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Module 8 – Portfolio Project – Option 1

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MODULE 8 – PORTFOLIO PROJECT – OPTION 1

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**Abstract**

For the Capstone project, the research question will be looking at social survey data gathered from the General Social Survey (GSS) for social sentiment analysis for the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) as it applies to attitudes related to racial equity and social justice. This project looks at whether demographic information of an individual, specifically political and/or religious sentiments, has any statistical relevance with respect to one’s attitude towards a national focus on addressing issues regarding racial equity. Based on the results, prescriptive suggestions will be provided to the UUA as far as likely allies among other denominations as well as populations that might be suitable for outreach and support.

**Research Hypothesis**

The GSS has a number of different questions that touch on racial equity, and a tally will be created with a score from 1 to 7 based on the scale of answers available for specific questions. The sum of the non-null values divided by the count of non-null responses will be a composite racial equity score each respondent will receive. Each respondent provided a political self-assessment, which will also scored 1 to 7. With respect to religion, each respondent provided a religious self-assessment of church type that ranges from no answer, liberal, moderate, or fundamentalist. Each respondent’s strength of their religious affiliations will be ranked ranging from 1 to 7. Both the racial equity index and religiosity strength rankings will have one subtracted from it and normalized from 0 to 1. Lastly, the values will be aggregated based on political score as well as church type, calculating the mean of the normalized racial equity index as well as the religious strength, followed by linear regression performed against the political self-identified index.

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The first null hypothesis is that the P value is greater than .05 for the linear regression of the political ranking and the mean of the racial equity index over each of the religious categories. The alternative hypothesis is that the linear regression of the political ranking and the mean of the racial equity index over each of the religious categories will have a P value less than or equal of .05, meaning the first null hypothesis can be rejected. (O’Leary, 2017)

The second null hypothesis is that the P value is greater than .05 for the linear regression of the political ranking and the mean of the strength of religiosity over each of the religious categories. The alternative hypothesis is that the linear regression of the political ranking and the mean of the strength of religiosity over each of the religious categories will have a P value less than or equal of .05, meaning the second null hypothesis can be rejected. (O’Leary, 2017)

**Introduction**

**UUA Organization and Structure**

The UUA is a quasi-Protestant denomination that is more aligned with humanism then Christianity that skews liberal both on the political as well as theological scale. Headquartered in Boston, the UUA is the national organization made up of over 1000 individual member congregations. (UUA, 2020) While there are some international congregations in the UUA, the majority of the congregations are found domestically here in North America with congregations in Canada handled by a sister organization called the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC). For the purposes of this research project the focus will be on congregations here in the United States.

As a member of this denomination, the researcher chose the UUA for the Capstone project as the UUA’s focus on social justice activism dovetails the researcher’s own interests. The hope is that this paper and other research to follow can support the UUA’s work as a liberal denomination along with others on a range of social justice issues. (O’Leary, 2017)

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While the UUA serves as the face of the denomination, there are over a thousand congregations and each one is independent and functions on its own. As members of the UUA, individual congregations receive support from the UUA “in their work by training ministers, publishing books and the UU World magazine, providing religious education curricula, offering shared services, coordinating social justice activities, and more”. (UUA, 2020) In addition to the broader UUA umbrella organization, groups of congregations are also organized into geographical regions which are then broken up further into smaller districts that align congregations together for joint actions and support.

The UUA President is elected by the congregations and serves for a six-year term. There is also a Moderator and Board of Trustees that handle the UUA governance, as well as “specialized boards, committees, and advisors” that help lead the UUA. (UUA, 2020) There are roughly 200 paid staff that make sure that the congregations are supported as needed as well as handling the day to day operations. Based on the treasurer’s report found on the UUA website, in 2019 the UUA had annual revenue and expenditures of roughly $40 million, as well as total assets including investments and endowments of $317 million. (Mayer Hoffman McCann, 2019)

**UUA History and Social Justice**

As an organization, the UUA was founded in 1962 with the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations. Known as a bastion of Progressive activism over the last 150 years, members in both denominations championed causes like abolition, public school, suffrage for women and minorities, food safety, worker safety, and more. Both denominations had become increasingly secular and humanist over time and they chose to combine forces during the social turbulence that came out of the 1950s. With civil rights, UU ministers were at the fore of the marches and protests in the 1950s and 1960s.

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This social justice work has continued to this day. Each year the congregations meet at a national conference called General Assembly (GA) where a national emphasis is discussed and voted on that the denomination as a whole can focus on as a national issue. While congregations perform social action at the local level, as part of the UUA they can also be involved at the state and national level for a wide arrange of social justice and action work.

