

Religiosity, transcendent accountability, and civic engagement

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Academic experts from Baylor University and Pepperdine University explore religiosity, transcendent accountability, and civic engagement

Civic engagement has declined considerably in America since Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political scientist, visited the United States in 1831 and observed the unique tendency toward volunteerism and the role it played in American civic life and culture. He wrote extensively about the inclination of American citizens to form voluntary associations of all types, including religious, community, and political organizations that contributed to volunteerism.

He also observed that religious congregations provide important sources of connection between individual citizens and their local community as well as government, motivating them to participate in civic and political activities. Tocqueville's observations provide an important clue to the trending decline of civic engagement in contemporary America.

Religiosity and civic engagement

If Tocqueville was right that religion is a significant determinant of voluntary associations and volunteerism, it would make sense for social scientists to examine whether and how religion might contribute to civic engagement. Specifically, how might an individual's religiosity or involvement in religious activities lead to civic participation, whether community or political?

A review of the research literature reveals a positive relationship between individual religiosity and civic engagement, as well as possible explanations for the relationship. For example, there is evidence that religious involvement increases volunteering in the community as it provides social networks and opportunities to volunteer and serve others. Similarly, studies indicate religiosity enhances political participation, as it offers opportunities to practice civic skills essential to political activity and to be exposed to politically relevant messages.

Moreover, religious involvement can lead to recruitment into politics via a network of coreligionists. Research also confirms that participation in religious activities raises group consciousness and a sense of political efficacy. While these explanations have generally received empirical support, they tend to be non-religious in nature, as scholars often failed to explore intrinsically religious mechanism explaining the religiosity-civic engagement relationship beyond social or psychological resources for civic participation.

Transcendent accountability

To address this gap in research on religiosity and civic engagement, we propose a rarely studied concept as a new resource for community and political participation: accountability. While the term “accountability” may carry a negative connotation (e.g., holding someone accountable for wrongdoing), recent work in philosophy and theology proposes accountability as a relational virtue. (Witvliet et al., 2023; 2024).

Stated differently, accountability is a positive trait of recognizing what is due to a person who has legitimate standing or authority and gladly seeks to render what is due to that person. Depending on who the accountor is, the virtue is either human or transcendent accountability, and we focus on the latter in our research.

People with the virtue of transcendent accountability welcome living in ways that are responsive to a transcendent guide (whether God, a higher power, or transcendent ideals), and are willingly responsible for their actions as well as cognitions and emotions. Thus, people with transcendent accountability not only seek to know transcendent values and standards for how to live, but also want to do well in living up to those values and standards.

Empirical studies

To empirically examine relationships among religiosity, transcendent accountability, and civic engagement (Jang et al., 2023a; Jang et al., 2023b), we hypothesized that religiosity would be positively related to transcendent accountability because the more religious people are, the more likely they are to have a sense of accountability to a transcendent guide for what they do in life.

We also hypothesized that transcendent accountability would be positively related to (a) pro-community attitudes since one’s responsibility to God or a higher power for one’s decisions and actions is likely to engender compassion and generosity toward others and (b) “religiopolitical awareness,” as the sense of accountability is expected to increase one’s perceiving the relevance of religion to politics. Finally, we hypothesized pro-community attitudes and religiopolitical awareness to be positively related to community and political participation, respectively.

To test these hypotheses, we analyzed data from a 2020 survey of 3,609 American adults. Both public and private religious behaviors and beliefs measured religiosity. Transcendent accountability was gauged by the extent to which respondents perceived they were “accountable to a higher power for [their] impact on other people” and “the natural environment.”

Multiple items were used to measure pro-community attitudes and religiopolitical awareness. Community participation was also measured by multiple items asking about the respondent’s actual behavior, such as attending community events and participating in organized volunteer opportunities. Similarly, political participation was measured by multiple items about electoral (voting) and non-electoral activity (e.g., signing a petition or joining a protest).

Results generally supported our hypotheses. That is, we found that religiosity was positively associated with transcendent accountability, which in turn was positively related to pro-community attitudes and religiopolitical awareness. These civic outcomes of transcendent accountability were then positively related to community and political participation, respectively.

Does religiosity contribute to civic engagement?

Our research provides empirical evidence that religiosity contributes to civic engagement because it is likely to enhance the virtue of transcendent accountability, which in turn generates pro-community attitudes and religiopolitical awareness, which leads to community and political participation. This finding implies that religion may promote and sustain civic engagement in ways that are beneficial to society as a whole, particularly in areas of community life and participatory democracy.

References

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