

Christian Conservatism and Prominent Sociopolitical Values among Teacher-Education Students in a Southeastern University

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Abstract

Teacher-education students attending a state university in the Southeastern United States responded to measures of Christian conservatism (theological fundamentalism and political evangelicalism) and sociopolitical values (e.g., nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent). Most of the measures demonstrated adequate internal consistency. Although both Christian conservatism measures correlated significantly with all sociopolitical measures except internationalism, political evangelicalism was more strongly related to the comparison sociopolitical perspectives than was theological fundamentalism. The Christian conservatism measures correlated most strongly with (a) respect for civil liberties and (b) tolerance of dissent. In both cases, the relationships were negative.

Introduction

[1] The association between conservative Christian views and conservative political values has been a high-profile issue in the U.S. media in recent decades. Conservative Christian groups (variously identified as fundamentalists, evangelicals, or born again) claim to be one of the most active and aggressive voting blocs in American politics (CNN 2004a; Falwell; Hastings; Land). They advocate electing Christian candidates, passing laws supportive of Christian values, and appointing judges whose rulings are consistent with Christian values. Various polls indicated that Christian evangelicals overwhelmingly voted for the conservative candidate in the 2004 presidential election (CNN 2004b; Strode).

[2] The evidence from the political science literature regarding the role of Christian conservatives in the 2004 presidential election appears generally consistent with media reports. For example, Olson and Green (2006b) reported a relationship between church

attendance and voting preferences in the 2004 election. Overall, those who attended church one or more times a week overwhelmingly voted for the Republican candidate, whereas those who attended church infrequently or not at all preferred the Democratic candidate. The percentages of frequent church attendees and infrequent attendees in the U.S. population in 2004 were approximately the same, but the disparity in the voting preferences for the Republican and Democratic candidate was greater among the frequent than the infrequent attendees. Although church attendance does not precisely reflect level of Christian conservatism, research does show a weak to moderate relationship between conservative theological beliefs and church attendance (Hoge and Carroll; Hoge and Polk).

[3] Because research (e.g., Johnson and Tamney; Tamney and Johnson) has shown Christian conservatism/liberalism to be related to one's educational background, researchers need to control for educational level in assessing the relationship between Christian conservatism and sociopolitical perspectives. One way to control for educational level is to examine the religious and sociopolitical views of students within a particular college setting. Given that the collegiate experience tends to have a liberalizing effect on one's views (Williams), the presumed relationships between Christian conservatism and sociopolitical views might be somewhat tempered in collegiate settings. Especially important in collegiate settings are the views of teacher-education students who will subsequently influence the sociopolitical values of a broad spectrum of American youth.

Christian Conservatism and Sociopolitical Perspectives

[4] Of the various sociopolitical variables to which Christian conservatism has been linked in recent research, militarism has been among the most extensively emphasized. Eckhardt and Newcombe have defined militarism as "the belief in military deterrence, or the reliance on military strength to defend one's nation and its values, or aggressive foreign policy in general" (210). In their seminal work on the assessment of militarism, Eckhardt, Manning, Morgan, Subotnik, and Tinker reported that militarism was significantly related to religious orthodoxy, as well as to a variety of other sociopolitical perspectives. A recently completed study (Williams, Bliss, and McCallum) of students in a southeastern university showed that measures of Christian conservatism were strongly related to support for the military.

[5] The Williams *et al.* study made an important distinction between the theological and political dimensions of Christian conservatism, a distinction also made in the current study. The theological dimension was linked to the five fundamentals generally regarded as pivotal to Christian fundamentalism: The Bible is literally true and inerrant; Jesus is the divine Son of God; Jesus is the one and only person in human history born of a virgin; human beings have redemption from sin only through the crucifixion of Jesus; and Jesus will return to claim his own (Fundamentalist Christianity; Kellstedt and Smidt; Marsden). Obviously, individuals can embrace these beliefs without any involvement in politics, as many Christian fundamentalists have done in past U.S. generations (Marsden).

[6] The political dimension of Christian conservatism assessed in the Williams *et al.* study related to political issues presumably important to Christian evangelicals. Current political issues apparently vital to this group include gay marriage, abortion, support for the military, public display of religious symbols, prayer in the schools, and the inclusion of the phrase "under God" in the pledge of allegiance. Abortion and same-sex marriages were among the

most salient political issues for Christian conservatives in the U.S. 2004 presidential election (Pew Research Center). Despite the apparent importance of these issues to Christian evangelicals, Hillygus and Shields found that they had a smaller impact on the outcome of the 2004 Presidential election than voter perspectives of the Iraq War, terrorism, and the national economy.

