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A Question of Morality: Artists' Values and Public Funding for the Arts

In 1989, the combination of art, religion, homosexuality, and public dollars set off an explosive two-year battle and a decade of skirmishes over funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. To promote artistic freedom and to avoid political controversy, federal arts policy delegates specific funding decisions to private donors and arts professionals. In an era of morality politics—hot-button issues driven by deeply held beliefs rather than by expertise—that strategy no longer works. Artists, donors, and arts audiences diverge widely from the rest of the American public in their attitudes toward religion, sexual morality, and civil liberties, as General Social Survey data show. Delegating funding decisions to them has naturally led to some subsidies of art offensive to important segments of the population.

> "Americans for the most part are moral, decent people and they have a right not to be denigrated, offended, or mocked with their own tax dollars."
>
> —*Former North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms*

In 1989, two grants totaling $45,000 turned a small federal arts agency into a battlefield in the "culture wars." The photography exhibits receiving the grants included a picture of a crucifix immersed in urine and several explicitly homoerotic and sadomasochistic images. Cultural conservatives charged the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) with funding blasphemy and indecency. Artists and cultural liberals charged NEA critics with censoring free expression. The combination of art, religion, sex, homosexuality, and public dollars set off an explosive two-year political battle and a decade of skirmishes.

How did public funding for the arts briefly generate the kind of controversy typical of issues such as abortion, gay rights, and capital punishment? Like these other "morality politics" issues, NEA funding became a fight over "first principles," over "legal sanctions of right and wrong" (Mooney 2001, 3). Opposing sides framed the battle as a fight between decency and immorality, or between free expression and censorship, making the issue easy—people could confidently take sides without studying the issue (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Haider-Markel and Meier 1996)—and politically salient—people cared enough that public opinion mattered more than usual to elected officials (Mooney 2001).

Why was the NEA susceptible to having its existence framed as a legal sanction of right and wrong? We argue that a weak normative justification for public funding of the arts, a divergence in values between the arts community and others, and the political mobilization of Christian conservatives made public money for the arts a hot-button issue. Congress has traditionally tried to shelter federal subsidies to the arts from political controversy by delegating specific funding decisions to private donors or experts. Because the arts community differs from the rest of the country in its attitudes toward religion, sex, and sex roles, however, this divergence of values left public funding for the arts susceptible to political controversy when Chris-

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tian conservatives mobilized around these issues.

We begin with a brief history of federal arts policy and the NEA debate. We then use the 1989–2000 General Social Surveys to demonstrate that, relative to the general population, artists, donors, and patrons are (1) less religious, (2) more socially liberal, (3) more likely to favor individual freedom over traditional morality, and (4) more opposed to traditional sex roles. We then discuss the implications of the values divergence between the arts community and the rest of America for the NEA funding debate and for options for minimizing conflicts over public arts funding.

Federal Funding for the Arts

Populist principles give the fine arts no greater claim on public funds than "push-pin" or other forms of entertainment (Bentham 1811; Will 1992; Samuelson 1992). Early opponents criticized arts funding for taxing the many to subsidize the pleasures of the wealthy and educated few. Economists' market-failure framework provides little justification for subsidizing art (Samuelson 1992; Frey 1997)—that is, unless art serves social purposes for nonconsumers, such as to "elevate the public mind by bringing it into contact with beauty" (Will 1992, 89). Nonetheless, many governments fund the arts, largely as demonstrations of civic pride (Frey 1997). In the words of President Lyndon Johnson, "empires and nations … which created no lasting works of art are reduced to short footnotes in history's catalogue" (Brenson 2001, 1). Though many civic leaders want to promote a dynamic cultural life, they also worry that "government art—art officially sanctioned and inoffensive … is virtually guaranteed to be art that history quickly forgets" (Fox 1992, 48). Freeing art from bureaucratic control, however, increases the danger it will serve the few or offend the many.

