Religion and Government Corruption in the American States*  

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Abstract

One way to measure the quality of government is to assess the extent to which political officials are corrupt – using their public office for private gain. Previous studies of the factors that lead to more or less government corruption have neglected the role that religion might play in promoting good government and dissuading illegal behavior among public officials. This study first presents a set of theoretical expectations for why states with more religious citizens will have lower levels of government corruption and then tests this proposition using cross-sectional data from the American states. Despite reasons to expect otherwise, the religiosity of a state’s population is not related to instances of government corruption. This result is robust to multiple measures of both corruption and religiosity. The study concludes with a discussion of how these findings increase understanding of the impact of societal characteristics on the quality of government.
Political scientists are increasingly interested in what factors contribute to good
government (Knack 2002; Putnam 1993; Rice 2001; Uslaner 2006). While experts disagree on
what defines a good government, undoubtedly one desirable characteristic is that a government
has relatively few instances of corruption – officials who use their public office for private gain.
But, as Peters and Welch (1978, 974) aptly asked, “If political corruption is in the mainstream of
American politics, why is it not in the mainstream of American politics research?” To fill this
void, a handful of studies have attempted to measure and explain the prevalence of government
corruption, particularly across the American states (Alt and Lassen 2008; Boylan and Long 2003;

Among others, scholars have pointed to social capital (Uslaner 2006), state political culture
(Elazar 1966; Johnston 1983), and factors such as party competition, voter turnout, and
institutional design (Alt and Lassen 2008; Meier and Holbrook 1992) as determinates of
government corruption.

To date, religion has received scarce attention in studies of government corruption, a
surprising omission given the extensive literature on how religion impacts individual-level
political behavior. If religion leads individual citizens to adopt certain attitudes and behaviors,
do aggregate levels of religiosity function similarly and lead to less corrupt governments? To
evaluate this question, this paper first describes a set of theoretical expectations that predict
states with more religious citizens will have lower levels of corruption. It then empirically tests
this prediction and finds little relationship between religiosity and corruption in the American
states. Because there is disagreement among scholars over the measurement of religiosity and
government corruption, the paper shows that this result is robust to multiple measures of both.
Together, the findings contribute to the understanding of corruption and government quality.
Corruption as a Measure of Government Quality

There is increased interest in evaluating the quality of governments and investigating factors that contribute to their overall functioning. Recent work has documented a relationship between certain values within a community (most importantly interpersonal trust) and higher government quality. Whether measured as citizen perceptions of the effectiveness and responsiveness of local governments (Rice 2001) or a “technocratic” measure of government performance (Knack 2002), areas with high levels of trust and generalized reciprocity tend to have higher quality governments.

Uslaner (2006) explicitly considers corruption as a means by which government performance can be gauged and finds that (similar to the studies cited above) reciprocal trust, and similar values associated with higher stocks of social capital, promote better government by decreasing political corruption. Other studies have found that large states, and those with traditionalist political cultures, have high levels of corruption (Johnston 1983), while states with divided government, elected judges, more educated citizens, a “moralistic” political culture, and less urban areas tend to have lower levels of corruption (Alt and Lassen 2008; Johnston 1983; Meier and Holbrook 1992). Previous studies have also documented that corruption “matters” insofar as it leads to observable negative consequences. Specifically, corrupt governments are less efficient in their day-to-day operations and in serving constituents (Knack and Keefer 1997; LaPorta et al. 1999; Mauro 1997; Woods 2008; but see Nice 1986).

Theoretical Linkages between Religion and Government Corruption

What reasons are there for expecting government to be influenced by religious factors? To begin, beliefs associated with religion are known influence a wide range of individual
behaviors.¹ An individual’s ideas about what is correct behavior, as well as the consequences of deviant behavior, are to a great extent shaped by religious beliefs. Church doctrines inform individuals about the benefits “do-gooders” in this life will receive in heaven, and the costs “evil-doers” will pay in hell. Moral behavior, and the resulting moral order of society, is therefore enforced by religion, and for some individuals this means living under “omnipresent divine surveillance” by the “supernatural police,” greatly raising the costs of transgression (Anderson and Tollison 1992). Hull and Bold (1994) agree that by shaping perceptions of the afterlife, religion encourages people to conduct themselves in socially desirable ways, and go further by suggesting that in different cultural contexts the rule-enforcement power of religion may be stronger than other factors such as government, community, and family.