[7] An important issue in the current study is whether the theological and political dimensions of Christian conservatism differently relate to sociopolitical values. Becoming heavily invested in political movements versus keeping one's focus on the five fundamentals could lead to different sociopolitical perspectives. Despite this possibility, Williams *et al.* found that theological and political Christian conservatism highly related to each other and both strongly related to militarism. Nonetheless, when both theological and political religious measures were used as potential predictors of militarism in a stepwise regression analysis, the political dimension accounted for most of the variance in militarism.

[8] Another sociopolitical variable that has been widely linked to conventional Christian values is intolerance of dissent. Stouffer's national survey showed that non-churchgoers were more tolerant of diverse views than were churchgoers, with Southern Protestants being the least tolerant Christian group. Beatty and Walter found that frequency of church attendance was negatively related to political tolerance. Furthermore, controlling for educational and occupational level did not diminish the relationships between church attendance and political intolerance.

[9] Beatty and Walter's study showed that individuals across all denominations who frequently attended church services were less tolerant of unpopular views than were non-attendeers. However, the targets of intolerance varied across religious groups: Episcopalians were least tolerant toward militarists, whereas Jehovah's witnesses were least tolerant toward homosexuals. Karpov compared the relationship between religiosity and tolerance in the U.S. and Poland. Theocratic beliefs (support for the power of the church in government) proved predictive of intolerance in both societies.

[10] Although level of intolerance among Christian conservatives may be related in part to educational level and region of the country, doctrinal issues also appear to play a role in this intolerance. Wilcox and Jelen speculated that two doctrinal issues may be at the root of Christian conservatives' intolerance: commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible and belief in a Devil who intervenes in human affairs. Because the teachings of the Bible are viewed as clear and incontrovertible, questioning Biblical directives would likely be viewed by Christian fundamentalists as detrimental to one's faith. Fundamentalists are likely to attribute actions and beliefs contrary to Biblical teachings as influenced by the Devil. Thus, any tolerance of views inconsistent with Biblical teachings could be viewed as evil. An academic atmosphere characterized by discussion of alternative religious, moral, and political views could be regarded as particularly hazardous for the impressionable minds of college students (Jelen and Wilcox).

[11] Social-science research has not widely addressed the relationships between religiosity measures and the remaining sociopolitical variables (e.g., nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, and respect for civil liberties) targeted in the current study. However, the definitions of these variables suggest that they share some common ground with

conservative Christian values. Nationalism has generally been represented as an “America-first” perspective that considers the U.S. as superior to and dominant over other countries (Baughn and Yaprak; Kosterman and Feshbach). The perceived superiority of one’s group over other groups seems consistent with the mentality often found in Christian fundamentalist groups (i.e., only they know the real truth of God). Kristol has acknowledged an association between religiosity and nationalism in his claim that “the three pillars of modern conservatism are religion, nationalism, and economic growth” (365).

[12] In contrast to nationalism, internationalism is a worldview that places global welfare above the self-interests of one’s own country. In fact, internationalists would be willing to make sacrifices to help relieve poverty, suffering, and oppression in other countries (Kosterman and Feshbach). Because many of the notions reflected in internationalism appear consistent with the teachings of Jesus to help the poor and preach the gospel everywhere, one might expect Christian conservatives to embrace an internationalistic perspective.

[13] Another highly publicized sociopolitical value potentially related to Christian conservatism is patriotism. This construct emphasizes positive feelings about one’s country, embodying such emotions as love and appreciation of one’s country. Although patriotism was weakly but positively correlated with nationalism in Kosterman and Feshbach’s research, the two terms have been used somewhat interchangeably in some U.S. political circles. A highly nationalistic approach to patriotism is reflected in the USA Patriot Act, originally championed by a U.S. Attorney General committed to Christian conservatism (Urban). Scarry noted that the Patriot Act permits one’s private communications to become more accessible to government view and government business to become more concealed from public view.

[14] Given the diversity of views about the nature of patriotism, Schatz, Staub, and Lavine have distinguished between blind patriotism and constructive patriotism. According to their differentiation, blind patriotism is virtually synonymous with nationalism (unquestioning allegiance to the U.S. and denigration of criticism of U.S. policies and actions). On the other hand, constructive patriotism supports questioning and criticizing political practices that undermine the high purpose of the U.S. in the world. Individuals embracing constructive patriotism tend to be better informed about political policies and more politically active than those committed to blind patriotism. Within this framework, constructive patriotism may actually represent a deeper commitment to the well-being of one’s country than blind patriotism.