This country's primary solution is indirect aid. The tax deductibility of gifts to nonprofit arts organizations increases private donations by lowering the cost for donors at the expense of forgone tax revenues. Private contributions (currently $11 billion annually) outweigh direct public subsidies by about 17 to 1 (McCarthy et al. 2001), but at a cost to governments of $3 billion to $4 billion in lost tax revenues on these tax-deductible contributions. Forgone federal revenues outweigh direct federal spending on the arts by about 14 to 1 (Brooks 2004), and total forgone revenues to federal, state, and local governments outweigh total government spending on the arts by about 5 to 1 (Feld, O'Hare, and Schuster 1983). Tax deductions also mean that private donors allocate public dollars, minimizing government control and visibility.

In creating the NEA in 1965, Congress dramatically increased federal visibility in the arts but emphasized artistic freedom over government control. Supporters expected the NEA to contribute to the Cold War by demonstrating that free societies produce dynamic art while totalitarian regimes create dull Stalinist or Maoist art (Hyde 1999). They saw artists as unpopular—"truth-telling visionary outsider[s]" to those who liked them, politically suspect nonconformists to those who did not—and strove to free artists from social pressures and bureaucratic oversight, as well as from material want (Brenson 2001, 35). In the words of President John F. Kennedy, "If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him" (Brenson 2001, 17). Congress told the NEA to "help create and sustain … a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry" (20 U.S.C. § 951(7); *NEA v. Finley*, 524 U.S. 569 [1998], 573).

The NEA saw its primary responsibility as encouraging "experimentation and innovation" by supporting artists who took risks (Brenson 2001, 31). Early grants were prospective, meant to support the future work of promising artists. This increased the danger of unpopular work, and "those who established the procedures for distributing funds devised elaborate systems specifically designed to relieve government officials of the task of decision-making and to turn those responsibilities over to acknowledged and respected experts in the field" (Fox 1992, 48). Peer-review panels of respected artists (rather than NEA employees) awarded grants. The National Council on the Arts (also composed of private citizens) reviewed their recommendations and passed their own judgments on to the NEA chairman, who had the final say, but both were expected to accede to peer-review panel recommendations. The NEA also passed 20 percent of its funds on to state arts councils, which made their own grants, further distancing NEA administrators from decision making. NEA grants to art institutions (for instance, for particular exhibits) typically required state, local, or private matches, so that the NEA provided only a fraction of the funds and supported only projects endorsed by other sponsors.

In delegating the definition of artistic excellence to artists, Congress gave the NEA tremendous discretion—buffering grants from political oversight and emphasizing artistic freedom over democratic accountability. This reliance on artists increased the credibility of the NEA grant process in the arts and donor communities, giving the NEA leverage in the allocation of private donations. For its first quarter-century, it generated little political controversy. A $1,500 grant to Aram Saroyan in 1969 for his one-word poem "lighght" raised hackles over government waste,[1] and a grant to Erica Jong as she was writing *Fear of Flying* raised worries the NEA was funding pornography, but neither led to changes in the agency. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan proposed a 50 percent reduction in the NEA's bud-

get (which had grown twentyfold from its initial funding of $8 million), based on opposition to "the general principle of government support for the arts" rather than to the way the NEA was allocating its funds (Cummings 1991, 57). Congressional arts supporters were able to hold the cut to 10 percent and kept funding fairly stable throughout the 1980s. In 1985, Representative Dick Armey attacked the NEA for subsidizing homoerotic poetry (Bolton 1992), presaging later controversies, but the agency's mission appeared secure for most of the 1980s.

The NEA Debates

In 1989, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art selected Andres Serrano for one of 10 Awards in the Visual Arts[2] and gave him $15,000 (partly funded by the NEA) to show eight of his works—including *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix immersed in the artist's urine—in a traveling exhibit. The NEA also awarded $30,000 (about 15 percent of the cost) to the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania for a traveling retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's work, much of it homoerotic (some explicitly sadomasochistic), which included two pictures of naked minors. Both exhibits received funding from multiple sponsors and attracted relatively limited and specialized audiences before the controversy, few of whom were offended by the work.

