

No Religion, No (Political) Values? Political Attitudes of Atheists in Comparison

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On the basis of survey data for Switzerland, this study systematically compares the political attitudes of atheists with the ones of theists. As expected theoretically, there are indeed statistically significant differences in the attitudinal structures of these two groups. Atheists are more to the political left than theists, they have a higher degree of interest in politics, but less trust in established institutions. These results lead to two conclusions. First, the author pleads for a more systematic integration of the religious cleavage into the analyses of politics. Second, he maintains that key political and societal institutions have to adapt their strategies in order to include atheists.

Introduction

Attitudes can be described as a "type of subsystem of beliefs" and are acquired through the "principles of learning" (Rokeach 1968: 454, 450). They are learned "before the adult is fully mature", and they tend to be "relatively stable" during a person's life (Sears and Funk 1999: 1). During socialization, attitudes are "powerfully shaped" by a person's surroundings, namely by the social and political context, by

group memberships and by the "context-dependent experience of the given moment" (Bergman 1998: 82-83; Miller 1992: 428).

Religion and church membership are considered to be key formative elements of an individual's political attitudes, they give "individuals their most comprehensive ideas about reality and the meaning of events" (Lovin 1992: 521). According to this argument, different religious or confessional beliefs are linked with specific moral and ethical values and certain political and social attitudes. This line of thinking led Max Weber to his famous thesis of the Protestant work ethic, and historical analyses have underlined that the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation had indeed left a deep "moral imprint" on society (Ozment 1993: 217). Latest empirical studies have shown that religion still matters in politics, even though secularization in most Western nations[1] has unquestionably weakened the impact of religion on politics, political norms and behavior, and policy (Lovin 1992; Jelen 1993; Castles 1994; Barnea and Schwartz 1998; Geissbühler 1999).

It has been demonstrated that the relevance of the confessional cleavage has continuously decreased in Western Europe since the end of World War II. At the end of the 20th century, the political attitudes "of devout Catholics differed much more from those of uncommitted Catholics than those of devout Protestants". This finding leads to the conclusion that confessional differences have become less and less significant politically, while "the religious cleavage is of lasting importance" (Geissbühler 1999: 236).[2] In other words, people who go to church more often think and act politically in different ways than persons who go to church seldom or not at all. More religious people tend to be more conservative and more to the political right, and they also show above-average support for key state institutions (Geissbühler 2001: 220).

We do not know much, however, about the political attitudes of the ever-growing number of atheists in Western countries. Do they differ from people who still belong to a church or religious group? Are these differences, if they really exist, relevant for the long-term development of politics and policies in Western nations and the way sociologists and political scientists analyze political attitudes? These are the core questions I would like to answer in this short article.

Theory, Theses and Data

Theoretically, it would not be surprising to find specific political attitudes among atheists. As underlined in the introduction, political attitudes as well as moral and ethical ones are, to a good degree, "learned" during an individual's phase of socialization (Sears and Funk 1999), "children are not born with this knowledge" (Bennett 1993: 12). One historian has accordingly argued that because "religion is intrinsically social and cultural, it informs and shapes a people's moral behavior [..] profoundly" (Ozment 1993: 217). Therefore, a religious upbringing and education should lead to different outcomes than an edu-

cational framework which does not include religious teachings. Regular church attendance should furthermore reinforce specific values and attitudes.

Doubtlessly, Judeo-Christian traditions had a "major formative influence" on Western societies (Bennett 1992: 206). Thereby, religion is, according to an outspoken contemporary American conservative philosopher, "a wellspring of the civic virtues that democracy requires in order to flourish. […] It lifts each citizen outside himself and inspires concern for community and country. It is a call to kindness, decency, and forgiveness […] At the same time, it offers a sense of purpose and a frame of reference for claims that transcend everyday politics" (Bennett 1992: 207-208). If these considerations are correct, we should see differences in the political attitudes of people who belong to a church or religious group and of atheists.

But what differences can we expect? According to Bennett (1992), we should anticipate atheists to care less about community and country than religious people. Atheists should be less kind and less decent. Indeed, there is – as Michael Martin (1990: 7) has documented – a school of philosophical opinion that associates atheism with "low moral character". Of course, such a thesis is not very convincing because it includes fervently normative, even deeply ideological elements. It cannot be our goal to judge atheists or their political attitudes. This is a sociological article and not a political one, and Martin (1990: 23) has correctly emphasized that atheism "does not entail moral relativity". Without judging differences in attitudes, I would still maintain that atheists are indeed politically different from theists.

Generally, I argue that atheists are more autonomous in their thoughts and more open to change. While theists stress tradition, conformity and security, atheists prefer values such as self-direction, independence and hedonism (Barnea and Schwartz 1998). Based on this broad reasoning, I have developed the following three theses.