[15] Another major issue being debated in our society is the balance between national security and civil liberties. The debate centers on the extent to which conventional civil liberties can be temporarily set aside in the interest of national security. For example, can a non-citizen suspected of having terrorist ties be imprisoned indefinitely without being charged and without having access to counsel and family? Are the civil liberties guaranteed to U.S. citizens also applicable to non-citizens under U.S. control? Although there is minimal research on conservative Christians’ views of civil liberties, some research suggests that conservative Protestants are less willing to grant civil liberties to unpopular groups than are mainline Protestants and Catholics (Reimer and Park).

Framework for the Current Study

[16] Because past research has clearly established a relationship between Christian conservatism and militarism, that relationship was not addressed in the current study. Instead, the study examined the relationship between two measures of Christian conservatism, as previously delineated by Williams et al., and other high-profile sociopolitical values: nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent. Among these sociopolitical variables, only tolerance of dissent has received considerable attention in the religiosity research. Although research has shown negative relationships between religiosity measures and tolerance of dissent, that research has not examined whether the two dimensions of Christian conservatism assessed in the current study are differentially related to tolerance of dissent. In addition, little empirical research is available regarding the relationship between the Christian conservatism measures and the remaining sociopolitical variables targeted in this study.

The Study

Participants

[17] Teacher-education students ($N = 190$) in an undergraduate human-development course in a Southeastern U.S. state university participated in the study. Most participants were sophomores and juniors, with a 2 to 1 ratio between females and males. The sample was relatively homogenous with respect to religious ideology. Voluntary demographic information submitted by students in the course has indicated that about 80% of the reporting students were Protestants, 9% Catholics, 2% atheist/agnostics, and the remaining 8% of other religious faiths.

Questionnaires

[18] All participants responded to two major questionnaires that measured various religious and sociopolitical perspectives: one questionnaire assessed Christian conservatism (containing some items strictly theological in nature and other items linking Christianity to political issues) and another questionnaire measured a combination of sociopolitical values (i.e., nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent).

[19] *Religious Perspectives Questionnaire*. This measure included 20 items that were thematically related to theological premises of Christian fundamentalism and another 20 items thematically related to political concerns often voiced by Christian evangelicals. These two dimensions are referred to henceforth in the current article as theological fundamentalism and political evangelicalism. The latter variable appears generally analogous to what some studies have referred to as “social theology” as opposed to theology focused on perspectives of God (Guth, Poloma, Smidt, Green, and Kellstedt).

[20] Approximately half the items in the two Christian conservatism scales affirmed Christian perspectives and the remaining items questioned Christian perspectives. Statements representing theological fundamentalism included such items as “every word in the Bible is inspired of God,” “Jesus offers our only hope for salvation,” and “Jesus is the only person in recorded history born of a virgin.” In contrast, statements questioning theological

fundamentalism included such items as “there are several contradictions in the Bible,” “the notion of Jesus as the Son of God is largely mythical,” and “it is highly questionable whether Jesus arose from the dead and ultimately ascended back to heaven.”

[21] Items representing the political activism of Christian evangelicals included “we should attempt to elect leaders who reflect the religious values of our country’s heritage,” “the basic moral standards of our society should be based on the Bible,” and “God provides special blessings to nations that follow him.” On the other hand, items counter to political evangelicalism included “public prayer should be prohibited in the schools,” “we should keep religion and government separate,” and “the teaching of Biblical values has no place in the schools.”

[22] Students responded to each item on a five-point scale: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *uncertain*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. All items supportive of Christian conservatism were scored in the following manner: *strongly agree* = 5 points, *agree* = 4 points, *uncertain* = 3 points, *disagree* = 2 points, and *strongly disagree* = 1 point. In contrast, items antithetical to Christian conservatism were scored in a reverse pattern: *strongly agree* = 1 point, *agree* = 2 points, *uncertain* = 3 points, *disagree* = 4 points, and *strongly disagree* = 5 points. Thus, scores could range from 20 to 100 on each of the 20-item Christian conservatism scales. High scores on the inventory reflected strong support for conservative Christian perspectives and low scores indicated reservations about these perspectives.

[23] *Perceptions of National and International Issues*. This instrument included five subscales: nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent. Items were answered on the same 1-5 scale as used in the *Religious Perspectives Questionnaire*; all items were scored in a direction supportive of the construct being measured (e.g., nationalism, internationalism, and patriotism). Five items were used to assess each sociopolitical perspective. Several statements included in these scales were adapted from items identified by Kosterman and Feshbach as having the strongest loadings on factors extracted in their study of selected sociopolitical values. Total scores on each subscale could range from 5 to 25.