By 1989, however, Christian conservatives had emerged as a political force, largely in defense of traditional family values and in opposition to the secularization of society and to the women's and gay liberation movements (Gallagher and Bull 1996). Many Christian conservatives saw the arts and popular culture as opponents that foisted antireligious, sexual, and pro-gay images on society. The Rev. Donald Wildmon and his American Family Association (AFA) were leaders in the fight against such images, organizing boycotts against private companies to fight "bias and bigotry against Christians" (Bolton 1992, 27).[3] When Wildmon learned about *Piss Christ*, he sent mass mailings to Congress and to AFA members, decrying "such demeaning disrespect and desecration of Christ" (Bolton 1992, 27). Conservative Senate leaders picked up the charge and attacked the NEA for funding—and thereby endorsing—filth that insulted the taxpaying public at its own expense. Opponents focused on the inappropriateness of paying public dollars for blasphemous and obscene art, but most saw the fight over the NEA as part of a larger struggle over popular and high culture. Pat Buchanan called for "a cultural revolution," Jesse Helms tied the NEA's activities to "[t]he homosexual 'community,' the feminists, the civil libertarians, … [and] their dangerous anti-family and anti-American agendas," and the Christian Coalition placed newspaper ads accusing the NEA of using taxpayers' "money to teach their sons how to sodomize each other" (Bolton 1992, 31, 306, 316).

The arts community defended near-absolute freedom of expression, even for artists who received public funds (NAAO 1992, 63). Many in the arts community viewed the Corcoran Gallery's decision to cancel its Mapplethorpe exhibit as capitulation to censorship (J. Smith 1992; Vance 1992; Orr-Cahill 1992). Carol S. Vance (1992, 109) called Buchanan's attacks on "decadent" art "chillingly reminiscent of Nazi cultural metaphors." Artists created vitriolic images of Jesse Helms (Bolton 1992; Dubin 1992). Though gay and lesbian artists saw the attacks on Mapplethorpe and others as homophobic (Sekula 1992; Hughes and Elovich 1992), most NEA advocates defended the principle of artistic freedom rather than the specific images attacked, and they emphasized that only a handful of the NEA's 80,000 grants had been controversial. However, they did not apologize for the "mistake" of making these grants, as some critics demanded (Bolton 1992, 245–51), and the controversy substantially increased attendance at Mapplethorpe's shows in Washington and Cincinnati, suggesting the images did not offend many donors or patrons.

Congress pursued several strategies to end the controversy, with only limited success. Congressional arts supporters did not defend Serrano or Mapplethorpe, but they blunted calls to eliminate the NEA altogether by cutting its budget by $45,000 (the amount of the two grants) and by prohibiting the use of NEA funds "to promote, disseminate, or produce materials which in the judgment of the National Endowment for the Arts … may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value" (P.L. 101-121, 103 Stat. 701, 741, § 304 (a); *Bella Lewitzky Dance Foundation v. Frohnmayer*, 754 F. Supp. 774 [1991], 777).[4] In implementing this policy, the new NEA chairman took the nearly unprecedented step of overturning a peer-review panel's recommendation to fund four performance artists and required grant recipients to sign an "obscenity oath," promising not to use NEA funds to produce art that violated this standard.

In 1990, Congress replaced this language with a "decency clause": "Artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are judged, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public" (20 U.S.C. §954(d)(1)). They also required that peer-review panels include "diverse artistic and cultural points of view … wide geographic, ethnic, and minority representation," and "lay individuals who are knowledgeable about the arts" (20 U.S.C. §§959(c)(1)-(2)). In 1995, Congress cut NEA funding 40 percent and eliminated grants to individual art-

ists (except writers) in favor of support for arts institutions, largely because, in the words of Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, artists were too likely to "offend the conscience of mainstream America" (Brenson 2001, 89).