Furthermore, evidence from cross-national research suggests that through ethical mechanisms religion can temper illicit behavior in the public sphere (Lipset and Lenz 2000; Woodberry and Shah 2004). This is no small matter, as most religious traditions in the United States advocate abiding by civil law and avoiding illegal activity that benefits one privately at the expense of the community or common good. Because government officials are drawn from the population at large, more religious officials are likely to hold public office in states with higher levels of religiosity and these officials will be less likely to engage in illegal (corrupt) behavior while in office.²

It is also expected that more religious citizens will be extra vigilant against government corruption and prioritize it as a salient issue. One piece of evidence in support of this expectation is a 2007 poll of 1,006 American adults conducted by the Gallup Organization.³ Respondents were asked, “As I read each one [issue], please tell me how important the candidates’ positions on that issue will be in influencing your vote for president – extremely
important, very important, somewhat important, or not important?” For the issue of “corruption
in government” fully 80% of respondents who reported being a member of a religious
denomination answered “extremely” or “very important” while only 67% of those who reported
“no religion” fell into those two categories. This poll result is one piece of evidence that the
issue of government corruption is more salient in the minds of more religious citizens.

Overall, expectations about the relationship between religion and government corruption
are grounded in the idea that characteristics of government and the public sphere more generally
are, to a great extent, reflective of characteristics of the citizens that populate that polity. For
Nice (1983, 509), government corruption is mainly a cultural by-product that represents the
extension of private behavior into the public sphere because, as he succinctly states, “If crime
abounds in the private sector … the public sector is unlikely to remain pure and undefiled.”
Assuming that a more religious population will be less prone to criminal activity leads to the
expectation that more religious citizens will generate a public sphere that is “pure and undefiled”
and less corrupt.4

But just as important as individual-level processes, the social nature of religious
belonging and worship may also promote less corruption in government. Religion promotes civil
society, a prominent theme in state-level studies of social capital (Putnam 2000) which has been
shown to increase government quality (Knack 2002; Rice 2001; Uslaner 2006). Treisman’s
(2000) cross-national research comes to a similar conclusion; religion reduces corruption
because it assists in the organization of a civil society and makes citizens more likely to monitor
elites. These studies all suggest a connection between religion and government quality, one that
is mediated through social connectedness. After all, churches are political communities (Wald,
Owen, and Hill 1988), serving as a venue through which individuals obtain a general awareness
of political matters. Church attendance, a form of associational life representing citizen participation in a social network similar to membership in other clubs, is a form of socializing that fosters social capital and likely spills over into government. So, church attendance helps citizens build the generalized trust that has been linked to higher quality government and less corruption.

In sum, the discussion above suggests at least two general theoretical reasons to expect that states with more religious populations will have lower levels of government corruption. First, religious belief influences individual human behavior and instills beliefs that promote a basic morality, law-abidingness, and certain values such as not using a public office for private gain. Second, religious belonging and worship is an important social activity that helps bind adherents into close social networks that have been associated with less corruption in previous studies.

Data and Method of Analysis

Is aggregate religiosity related to government corruption when controlling for other relevant factors? This proposition is tested using cross-sectional data from the American states. Before describing the data, however, it is first important to note that any relationship between religiosity and government corruption is likely exogenous or “one way” as compared to other studies that examine the impact of law enforcement or political institutions on corruption rates. While these factors detailed in previous studies likely influence the amount of corruption that occurs in a state, they are also, in part, a response to existing corruption and illegal behavior. Thus, the relationship between these factors and corruption is likely endogenous. In contrast, it is unlikely that citizens’ religious devotion is substantively affected by the amount of
government corruption in their state. So, there is initial confidence that any causal relationship runs from religiosity to corruption and not the reverse.

**Measuring Government Corruption**

This study utilizes two measures of government corruption. The first measure comes from Boylan and Long (2003) who surveyed reporters covering state legislatures in 1999 about their perceptions of corruption in their respective state governments (descriptions and summary statistics for all variables used in the analysis are provided in the Appendix). Reporters were mailed a survey that asked a series of questions pertaining to a variety of political corruption issues. A total of 293 reporters returned the survey, providing an overall response rate of 36.7 percent. No responses were received from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Jersey reporters, and only one response each from Hawaii and Oregon reporters. Boylan and Long create a corruption scale by normalizing, and then averaging, the responses to six questions from the survey. In their data, South Dakota is the least corrupt state with a value of -1.897, while New Mexico is the most corrupt state at 1.611. Expert surveys similar to this one are widely used by scholars in studies of cross-national variation in levels of corruption (Ades and Di Tella 1999; Fisman and Gatti 2002; Mauro 1995; Treisman 2000). In the United States, because of their extensive knowledge of the day-to-day activities of state governments, these reporters are well positioned to offer accurate appraisals of corruption in the state government they cover.