[24] The nationalism items assessed beliefs regarding the perceived importance of one’s own country in the world community. Generally speaking, highly nationalistic citizens of the U.S. believe that the nation should place greater emphasis on the priorities of the U.S. than the needs of other countries. They also regard the U.S. as having the greatest power and influence on the international stage of any nation in the world. Illustrative items were “we should buy products made in our own country whenever they are available,” “an important consideration in determining whether to provide aid to another country is whether giving that aid would be politically advantageous to us” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 265), and “it is better to fight terrorists on foreign soil than our own soil.”

[25] The internationalism subscale emphasized the importance of helping people in all nations, even if that means making some sacrifices in one’s own nation. The following items illustrate this notion: “We should support any movement that contributes to the welfare of the world as a whole, regardless of our special national interests” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 266); “we should teach our children to uphold the welfare of all people everywhere even when that assistance may be against the political interests of our country” (Kosterman and

Feshbach: 266); and “we should be very willing to share our wealth with suffering nations, even if this action does not necessarily coincide with our political interests” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 266).

[26] The patriotism subscale was intended to emphasize commitment to one’s country, but it did not differentiate between blind and constructive patriotism. Our measure included such items as “I love my country,” “I feel a great pride in my homeland,” and “My citizenship in this country is an important part of my identity” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 264). These items reflect a deep commitment to one’s country without implying that other countries are less worthy.

[27] The respect for civil liberties subscale addressed due process for individuals suspected of acting counter to the security and honor of their country. Illustrative items were “individuals suspected of involvement with terrorist groups should *not* be detained without being charged and without having access to legal counsel,” “it is acceptable to indefinitely imprison enemy combatants without charging them and without allowing them access to legal counsel” (negative indicator), and “soldiers accused of war crimes should be tried in civil courts rather than military courts.”

[28] The last subscale, tolerance of dissent, represented the possibility of being a good citizen while opposing established political practices in one’s country. Items illustrating this notion included “a person who prefers going to jail to serving in our military could still be a good citizen” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 267), “a person who doesn’t stand when our national anthem is performed could still be a good citizen” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 267), and “people who frequently criticize our country should be encouraged to move to another country” (negative indicator). It should be noted that Kosterman and Feshbach named these items civil liberties, whereas we referred to them as tolerance of dissent.

The Findings

[29] This section first presents the internal consistency of the seven measures (theological fundamentalism, political evangelicalism, nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent) used in the current study. The relationships between the Christian conservatism measures and the sociopolitical measures are then presented.

Internal Consistency of Measures

[30] Internal consistency is a mathematical measure of the extent to which responses to items on a scale are consistent with one another (i.e., the extent to which the items are measuring the same construct). A statistic known as Cronbach’s Alpha is the most popular representation of this concept. Internal consistency can range from 0.00 to 1.00, with the latter representing perfect consistency between responses to items. Low internal consistency does not necessarily mean that responses to the items are invalid, but rather that those items do not reflect a unitary construct. Across our item groups, a majority of the internal consistency measures were above the .70 level suggested for research purposes (see Table 1). The two measures of Christian conservatism yielded extremely high internal consistency: .96 for theological fundamentalism and .94 for political evangelicalism. The two item groups

yielding the weakest internal consistency measures were nationalism (.55) and respect for civil liberties (.59).

Table 1: Cronbach's Alphas across Sociopolitical Measures

Theological Fundamentalism	Political Evangelicalism	Nationalism	Internationalism	Patriotism	Civil Liberties	Tolerance of Dissent
.96	.94	.55	.72	.81	.59	.79

Relationships between Religious Measures and Comparison Sociopolitical Variables

[31] For the two religious measures, students scored significantly higher on theological fundamentalism than political evangelicalism, with means for the two groups being 74.59 and 62.66 respectively and the standard deviations being 18.56 and 16.54 respectively. Somewhat higher standard deviations for the theological fundamentalism measure should have contributed to stronger correlations between this measure and the sociopolitical values than between political evangelicalism and the sociopolitical variables.

[32] Actually, both religious measures correlated significantly with all comparison variables except internationalism. However, Table 2 shows that these relationships tended to be stronger for political evangelicalism than for theological fundamentalism. The relationships between the Christian conservatism measures and comparison sociopolitical variables were strongest for respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent, with both relationships being negative. The highest correlations were between political evangelicalism and respect for civil liberties (-.50) and tolerance of dissent (-.63). According to psychometric authorities (e.g., Cohen), both of these correlations would be considered large.