Despite congressional action, the NEA continued to generate controversy. The "NEA Four" (the performance artists denied funding) sued and won their grants back in court. A catalog for an NEA-subsidized exhibit on AIDS called Cardinal O'Connor a "fat cannibal" and fantasized about "dous[ing Jesse] Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set[ting] his putrid ass on fire" (Bolton 1992, 127, 129), and the sexually explicit "post-porn modernist" performance artist Annie Sprinkle claimed to have NEA funding (Dubin 1992). Local funding also led to political controversies—most prominently, the Charlotte Repertory Theater's 1996 production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that deals explicitly with gay life (Dobrzynski 1997), and the Brooklyn Museum of Art's 1999 exhibit of Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, a painting of the Madonna adorned with elephant dung and cutouts of female genitalia from pornographic magazines. Local governments responded with funding cuts and attempts to control arts organizations.

To some extent, controversy continued because of the extreme decentralization and fungibility of NEA grants. The NEA did not have direct input into the awarding of the Serrano grant, and requirements for local and private matching funds mean that NEA grants provide only small portions of arts organizations' budgets, raising questions about how far NEA responsibility stretches. The agency explicitly did not fund the controversial catalog for the AIDS exhibit it subsidized, and it gave a grant not to Annie Sprinkle, but to the theater where she performed (Dubin 1992).

The courts have kept the issue alive by partly viewing the issue as censorship. Federal courts ruled the 1989 "obscenity oath" unconstitutional (*Bella Lewitzky Dance Foundation v. Frohnmayer*, 754 F. Supp. 774 [1991]) and overturned New York mayor Rudy Giuliani's de-funding of the Brooklyn Museum of Art (ruling that "the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society … finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable" [Americans for the Arts 1999]). The Supreme Court rejected 8 to 1 a claim that the 1990 decency clause was unconstitutional on its face, but only (according to Justice Scalia) "by gutting it," reading the clause "as merely hortatory," and as discouraging rather than preventing the funding of "indecent" or "disrespectful" art (*NEA v. Finley*, 524 U.S. 569 [1998], 590, 580).

But the controversy also continued because of artists' values. Congress's decision to diversify peer-review panels by including "lay individuals … knowledgeable about the arts" and its elimination of grants to individuals appeared to identify artists as a key part of the problem. The diversification demand seems to accept that a more representative bureaucracy will incorporate the people's values in decision making better than panels restricted to artists. Public administration research on representative bureaucracy has focused on race and sex, and empirical findings have been mixed. Early research found that demographic factors had little impact on the values of public administrators (Meier and Nigro 1976), but recent research has found links between government outcomes and the race and sex of administrators, teachers, and principals (Hindera 1993; Meier and Stewart 1991; Keiser et al. 2002; Dolan 2000).

Though we do not have direct evidence on NEA decision makers, we show how the broader arts community (including artists, donors, and patrons) differs from the rest of the country in its attitudes toward religion and sex—the focus of the NEA debates. Though both cultural conservatives and radical artists appear to agree that artists are more likely to reject traditional values than average people (while putting very different spins on this rejection), little research examines whether this rejection is really widespread in the arts community. Himmelstein and Zald (1984) view depictions of the arts establishment as liberal as little more than a conservative fantasy, but ad hoc evidence suggests otherwise: 80 percent of professional artists in California are registered Democrats (Jeffri and Greenblatt 1998), liberals are more likely to attend the visual and performing arts than demographically similar moderates and conservatives (Brooks 2002), and gay and nonreligious people are substantially more likely than comparable others to become professional artists (Lewis and Seaman 2004).

Data

We analyze data from eight General Social Surveys (GSS) conducted between 1989 and 2000. A nearly annual survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, the GSS combines a standard set of questions asked during most years with specialized modules of questions asked only occasionally. Because our variables come from both the standard set and specialized modules, sample sizes vary substantially from table to table.