With the videotaped murder of George Floyd on Memorial Day at the end of May 2020, America saw significant social upheaval and unrest as millions took to the streets demanding change and accountability in policing reform and the judicial system as it relates to structural racism. When the denomination met virtually for the annual GA in June 2020, the focus area of racial equity was chosen along with support of Black Lives Matter (BLM). The research question is whether the GSS data can help inform this year’s area of focus, perhaps in future years as well.

**NORC’s General Social Survey**

With the focus on the social justice work that the UUA is involved in, the goal is to identify a publicly available dataset that will be able to support the social action of the denomination. To this end, the dataset that has been selected to be explored and proposed as a source for current and future research for the UUA is the General Social Survey (GSS), which has been an important part of social research ever since it was first tallied back in 1972. Gathered annually, this longitudinal study serves as a barometer of social opinions and trends on a range of issues over time with a standing group of surveyed parties. Administered by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, it has followed hundreds of social trends for almost a half a century. Because it came out of earlier social surveys, some of the trends can be actually followed over as much as 80 years. (NORC, 2020) Another benefit of the GSS is it is reflective of what other countries survey for international comparative research.

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**Objectives**

The objective is to identify other denominations with which to possibly ally with on racial equity and other social justice causes. On the other side of the coin, there may be others in religious denominations not typically considered as an ally that share common purpose and interest on issues like racial equity. These people and organizations may be amenable to collaborative outreach and education seeking opportunities to change hearts and minds within their denominational organizations as well as in society at large. This will be done by looking at the cross-sectional influences of political persuasion and religious affiliations, as well as the strength of the religious affiliation.

The other goal is to show the utility of using the GSS for this kind of research and analysis at the denominational level. Performing the research over multiple years’ worth of surveys can help show changes in societal attitudes and may even suggest specialized research performed at the behest of the UUA in addition to what can be gleaned from the GSS. The effectiveness of the methodology can also be assessed.

**Overview of Study**

For this research project, previous research that has made use of the GSS has been identified as a source of guidance on how other researchers have leveraged the social survey data. With the entrenchment of different political affiliations, particularly over the last couple of decades, there appears to have been a hardening of political views, particularly along culture war issues. The hope is to find common ground and purpose with different religious denominations, perhaps even those that may not appear on the surface to be natural allies. An attempt was made to find previous research that touched on political affiliation, religiosity, and usage of the GSS in general.

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**Literature Review**

With the quality set of data in the GSS and a question that looks for relationships in attitudes based on religious affiliation, a review of existing GSS research was done to assess how other researchers have set up related GSS research. (Machi & MacEvoy, 2016) The literature review was done in two parts, first a more general set of papers that look at the efficacy of using the GSS in general, followed by a closer look at specific research focused on attitudinal trends.

The first paper is “Reliability of the core items in the General Social Survey: Estimates from the three-wave panels, 2006–2014”, which looks at the reliability of the GSS. The researchers look at the consistency of questions over a series of surveys, specifically core questions, to see how reliable those questions are over time. (Hout & Hastings, 2016) They did this, factoring in the reality that some attitudinal changes are to be expected, and their research provides a reliability ranking of different questions based on their methodology. This was instrumental in assessing which GSS questions to use for this research for the UUA denomination.

A paper titled “Supporting evidence: Why social scientists should sometimes consider data other than the General Social Survey” looks at the benefit of using additional data sources beyond just the GSS, particularly when looking at religion. While the authors make the case that other social survey sources can be beneficial, they also acknowledge that the GSS is the gold standard for social survey data in America. (Hackett, Smith, Sciupac, & Gecewicz, 2018) The GSS alone will suffice for the Capstone project, but in the real world it would be good to expand the data sources to verify the pros and cons of using additional social surveys. This is particularly true since there are only 2500 or so responses with each iteration of the bi-annual GSS survey, so there really is not enough to drill down into specific denominations such as the UUA.

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The next paper reviewed looks at attitudinal change over the GSS’ first four decades. Titled “A generation of attitude trends among US householders as measured in the NORC General Social Survey 1972–2010”, the author looks at the change over time with respect to different attitudes relative to different societal concerns. (Davis, 2013) While the focus for this paper is just on the most recent GSS from 2018, a similar type of review could be done back to previous years’ surveys based on the questions that were used.

The paper titled “A longitudinal analysis of gendered association patterns: Homophily and social distance in the General Social Survey” presents the research in homophily, the tendency for individuals to associate with others self-identified as peers. (Brashears, 2015) This tendency to self-select others that are more homogenous may prove useful within a church environment which would rank high on the homophilic scale. This will also impact the political groupings that so many find themselves in based on their partisan affiliations and social networks.

