitivity to the diverse ways in which individuals interpret and act on their religious beliefs in the political arena. For policymakers, understanding the religious motivations behind policy support or opposition can inform more effective communication and policy formulation. Lastly, this study highlights the importance of inclusive practices that acknowledge and respect the intersection of religious and political identities, fostering a more engaged and representative political landscape.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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