We classify the 1.4 percent of respondents (196 individuals) with occupations as designers, musicians, composers, actors, directors, painters, sculptors, craft artists, printmakers, photographers, dancers, and "artists, performers, and related workers, n.e.c." as *artists*; the 21.6 percent (608 individuals) who contributed time or money to "art, culture, or humanities" organizations in 1996 or 1998[5] as *donors*; and the 46.6 percent (1,412 individuals) who went to "an art museum or gallery," "a live ballet or dance performance," or "a classical music or opera performance" in

1993 or 1998 as *patrons*. We compare the responses of artists and nonartists, donors and nondonors, and patrons and nonpatrons on religion, traditional and social liberalism, and feminism. In each case, we simply split the sample into those who met our definition and those who did not. Many differences would shrink if we had held education, age, and urban residence constant, but our question is not whether being an artist, donor, or patron *causes* one to have different attitudes than others, but whether these attitudinal differences exist.

Findings

Artists differ markedly from nonartists in their religious beliefs (table 1). Artists are only about half as likely as other Americans to be Catholics or fundamentalist Protestants, but nearly three times as likely to be Jewish or to have no religious preference. They are less than half as likely as others to believe the Bible is the literal word of God and more than twice as likely to say it is an ancient book of fables. Artists are less than two-thirds as likely to have no doubts that God exists, less than half as likely to believe that heaven and hell definitely exist, three-fourths as likely to pray daily, and four-fifths as likely to attend religious services weekly. Two-thirds of artists—but only a minority of the population—approve of the Supreme Court's decision banning mandatory school prayer. Half of the artists would not be offended by an exhibit of "art works [that] mock or demean religions or religious figures," and only a quarter would prohibit it; two-thirds of the public, however, would be offended by the exhibit and half would prevent it.

Artists are much more likely than nonartists to classify themselves as liberal, but they are no less likely than others to call themselves conservative. They are as likely as others to say their taxes are too high, and no more likely than others to favor more government spending on health, crime, drugs, education, blacks, foreign aid, welfare, and roads. Artists prefer higher spending on mass transit, cities, the environment, and the space program, and lower spending on defense and Social Security than the general public, but their overall spending priorities are reasonably typical.

Artists differ more substantially on individual liberties, especially when those liberties conflict with traditional morality. They are more politically tolerant of unpopular minorities, averaging 12 points higher on a 100-point scale.[6] Indeed, they are significantly more likely than others to allow each of 15 individual civil liberties. Differences are especially clear in terms of sexual behavior: Artists are less than half as likely as the general public to label premarital sex as "always wrong" and about 20 percentage points less likely than others to apply that label to teenage sex, homosexual sex, and extramarital sex. The difference is most striking on homosexual sex, which 45 percent of artists but only 25 percent of others call "not wrong at all."[7] Indeed, artists are nearly three times as likely as others to say they have had at least one same-sex sex partner since