The second measure of corruption comes from Glaeser and Saks (2004, 2006) and uses conviction rates for corruption-related charges for local, state, and federal public officials in a state per 100,000 state residents from 1990 to 2002. This corruption rate ranges from a low of .079 in Nebraska to a high of 9.19 in Mississippi. The information pertaining to crimes
committed by public officials was obtained from the Department of Justice’s (DOJ) “Report to Congress on the Activities and Operations of the Public Integrity Section” (United States Department of Justice 2006). The DOJ investigates and reports a number of criminal acts by public officials that includes “a wide array of topics such as conflict of interest, fraud, campaign-finance violations, and obstruction of justice” (Glaeser and Saks 2006, 1057).

It is important to point out that these two rather widely accepted measures of corruption are positively but not strongly correlated ($r = .17$), which provides evidence of the difficulty of accurately measuring the concept. In fact, this rather low correlation between the two widely used measures of government corruption in the political science literature indicates that future studies should attempt to reconcile the different aspects of government corruption that each measure is detecting.

There are benefits to using both of the measures. The state reporter perceptions of corruption measure addresses the problem that federal prosecution is determined not only by the amount of government corruption in a state but also the availability of prosecutorial resources and effort, varying greatly from state to state and not fully captured by using conviction data. In addition, federal prosecutors may be more reluctant to investigate and prosecute wrongdoing by public officials in some states compared to others. On the other hand, the conviction rate measure allows for a more objective and standardized measure of corruption than surveys, which also suffer from non-response bias. In addition, the conviction rate data cover a twelve year time period, which provides a more generalized level of corruption for each state that is less influenced by year to year fluctuations and idiosyncrasies.
Measuring State-Level Religiosity

There is even greater scholarly debate over the proper measurement of religiosity. This is due in part to disagreements among scholars about how best to quantify religion and an individual’s underlying “level” of religious belief and devotion. Scholars of religion and politics often use the terms “belief, belonging, and behavior” when referring to the different ways in which religiosity can be assessed (Kohut et al. 2000; Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Olson and Warber 2008). To mirror this three part conceptual definition, three different measures of religiosity are used (and described below).

As a measure of religious belief, this study uses data pooled over time (1975-1998) from the DDB Needham’s “Life Styles” surveys that asks respondents to respond to the statement “Religion is an important part of my life” on a 1-6 scale that ranges from “definitely disagree” to “definitely agree.” Because the surveys are pooled over time, it is possible to derive reliable state-level estimates of responses to this question. Deriving this measure simply requires taking the mean response to the statement across all respondents in a state, with greater importance assigned to religion in one’s life coded higher. As a measure of religious belonging, this study uses data from the American Religion Data Archive that measures the number of people who report being a member of an organized church per 1,000 state residents. As a measure of religious behavior, this study uses data on church attendance from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), a random-digit dialing rolling cross section survey conducted in the months leading up to the 2000 presidential election. The major advantage of this survey is its sheer sample size, over 60,000. To measure religiosity, this study uses an item that asks respondents “How often do you attend religious services, apart from special events like weddings and funerals?” with five response categories: never, a few times a year, once or twice a month,
once a week, more than once a week. These responses are then aggregated to the state level to produce a mean for each state, with greater frequency of church attendance coded higher.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Other Variables Influencing Government Corruption}

This study also controls for other factors that may influence levels of government corruption in the states. Across the literature on the political determinates of government corruption, there is wide variety in the control variables used in each study’s model specification. This study includes control variables only if they appear in two or more published studies of government corruption.

To begin, it is expected that states with more urban areas will have higher levels of corruption (Johnston 1983; Meier and Holbrook 1992), so a measure of the percent of a state’s population living in urban areas is included.\textsuperscript{12} It is also expected that citizens with higher socioeconomic status will be more likely to closely monitor government and increase the probability that public officials who engage in corrupt behavior will be brought to light (Alt and Lassen 2008; Glaeser and Saks 2006; Knack 2002; Meier and Holbrook 1992). So, a control for average level of education using the percentage of a state’s residents who have a high school diploma and a state’s wealth using per capita income data are included.\textsuperscript{13} This study also includes a measure of electoral competiveness from each state (Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993) with the expectation that states dominated by a single political party will have higher levels of corruption (Hill 2003; Meier and Holbrook 1992; Woods 2008) and controls for a state’s political culture using Sharkansky’s (1969) continuous formulation of Elazar’s (1966) political culture scheme with the expectation that more moralistic states will have lower levels of
corruption (Hill 2003; Johnston 1983). The two measures of government corruption are continuous, so the data lend themselves to analysis with ordinary least squares regression.