The researchers that wrote “Partisan strength, political trust and generalized trust in the United States: An analysis of the General Social Survey, 1972–2014” looked at the strength of partisan feeling with political and overall trust. (Hooghe & Oser, 2017) While this precedes the time that is being studied, this is still useful as relationships are explored that relate to the social justice issues being worked on by the UUA, especially as they relate to partisan position.

Lastly, the paper titled “U.S. citizens' current attitudes toward immigrants and immigration: A study from the General Social Survey” was pulled as it looks at the issue of immigration, which has been an area of concern of the UUA with respect to human rights for asylum seekers and U.S. immigration policy. (Pryce, 2018) This paper explores the specific issue of immigration as well as generally how the GSS can be leveraged for social justice research.

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**Research Design**

**Methodology**

The methodology is to create a racial equity index and strength of religiosity index based on a composite of multiple questions. In each of these, a single value is assigned from the sum and then mean of the attribute scores for the non-null values. Both political persuasion and religious belief each rely on the respondents’ self-assessment. While not ideal and dependent on the accuracy and honesty of the response, this was deemed reasonable and necessary.

There are two hypotheses, with the first the correlation of the racial equity index as the independent variable and political range as the dependent variable for each religious category. The second is the strength of religiosity as the independent variable and political range as the dependent variable, grouped by religious category.

**Methods**

The correlation will be using SAS to test for linear regression for any statistically relevant relationship between the respective rankings and the political index, grouped by religious category. A P value of under .05 will be the determinant that the null hypothesis will be rejected.

**Limitations**

Because not all questions are asked of all participants, the methodology of using the mean of the non-null answers for a ranking for the different areas of interest is suggested as a proxy. Ideally all respondents of the survey would have identical questions, but that is not always the case. This is true not just from one year to the next but even within a specific year’s survey. Only questions with consistent use in the last four surveys dating back to 2012 were considered.

**Ethical considerations**

With how the GSS is handled, there is not any ethical, security, or privacy concerns. The data is gathered and anonymized per strict best practice guidelines for social research.

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**Findings**

The first step was to analyze the distribution of the GSS responses broken up over both political and religious persuasions. As can be seen in Figure 1, there is a normalized bell curve of respondents with the lionshare in the political middle across liberal churches, moderate churches, and fundamentalist churches and denominations, with the moderate churches comprising the largest portion, followed by liberal and then fundamentalist churches. It was decided to focus on these broad categories instead of specific denominations since there are only ~2500 responses in a given year and sample sizes would be too small if broken down into specific denominations.

Figures 2 to 6 show the distribution of the racial equity index across all of the different religious categories. Using the aggregate mean across each religious and political category for both the racial equity index as well as the religious strength index, there was in fact a linear relationship between each index and the seven political groupings ranging from extreme conservative to extreme liberal. This was validated not just overall as seen in Figures 7 and 8, but with the results on each of the specific religious categories as seen in figures 9 through 12.

For the racial equity index for the first hypothesis, the Pearson coefficient was under .001, so the null hypothesis was rejected. For the religiosity strength index for the second hypothesis, the Pearson coefficient was .0285, also under .05, so that null hypothesis was rejected overall as well. While each of the subcategories of religious types also rejected the null hypothesis, the group of responses without an identified church category had a P value of .12, so while the church groups all rejected that second hypothesis, those that were unchurched did not. Interestingly, the relationship with religiosity strength and political persuasion was a negative slope with those self-identified as extremely conservative being the most self-identified religious on down to the most liberal being the least.

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**Conclusion**

This methodology seems promising and should help with future investigations of different forms of social justice research questions. Not only were the results statistically significant, but the trends seem to support additional conclusions that may prove useful. The first is that there are a lot more individuals that self-identify as religiously moderate and liberal compared to fundamentalist. The second is that political alignment appears to map with concerns over social justice, at least with the specific case of racial equity. The third is that there tends to be more political conservatism with fundamentalists than those in liberal and moderate denominations. The fourth is that there is a negative correlation to strength in religiosity and political leaning, with extremely conservative identifying as most religious and a diminution in the strength of religiosity as individuals trend more liberal.

What does this all mean? There is a lot of opportunity for finding allies in other liberal and moderate denominations, there are a lot of us, there is a potential benefit in encouraging religiosity to increase enthusiasm, and there are potential allies that identify as fundamentalist liberals that might be effective change agents within their houses of worship.

