

## GOD POLITICS: How faith-based initiatives are changing the role of religion in American society

Research by two economists at Copenhagen University shows that modern policies can influence peoples' personal religious beliefs, even in Western countries. **Jeanet Sinding Bentzen** and **Lena Lindbjerg Sperling** find that faith-based initiatives in the United States have increased churchgoing and the intensity of religious beliefs among Americans. Their study will be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019.

One major argument put forward by proponents of the faith-based initiatives is that churches are better at providing for the needy than the state. To test this, the researchers use data on more than 30 indicators of wellbeing, including happiness, crime rates and various income measures. They find that the initiatives have had no influence on wellbeing.

The faith-based initiatives are a series of policies strengthening the cooperation between state and church, securing religious liberty and increasing the autonomy of the church in providing public welfare. New initiatives are implemented yearly ever since George W. Bush initiated them in 1996. As late as 3 May 2018, Donald Trump signed an executive order granting faith groups a stronger voice within the White House.

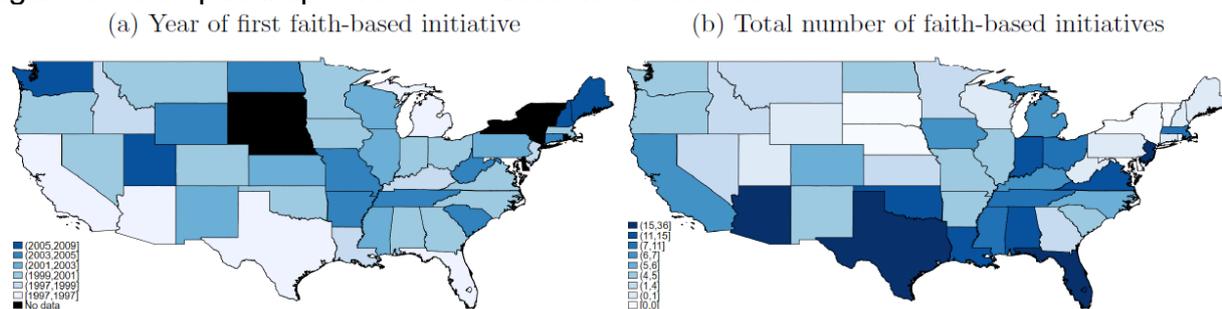
On average, churchgoing in the United States has fallen slightly over the past decades, but in states that implemented the faith-based initiatives early, average churchgoing has increased more than double the size of the average fall in churchgoing. Before the initiatives, Americans attended church less than once a month on average. After the initiatives, average attendance rates increased to nearly twice a month.

Different states have implemented the various faith-based initiatives at different points in time. The researchers use detailed data about the timing, intensity and type of initiatives passed between 1996 and today.

These data on 332 faith-based initiatives were compiled by sociologist Rebecca Sager at Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts in Los Angeles. The spatial spread of the timing and intensity of the initiatives are shown in Figure 1.

Jeanet Bentzen and Lena Sperling combine these data with data on the level of churchgoing, beliefs in God, importance of religion, and various measures of socio-economic outcomes for a representative sample of the American population.

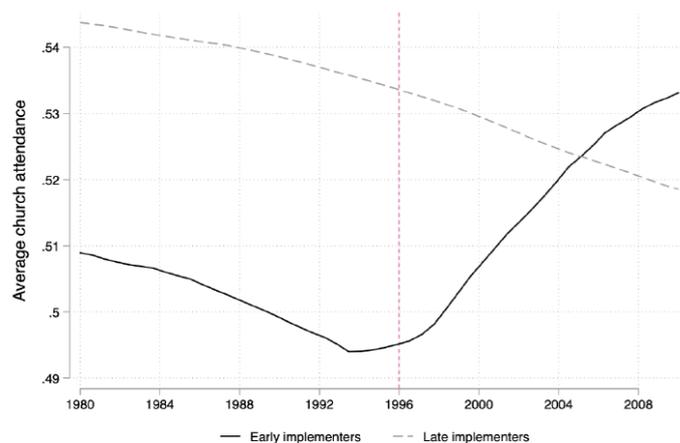
Figure 1. The spatial spread of the faith-based initiatives



As a simple illustration of their findings, Figure 2 splits US states into two equally sized bins; those that implemented faith-based initiatives before and after 2001, the median year of the first faith-based initiative in a state.

The figure shows that average US churchgoing is declining at a similar rate in the two groups before 1996. The decline in churchgoing continues for the late implementers throughout the period. For the states that implement faith-based initiatives early, however, churchgoing starts to increase around 1996. The researchers find similar effects for the various measures of the intensity of religious beliefs.

Figure 2. Average church attendance depending on the timing of implementation



Note: Early implementers are states that implement their first faith-based initiative before the median implementation year, while late implementers implement their first initiative after this year. The lines represent the kernel-weighted local polynomial regression of the weighted state means of attendance rates.

The explanation for the increased churchgoing and intensity of religious beliefs is that the initiatives have changed the role played by religion in the American society. Faith-based organisations have a larger say in politics, politicians use religion more when addressing the public, and the importance of religion in the American society in general has increased.

This piece of research contributes to our understanding of what drives changes in religiosity. A new field of research in economics, the economics of religion, investigates the importance of religion for differences in various social factors.

The basic idea is that religion potentially shapes the cultural values of individuals and/or the institutions of a society. Therefore, religion may influence individuals' incentives to innovate, save, and invest, for instance. Thus, understanding the roots of differences in religiosity is crucial. The research by Jeanet Bentzen and Lena Sperling also informs about a hitherto unknown consequence of these policies; increased religiosity.

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Contact:  
Jeanet Sinding Bentzen  
Associate Professor  
Department of Economics  
University of Copenhagen

[Jeanet.bentzen@econ.ku.dk](mailto:Jeanet.bentzen@econ.ku.dk)

Phone: +45 28252615

Website: <http://web.econ.ku.dk/bentzen/>