Table 1 Differences between Artists and the General Population

	Artists	Nonartists	Difference
Religious preference			
Fundamentalist Protestant	17	31	−14***
Moderate Protestant	13	13	0
Liberal Protestant	15	15	−1
Catholic	14	24	−10***
Jewish	6	2	4***
None	30	11	19***
Other	7	4	3*
The Bible is			
Literal word of God	13	32	−18***
Ancient book of fables	39	17	23***
Knows God exists	39	64	−26***
Heaven definitely exists	29	67	−38***
Hell definitely exists	21	56	−34***
Attends religious services weekly	24	32	−7*
Prays daily	44	54	−10*
Art that mocks religion			
Wouldn't offend	47	31	16*
Wouldn't allow	24	45	−21*
Approves Supreme Court ban on mandatory school prayer	63	42	21***
Political ideology			
Liberal	44	27	16***
Conservative	30	35	−5
Favors increased government spending on			
Education	79	73	6
Health	73	70	3
Environment	75	66	9*
Crime	58	64	−6
Drugs	60	60	0
Social Security	48	54	−6*
Roads	54	51	3
Cities	52	41	11***
Welfare	43	40	3
Mass transit	52	37	15***
Parks	39	33	6*
Blacks	36	33	3
Defense	10	17	−7***
Space program	16	12	4**
Foreign aid	7	5	2
Federal taxes too high	56	64	−8
Opposes capital punishment	34	24	10**
Feels courts not harsh enough	81	84	−3
Political tolerance	74	62	12***
Behavior is always wrong			
Premarital sex	11	25	−14***
Homosexual sex	40	64	−24***
Teenage sex	52	70	−18***
Extramarital sex	59	78	−19***
Has had same-sex sex	14	5	9***
Supports legal abortion for any reason	65	44	21***
Legalize marijuana	48	26	23***
Strongly disagree wife should help husband's career first, not own	39	24	15***
Strongly disagree men should work, women should tend home	35	19	16***
Would vote for woman president	97	92	5*
Approve of wife working	94	83	11**
Disagree men should run country	94	86	9**
Men not better suited for politics	82	78	4

Difference significant at: * .05 level, ** .01 level, *** .001 level.

their eighteenth birthday.[8] They are also far more likely than others to say that a woman should be able to get a legal abortion for any reason, and nearly twice as likely to believe that smoking marijuana should be legal. Artists are 40 percent more likely than others to oppose capital punishment for murderers, though they are no less likely to think the courts are not harsh enough on criminals. Artists are also less likely to support traditional sex roles for women, though differences are not as large as on religion and civil liberties.

Patrons and donors differ from the rest of America in much the same way artists do. For instance, artists are 14 percentage points less likely than nonartists, donors are 13 percentage points less likely than nondonors, and patrons are 15 percentage points less likely than nonpatrons to be fundamentalist Protestants (table 2). By whatever definition, the arts community is substantially less fundamentalist and significantly less Christian than the rest of the country. Artists, donors, and patrons are substantially less likely to believe the Bible is the literal word of God or that heaven, hell, and God definitely exist. Donors and patrons are as likely as the general public to be offended by art that mocks or demeans religion, but higher percentages of them would allow exhibits of such art anyway. All are significantly more likely than the general public to approve of the Supreme Court's ban on mandatory school prayer.

Donors and patrons are more liberal than the general public, though less liberal than artists, and their government spending priorities differ from others in much the way that artists' priorities do. Donors and patrons appear at least as politically tolerant as artists and, although they are somewhat less sexually permissive than artists, they are much more accepting of sex outside marriage than the general population. Again, opinions diverge most on homosexual sex: The arts community is far more likely than others to consider it "not wrong at all," and donors and patrons are significantly more likely than others to have had same-sex experiences. Donors and patrons are more liberal on capital punishment, abortion, and marijuana than the general public, but less so than artists. Members of the arts community are also more feminist than the general public, though differences again appear smaller for donors and patrons than for artists.

In sum, artists, donors, and patrons all differ substantially from others on religion, morality, and sex roles. The arts community as a whole is more likely than the general public (and especially cultural conservatives) to support art that questions, challenges, or even mocks traditional religious beliefs, that depicts explicitly sexual (including homosexual) images and drug use, and that "challenges patriarchy." Although many Americans found Serrano's and Mapplethorpe's photography deeply offensive, most Americans who produce or patronize the arts did not.