**Recommendations**

Further research can be pursued with a similar methodology over other areas of interest like environmental protection, abortion, gun control, and voter protection and access. As was noted earlier, other public social surveys might be useful, particularly as related to religiosity and religious affiliation. (Hackett, Smith, Sciupac, & Gecewicz, 2018) Also, the work done could be replicated over the last four surveys back to 2012 based on the questions used. This would allow the analysis of trends over time that might be useful for the UUA to consider for deeper understanding of results and as we prepare for the newest results from the 2020 GSS.

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*Figure 1.* Total responses for the seven political bins (Conservative -> Liberal) and the three religious categories (Liberal, Moderate, Fundamentalist), with unk. or n/a zero in both scales.

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*Figure 2.* Total distribution of the racial equity index [blm\_index] overall.

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*Figure 3.* Total distribution of the racial equity index [blm\_index] for unspecified religious pref.

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*Figure 4.* Total distribution of the racial equity index [blm\_index] for liberal denominations.

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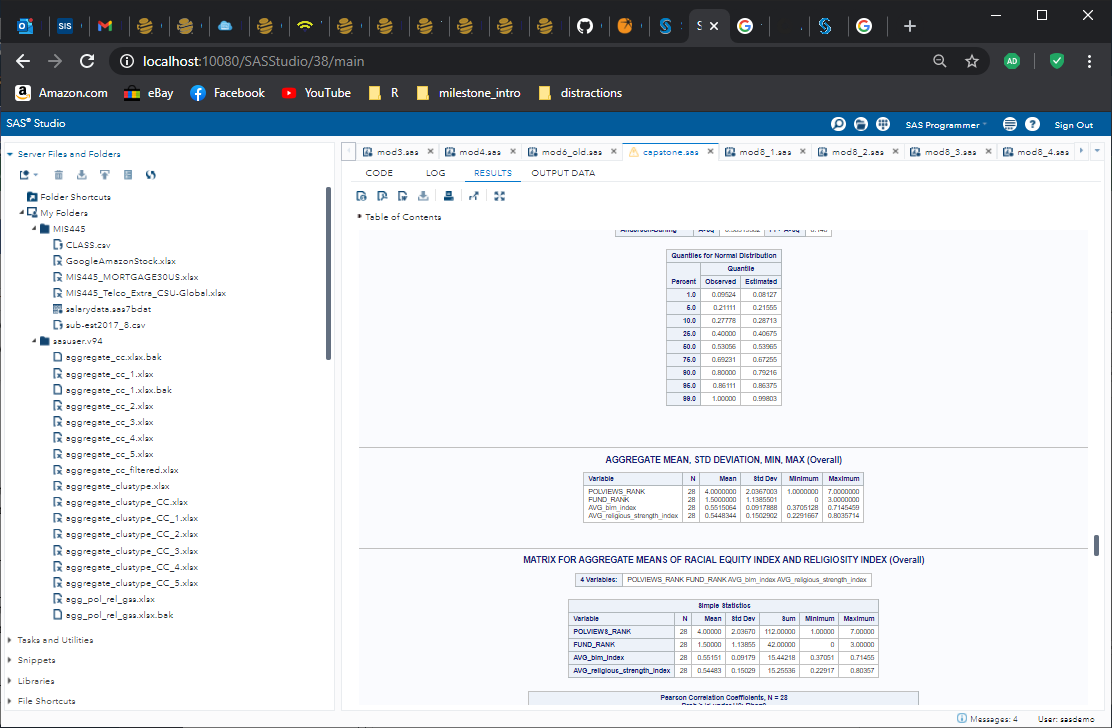
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*Figure 5.* Total distribution of the racial equity index [blm\_index] for moderate denominations.

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*Figure 6.* Total distribution of the racial equity index [blm\_index] for fundamentalist denominations.

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*Figure 7.* Mean, standard deviation, min, and max for aggregate grouping of religious categories and political leanings [Overall].

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*Figure 8.* Linear regression matrix for aggregate means of racial equity and religiosity indices [Overall].

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*Figure 9.* Linear regression matrix for aggregate means of racial equity and religiosity indices [No specified religion].

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*Figure 10.* Linear regression matrix for aggregate means of racial equity and religiosity indices [Religious Liberal].

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*Figure 11.* Linear regression matrix for aggregate means of racial equity and religiosity indices [Religious Moderate].

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*Figure 12.* Linear regression matrix for aggregate means of racial equity and religiosity indices [Religious Fundamentalist].

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| <https://github.com/johnimbur/MIS581-Capstone> |
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*Figure 13.* GitHub project link and screen shots of the SAS source code for the analysis and visualizations that can be found in the GitHub project folder, parts 1 and 2 of 4.

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*Figure 14.* Screen shots of the SAS source code for the analysis and visualizations that can be found in the GitHub project folder, parts 3 and 4 of 4.

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