**Empirical Results**

To begin, Figure 1 displays six scatterplots that show the bivariate relationship between the two measures of corruption and three measures of state-level religiosity. These scatterplots provide a clear representation of any bivariate relationship between religiosity and government corruption. Looking across the six scatterplots, the most prominent feature is that there appears to be little systematic relationship between the three measures of religiosity and the two measures of corruption. The scatterplot comparing corruption using the state reporters’ perceptions and religiosity measured as church membership per 1,000 state residents (Scatterplot “B”) suggests a slight negative relationship, as expected, but the strength of that relationship is hardly overwhelming. In the remaining graphs, the relationship appears to be zero or even tending toward positive, possibly indicating that more religious states have higher levels of government corruption.

[Figure 1 about here]

Next, the two measures of corruption are regressed on the different measures of religiosity and the set of control variables described above. In Table 1, the Boylan and Long (2003) state legislative reporters’ perceptions measure of government corruption is used. Across the three columns, the coefficients for religious belief, belonging, and behavior are all negative, but none of the coefficients is statistically different from zero at conventional levels of statistical significance. This result is not surprising given the apparent non-relationship displayed in Figure 1. Turning to the other variables in the model, consistent with prior research
on government corruption, states with a greater percentage of their residents living in urban areas have higher levels of corruption (Meier and Holbrook 1992) as well as states with more traditionalistic (and less moralistic) political cultures (Hill 2003).

Using Glaeser and Saks’ (2004, 2006) conviction rate measure of government corruption, Table 2 also reveals little evidence of a relationship between a state’s aggregated level of religiosity and government corruption. In fact, all three religiosity coefficients are positively signed, though their values are not statistically distinguishable from zero. The hypothesized negative relationship between a state’s level of religious belief, belonging, and behavior and instances of government corruption is simply not borne out in the data examined here.

Given these surprising null results, a further comment on the model specifications is necessary. Most of the control variables this study and others have hypothesized would strongly relate to a state’s level of government corruption are, in fact, not statistically related to either measure of corruption. But, a survey of previous research on the topic reveals that this is not all that surprising. For example, Rice (2001) and Glaeser and Saks (2006) discuss some of the problems associated with modeling government corruption in the United States and express concerns that their results may be especially sensitive to model specification. In fact, most of the models in previous studies reviewed above tend to report only one or two variables that are related to corruption at conventional levels of statistical significance, while the remaining variables bear no relationship. It is likely that this is in large part due to the inherent difficult in accurately measuring the dependent variable of interest. One piece of evidence to support this proposition is that the two measures of corruption used in this study and are prominently featured
in the small but growing government corruption literature correlate at only .17. This low correlation suggests there is a great deal of measurement error in the dependent variable, which would increase the uncertainty in the relationship (i.e. the size of the standard errors for regression coefficients) between it and the explanatory variables in any linear model. Therefore, future research efforts on this topic should to carefully consider how the concept of corruption is measured and operationalized.

Discussion

Government performance is not just efficiency or responsiveness, it also depends on the amount of corruption perpetuated by public officials. Most previous studies have failed to take corruption into account as a key feature of government performance. Governments may receive high marks on standard measures of efficiency and responsiveness (Knack 2002; Rice 2001), but if the officials who conduct the day-to-day business of politics are dishonest, then scholars should think twice before passing judgments about government quality. Perhaps Uslaner (2006, 18) said it best: “Corruption is the scourge of good government.”

For some time scholars have called for more research on government corruption (Johnston 2006; Peters and Welch 1978). This study answers that call by examining the relationship between religion and corruption across the American states. Although the results indicate little relationship between aggregated measures of citizens’ religiosity and government corruption, these “null findings” have significant implications for future research. A rather obvious question that arises from this study is: Why is there no apparent relationship between religion and government corruption in the United States? The analysis uses an aggregated measure of citizens’ religiosity, and can make no claims about the relationship between religious
practice and the extent to which individuals engage in socially undesirable acts. However, the null findings are suggestive of a gap between private activity and public activity, thereby raising the question of whether society as a whole (and quality of government in particular) normatively benefits from private religion, religious values, and morality.

This does not imply, however, that efforts to understand the relationship between religion and government performance should be abandoned. In fact, it points to the need for continued research on the relationship between the two. For example, previous studies have shown that the values that partly make up common measures of social capital (primarily interpersonal trust) are associated with higher quality of government (Knack 2002; Rice 2001; Uslaner 2006). Future studies should attempt to determine the extent to which churchgoing and religious belief are the primary source of these important values. However, given the empirical findings presented here, religion does not seem to directly “purify” government by reducing corruption in the American states.
References


   
   *Journal of Urban Affairs* 23(3-4): 375-89.