Table 2: Correlations between Religious Measures and Comparison Sociopolitical Variables.

Religious	Sociopolitical Values				
	Nationalism	Internationalism	Patriotism	Civil Liberties	Tolerance of Dissent
Theological Fundamentalism	.17*	.10	.27**	-.36**	-.49**
Political Evangelicalism	.33**	-.08	.40**	-.50**	-.63**

*p < .05 **p < .01

Implications of the Findings

[33] The findings of this study underscore the extent to which conservative Christian beliefs have become enmeshed within the conservative sociopolitical culture of the U.S. Although both theological fundamentalism and political evangelicalism were significantly related to most of the sociopolitical views assessed in the current study, these relationships were considerably stronger for political evangelicalism. As seen in the 2004 presidential election, Christian evangelicals strongly supported the candidate perceived as representing their

religious views in the formulation of political policy. While the war in Iraq was a major issue for many Americans in that presidential election, Christian evangelicals appeared more concerned about life-style practices within the American culture (e.g., homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and abortion) in the determination of their vote. Such life-style practices were seen as undermining the Judeo-Christian sanctity of the American culture. Although Christian evangelicals resist the rights of others to embrace life-style practices counter to the Judeo-Christian heritage, they oppose restraints on the political recognition of conservative Christian views (van der Vyver).

[34] The results of the current study show that Christian conservatism is more nationalistic than internationalistic. One might think that Jesus' teaching about the oneness of the Christian family, without regard to nationality, ethnicity, gender, or station in life, would lead conservative Christians to reach out to the poor and suffering everywhere. Plus, one of the strongest commitments of Christian evangelicals is to preach the Gospel of Jesus throughout the world. The lack of a significant correlation between the Christian conservatism measures and internationalism appears to suggest an indifference to one's nation using its resources to promote the well-being of other nations.

[35] Given that the current study was done with a relatively small sample of college students in a Southeastern University, one wonders whether the observed trends would hold at other educational levels and in other regions of the country. Had a random sample of Americans from all educational levels been used as respondents, would the relationships observed in this student sample have been stronger or weaker? Our speculation is that those relationships would have been stronger. Most of our students tend to have moderate rather than extreme religious and sociopolitical views. A more restricted range of views in either area reduces the magnitude of the correlations between these spheres. Thus, if responses had been solicited from relatively uneducated individuals, as well as from those pursuing a college degree, the breadth of views would likely have been extended and the correlations strengthened between the Christian conservatism measures and the selected sociopolitical views.

[36] It is likely that our findings have a regional flavor. Although the targeted university has students from all regions of the country, a majority of the student body comes from the southeastern region of the U.S. It is widely known that this region is more politically conservative than some other regions of the country, especially the Northeast and the Far West (Olson and Green, 2006a). Thus, the strength of views on some dimensions addressed in this study (e.g., Christian conservatism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent) might be somewhat stronger in the Southeast than in other regions of the country. Nonetheless, a difference in the strength of those views would not necessarily affect the nature of the relationship between the views. It is quite possible that the same study done in universities in other regions of the country would produce higher or lower mean scores on certain of the selected variables but not necessarily different correlations between those views than those obtained in the current study.

[37] The relationships between the Christian-conservatism measures and the sociopolitical variables targeted in the current study may not be unique to Christian views. Schwartz and Huismans compared the value priorities and religiosity of four different religions (Judaism,

Protestantism, Catholicism, and Greek Orthodoxy) in societies where each religion was dominant. They found stronger religiosity among individuals who value certainty and submission to external truths than among those who value openness to change and free self-expression. Certainly, this emphasis on certainty and submission to “external truths” would seem consistent with the pattern of nationalism and intolerance of dissent found among Christian conservatives in the current study.

[38] The results of this study were not intended to reflect adversely on the theological efficacy of Christian conservatism. Although the theological fundamentals of Christian conservatism are challengeable on theological grounds, the focus of our study was the relationship between Christian conservatism and sociopolitical values. The findings suggest that even among students pursuing a college degree in teacher education, Christian conservatism is associated with certain sociopolitical perspectives: strong nationalism, patriotism, intolerance of dissent, and de-emphasis on civil liberties. It appears that conservative Christian values may be counter to some long-cherished ideals in the U.S. society: freedom of religion, separation of church and state, respect for diversity, and protection of civil liberties.

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