My first thesis is that atheists are more to the political left. There has traditionally been a strong tendency among the left to judge religion negatively (Bloch 1968). Theists also tend to accept hierarchy and tradition and other value systems linked to conservatism and the political right. Second, I argue that being an atheist is often related to a difficult personal decision to "leave" a church or religious group. Such a decision is probably linked to careful deliberation and discussion. This leads me to the conclusion that atheists are particularly open to discussion and political debate, too (Barnea and Schwartz 1998). Theists on the other hand are integrated into a relatively stringent system of thought that does not leave a lot of room for interpretation and debate. I would therefore argue that atheists are more interested in politics and more actively involved in it than theists. Third, people who belong to a church have to accept a "higher" authority, namely a god and often a (hierarchical) church organization, too. Atheists do not accept such an authority, they question religious dictates, and they stress the importance of autonomy of thought (Barnea and

Schwartz 1998). This is a first indication that it might be easier for theists than for theists to accept organizational structures. Furthermore, many religions explicitly ask their followers to recognize state institutions. Therefore, I claim that theists tend to have more trust in institutions than atheists.

The data basis for this article is the 1998 Swiss labor market survey ("Schweizer Arbeitsmarktsurvey"), with more than 3'000 respondents one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys ever conducted in Switzerland. It includes a wide variety of attitudinal variables. In the survey, 45.1 per cent are Catholics, 38.5 per cent are Protestants, 11.5 per cent are atheists and the rest belongs to other Christian or non-Christian groups (n = 3017). These numbers correspond very well with the results of the 2000 Swiss census which came up with the following percentages: 44.1 per cent Catholics, 36.6 per cent Protestants and 11.7 per cent atheists (Federal Office for Statistics 2002: 41).

Throughout this article, I will look at two groups. The first group consists of the atheists, of persons who stated that they did not belong to a church or religious group. The second group consists of all the persons in the survey who stated that they belonged to a church or religious group. The individuals in this group are called theists throughout this piece.

Atheism, Left, and Right

According to my first thesis, atheists should be more to the political left than theists. In the 1998 survey, atheists positioned themselves on an average 4.67 point on the left-right-scale between 1 (far left) and 10 (far right). The mean for the theists on the other hand was 5.10. Clearly, theists are more to the right than atheists. This correlation also exists if one calculates a regression model with the left-right self-placement as the dependent and atheism as the independent variable (0 = theists, 1 = atheists) (see Table 1).

Table 1
Left-Right Self-Placement and Atheism: Regression Model

Variable	B	Beta	
Constant	5.096		R^2 adj. = 0.01
ATHEISM	-0.425	-0.077**	n = 2721

Source: Schweizer Arbeitsmarktsurvey 1998.
Remarks: ATHEISM: 1 = atheist, 0 = theist; LEFT-RIGHT SELF-PLACEMENT: 1 (far left) to 10 (far right). Statistical significance: ** < 0.01.

But does the relation also hold if other independent variables are taken into consideration? The second regression model with three control variables (age, income, political interest) underlines the relevance of atheism in explaining left-right self-placement (see Table 2). According to the Beta coefficients, income and age have a slightly more substantial impact on left-right self-placement than atheism. Richer, older and politically less interested individuals tend to be more to the political right than younger

and politically more interested persons with less income. But the independent variable atheism is still highly significant, too. Atheists are, even if we control for age, political interest and income, approximately 0.5 points more to the left than theists (B = -0.478). Therefore, we can safely argue that atheists tend to be more to the political left than theists.

Table 2
Left-Right Self-Placement and Atheism: Regression Model with Control Variables

Variable	B	Beta	
Constant	3.855		
ATHEISM	-0.478	-0.087**	
AGE	0.013	0.097**	
INTEREST	-0.126	-0.068**	R^2 adj. = 0.03
INCOME	0.000	0.112**	n = 2211

Source: Schweizer Arbeitsmarktsurvey 1998.

Remarks: ATHEISM: 1 = atheist, 0 = theist; AGE: years; INTEREST: 4 = politcially very interested, 3 = politically interested, 2 = politically not interested, 1 = politically not at all interested; INCOME: CHF per months net income; LEFT-RIGHT SELF-PLACEMENT: 1 (far left) to 10 (far right). Statistical significance: **<0.01.

Not surprisingly, more atheists than theists with an attachment to a political party feel close to the Social Democrats (57%, n = 131 vs. 34%, n = 1051), too. This finding furthermore emphasizes the tendency of atheists to the political left.

Atheism, Political Interest, and the Trust in Institutions

In regard to political interest, I expected atheists to be slightly more interested than theists. The data underscores this thesis. The correlation between political interest and atheism is positive and statistically highly significant. Second, the same result emerges if one asks how often an individual talks about politics with colleagues or friends. Atheists discuss politics more often than theists.