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Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors reported below in brackets.

* denotes p<.05 with a two-tailed test.
### Table 2: State Religiosity and Criminal Conviction Rates for Government Corruption

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Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors reported below in brackets.

* denotes p<.05 with a two-tailed test.
Figure 1: Bivariate Scatterplots of State Religiosity and Government Corruption

A

B

C
## Appendix: Description and Summary Statistics of the Data

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<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean, SD, Range</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<td>Corruption #1</td>
<td>State reporters’ perceptions of government corruption, factor score of 6 survey items (1999)</td>
<td>0 (\pm 0.73) to 1.89 (\pm 1.61)</td>
<td>Boylan and Long (2003)</td>
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<td>Corruption #2</td>
<td>Corruption convictions per 100,000 state residents (1990-2002)</td>
<td>3.98 (\pm 0.10) to 9.19 (\pm 0.79)</td>
<td>Glaeser and Saks (2004)</td>
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<td>Religious Belief</td>
<td>Degree to which religion is important in a respondent’s life (1-6)</td>
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<td>Religious Belonging</td>
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<td>% High School Diploma</td>
<td>Percentage of state residents with a high school diploma</td>
<td>78.5 (\pm 5.7) to 87.6 (\pm 65.9)</td>
<td>U.S. Census (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>Per capita income of all state residents</td>
<td>$15,421.08, $2446.63, $10,947 to $22,129</td>
<td>U.S. Census (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Competition</td>
<td>Competitiveness of state elections measured using district-level legislative election results (higher value indicates a state is more competitive)</td>
<td>39.03 (\pm 11.40) to 56.58 (\pm 9.26)</td>
<td>Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Culture (Traditionalistic)</td>
<td>State’s political culture from moralistic (1) to individualistic to traditionalistic (9)</td>
<td>4.97 (\pm 2.59) to 9 (\pm 1)</td>
<td>Sharkansky (1969)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All data are for the state level.
Endnotes

1 There is a large literature in political science that examines the connection between religion and individual behaviors (e.g., Leege and Kellstedt 1993). This study asks whether these individual behaviors, when aggregated to the state level, lead to lower levels of government corruption.

2 In a case study of religion’s influence on politics in the state of Georgia, Bullock (2006, 94) details recent elections in which individuals sympathetic to the preferences of religious conservatives have won state legislative offices and stand poised to “push the evangelical agenda.”


4 Elaborating on this idea, Meier and Holbrook (1992) argue that increased public perceptions of government corruption may lead to an increase in more general criminal activity in a society.

5 Ideally, data pooled over time would allow for evaluating the relationship between change in religiosity and change in levels of government corruption while using fixed effects for states. However, the data on government corruption (1990-2002) coincides with a period when religious adherence rates across the states remained quite stable (see Finke and Stark 2007, 23). In other words, there is little variation in the independent variable of interest over the time period of interest.

6 Other scholars of state politics have identified religiosity or religious affiliation as exogenous measures and have used them as an instrument to address endogeneity problems (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993).

7 The Cronbach’s alpha (.82) for this scale indicates that it is reliable and robust.
They use a variation of the method used by Nice (1983) and Meier and Holbrook (1992), who measured the number of convictions in each state per 100,000 federal, state, and local employees.

Every state except for five (Delaware N=165, North Dakota N=172, South Dakota N=186, Vermont N=153, and Wyoming N=103) has a sample size greater than 200 respondents.

Every state except for three (Delaware N=146, North Dakota=159, and Wyoming N=160) has a sample size greater than 200 respondents. The NAES did not survey respondents in Alaska or Hawaii.

The measure of religious belief correlates with belonging at .64 and with behavior at .95. The measures of religious belonging and behavior correlate at .62.

The percent of a state’s population living in urban areas is closely related to the size of a state’s population which has been show to relate to government performance in previous studies (Knack 2002; Rice 2001).

As an alternative measure of education, the percentage of state residents over the age of twenty-five with a college degree was substituted into the model. The results were substantively identical to those reported in Tables 1 and 2.

This variable ranges from 1 (Moralistic) to 9 (Traditionalistic), with the middle value indicating an Individualistic political culture. A “moralistic” political culture is characterized by heightened concern for civic engagement and the common good and should not be conflated with the possible moralizing effects of religion.

The number of observations in Table 1 is only 44 due to missing data. Specifically, there is no data on state legislative reporters’ perceptions of corruption for Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Jersey, data on electoral competition for Louisiana, and data on political culture for
Alaska and Hawaii. Table 2 uses conviction rate data for all states, leaving 47 observations due to the same missing states for electoral competition and political culture.