

Assessing public support for International Religious Freedom:

Evidence from the 2018 CCES*

Luke M. Perez, Ph.D.

University of Missouri

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Abstract

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) provides the U.S. government with additional tools and information in order to promote the rights of religious minorities around the world. In addition to mandating annual reporting from the State Department, the law created an independent watchdog agency to monitor religious freedom around the world and provides the executive with additional sanction powers for states which abuse religious minorities. Little is known, however, about the scope and intensity of American knowledge and support for these policies. This paper investigates the contours of American public opinion on international religious freedom. It relies on data from the 2018 CCES survey and attempts to identify the level of support for international religious freedom among the American electorate. But little is known about American attitudes about the law or subsequent policies which seek to strengthen rights of religious minorities around the world. This paper investigates public support for International Religious Freedom with questions on the 2018 CCES.

As for me, I will have no difficulty in saying: it is in the leadership of the foreign interests of society that democratic governments seem to me decidedly inferior to others.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Introduction

In 1998, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, by overwhelming margins, which established the protection of religious minorities as a core objective of American for-

*Corresponding email perezlu@missouri.edu. Working Draft, please do not cite without permission. Comments are welcome and appreciated. Contact author for most recent version of paper.

eign policy. Since its passage the law has been modified several times, including as recently as 2016 when a Republican controlled Congress passed (and a Democratic president signed) modifications to include Atheism as one of the protected classes of religious belief and elevated the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom reports directly to the Secretary of State. The provisions of IRFA include mandating that the State Department produce annual reporting on the status of religious freedom for every country in the world, and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom who is tasked, inter alia, with evaluating and critiquing the State Department's report from the previous year. The pace of promoting religious freedom abroad continues unabated. Last year, the State Department held the first ever ministerial, a high level diplomatic conference, on international religious freedom.

Explaining this behavior has, however, posed difficulty for researchers. These practices cannot explained as part of a general effort among developed nations to promote human rights. For although nearly every developed country in the world has an office of international human rights, only the United States has both IRFA and a human rights office. Nor can these practices be explained as part of America's pre-occupation with religion. Religious belief has been on the decline for decades.¹ The link between foreign policy and public opinion is also weak,² though this link has yet to be tested on human rights and religious freedom.

This paper beings to explore the link between public knowledge and support for international religious freedom and the activities of the US government which promote this particular human right with exceptional energy. Drawing on a unique data set of questions on the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES). The questions test for political knowledge about foreign policy before investigating the attitudes of voters on issues of international religious freedom.

1. Robert P Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

2. Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, "Who Influences U.s. Foreign Policy?" *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 107–23, doi:[10.1017/S000305540505152X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540505152X).

Literature Review

1. Work in public opinion finds a weak link between the general public and elite decision making.³
2. Work in international relations generally finds a tighter link between general public and decision-making, although the findings tend to be focused on war and national security.⁴
3. Religion may work differently than economics and war since religion has potential to organize stronger social than other values and can, under certain conditions, compete with politics.⁵
4. During the Cold War, e.g., elites relied on religion and religious freedom rhetoric to mobilize national support for containment.⁶
5. After the Cold War, the passage of IRFA was driven predominately by both secular and religious human rights activists.⁷

3. Ibid.

4. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (1991; repr., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

5. Jack Snyder, ed., *Religion and International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 3.

6. William C. Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), @herzog2011:spiritualindustrial.

7. Allen D Hertzke, *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (New York, NY: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

Data

Analysis

Discussion

Conclusion

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