Moreover, I have looked at trust of atheists and theists in key institutions (see Table 3). The results are remarkable and underline the thesis mentioned above. Persons who belong to a church or a religious group are significantly more likely to have trust in almost all institutions than atheists. The difference between the two groups is particularly large in regard to trust in the church, the military, the police, and the banks. It is still considerable in regard to the national, cantonal, and communal government, justice and law, and the United Nations. In fact, only one institution is trustworthier for atheists than for theists, namely the environmental movement.

Table 3
Atheists vs. Theists: Trust in Institutions

Institution	Atheists	Pearson's r
Church	Less trust	-0.329**
Military	Less trust	-0.166**
Justice / Law	Less trust	-0.070**

Police	Less trust	-0.128**
Media	No difference	0.020
Television	No difference	-0.034
National Government	Less trust	-0.093**
Cantonal Government	Less trust	-0.097**
Community Government	Less trust	-0.102**
Parliament	Slightly less trust	-0.050*
Political Parties	Less trust	-0.061**
Large Enterprises	No difference	-0.041
Banks	Less trust	-0.102**
Labor Unions	No difference	-0.016
Environmental Movement	Slightly more trust	0.053*
Women's Movement	No difference	0.013
European Union	No difference	0.007
United Nations	No difference	-0.040

Source: Schweizer Arbeitsmarktsurvey 1998.

Remarks: n is between 2144 and 2443. TRUST: 4 = much trust, 3 = trust, 2 = little trust, 1 = no trust. Statistical significance: **<0.01, *<0.05.

On the other hand, it is quite surprising – at least at the first glance – to see that atheists have a much more developed non-institutionalized action repertoire than theists. We are clearly able to empirically underline the thesis that "those who are politically less trusting [..] engage more in legal [and illegal] direct action tactics" (Kaase 1999: 18). Atheists are significantly more ready to write letters to the authorities, to participate in demonstrations, to spray (political) slogans on walls, to participate in strikes, to damage property and to disobey police officers than theists (see Table 4).

Table 4
Atheists vs. Theists: Non-institutionalized Action

Action	Atheists	Pearson's r
Write letters to authorities	More ready to write	0.057**
Participate in a demonstration	More ready to participate	0.134**
Spray slogans on walls	More ready to spray	0.132**
Participate in a strike	More ready to participate	0.131**
Damage property	More ready to damage property	0.116**
Disobey police officers	More ready to disobey	0.089**

Source: Schweizer Arbeitsmarktsurvey 1998.

Remarks: n is between 2307 and 2468. Statistical significance: **<0.01.

Conclusion

Of course, this study is only a first, small step towards a more profound understanding of the political attitudes of atheists, the differences between atheists and theists in regard to politics, and the possible repercussions of these differences on the political system as a whole.

I started this article with the thesis that attitudes emerge "from established, group-specific structures" (Bergman 1998: 86). The systematic comparison of the political attitudes of two groups, namely of atheists and of theists, indeed showed surprising differences in the attitudinal structures. Atheists are more to the political left than theists, they have a higher de-

gree of interest in politics, but less trust in established institutions.

First, we have to keep in mind that the group of atheists is growing rapidly. In Switzerland, more than 10 per cent of the population are atheists. In other Western countries, the respective percentage is even higher.[3] At same time, trust in almost all political and societal institutions is decreasing (Brunner et Sgier 1997; Putnam 1995), and "interpersonal and institutional attachments are becoming more fluid" (Dalton et al. 1984: 6). It is certainly too early to speak about a full-fledged crisis of institutions (Freitag 2001). It is, however, disturbing to see that especially atheists are poorly integrated into the long-established institutional fabric of society. It will be necessary to include this group and to translate the evident interest of atheists in politics into a positive force for the institutional "re-awakening" of Western nations.

Second, I strongly plead for a more systematic integration of the religious cleavage (atheism vs. theism) into political science and sociological analyses. The four "classical" social cleavages – center/periphery, church/state, rural/urban, class – presented "in one of the most cogent and influential accounts of the development of modern Western European politics" (Gallagher et al. 1992: 89) by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) are still important today (Geissbühler 2001). Empirical analyses have shown that there is no or certainly not a profound "decline of cleavage politics" (Franklin 1992). It is therefore puzzling to observe that the religious cleavage has not been included in many newer studies of political attitudes. Without a doubt, the confessional cleavage, the differences between Protestants and Catholics, has lost much of its traditional importance. However, the differences between theists and atheists are, as this study has demonstrated, still important.

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Notes

1 Cf. *Le Monde* (24. 7. 2002): 2.

2 The confessional cleavage has, however, not completely vanished. Apart from the studies mentioned above, I would particularly like to point to a stimulating article by Geser (1997) on the persistence of confessional political cultures in Switzerland.

3 *Le Monde* (24. 7. 2002): 2.