Table 2 Differences between Arts and Non-Arts Communities

	Artists–Nonartists	Donors–Nondonors	Patrons–Nonpatrons
Religious preference			
Fundamentalist Protestant	–14***	–13***	–15***
Moderate Protestant	0	3	2
Liberal Protestant	–1	6***	1
Catholic	–10***	-4	–5**
Jewish	4***	3***	3***
None	19***	3	2
Other	3*	2	3
Bible is			
Literal word of god	–18***	–17***	–18***
Ancient book of fables	23***	9***	10***
Knows God exists	–26***	–10**	–12***
Heaven definitely exists	–38***	–5	–10***
Hell definitely exists	–34***	–8*	–14***
Attends religious services weekly	–7*	–3	–4*
Prays daily	–10*	–2	1
Art that mocks religion			
Wouldn't offend	16*	1	0
Wouldn't allow	–21*	–7*	–13***
Approves Supreme Court ban on mandatory school prayer	21***	14***	15***
Political ideology			
Liberal	16***	10***	10***
Conservative	–5	–3	0
Favors increased government spending on			
Education	6	6**	8***
Health	3	2	1
Environment	9*	10***	10***
Crime	–6	–7**	–3
Drugs	0	0	–2
Social Security	–6*	–4	–12***
Roads	3	0	–2
Cities	11***	–2	5***
Welfare	3	1	–6**
Mass transit	15***	12***	16***
Parks	6*	0	4**
Blacks	3	3*	5**
Defense	–7***	–1	–4***
Space program	4**	7***	5***
Foreign aid	2	1	0
Federal taxes too high	–8	–6*	–1
Opposes capital punishment	10**	4*	7***
Feels courts not harsh enough	–3	–3	–1
Political tolerance	12***	13***	16***
Behavior is always wrong			
Premarital sex	–14***	–7**	–10***
Homosexual sex	–24***	–18***	–24***
Teenage sex	–18***	–8**	–5*
Extramarital sex	–19***	–10***	–8***
Has had same-sex sex	9***	3*	4***
Supports legal abortion for any reason	21***	13***	16***
Legalize marijuana	23***	12***	10***
Strongly disagree wife should help husband's career first, not own	15***	10***	10***
Strongly disagree men should work, women should tend home	16***	11***	7***
Would vote for woman president	5*	5***	4***
Approve of wife working	11**	5*	7***
Disagree men should run country	9**	11***	9***
Men not better suited for politics	4	8***	9***

Difference significant at: * .05 level, ** .01 level, *** .001 level.

Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Management

The Serrano and Mapplethorpe grants became political issues in an America divided over religion, family values,

and gay rights. The grants may not have occurred if the arts community were as religiously and sexually conservative as the rest of the country, and the grants almost certainly would have passed unnoticed if Christian conservatives had not already been mobilized politically around family values. Serrano's photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine was most likely to offend Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants, but members of the arts community are far less likely than others to belong to either group. The Mapplethorpe exhibit occurred when public fear of AIDS was near its peak and public acceptance of homosexuality had reached a new low (Yang 1997), but the arts community is far more sympathetic to lesbian and gay interests than the rest of the country and far less offended by sexually explicit images in general.

Why do American governments sometimes subsidize art that is offensive to many Americans? Religion, sex, love, and the place of men and women in the world are central artistic themes. Those who produce, consume, and subsidize the arts are more skeptical of organized religion, conventional sexual morality, and traditional sex roles than the general public. Tax laws and artist-driven grant-review processes mean that both indirect and direct subsidies tend to reflect the values of the arts community.

Can we change our cultural policy to remove art from the culture wars? We could eliminate direct public subsidies to the arts, but most Americans believe government is spending about the right amount or too little on the arts (Filicko 1996), and only a small minority of Congress has voted to abolish the NEA. Cities will continue to fund the arts, partly because museums and symphony orchestras, like professional sports teams, are sources of civic pride (Frey 1997), and partly because a dynamic cultural life may attract the creative class and increase economic development (Florida 2002). Eliminating direct funding could become more feasible if arts supporters concluded the cost in public support and goodwill from an ongoing political debate exceeded the relatively small dollar amounts of direct subsidies, but both arts advocates and cultural conservatives may gain from fighting the battle.[9] Ending direct subsidies would not end the culture war, however, nor would it eliminate indirect subsidies. Donors would retain major influence over indirect public funding, and subsidies to offensive art would become less visible but not necessarily smaller.

Legislatures could place more restrictions on the content of art they subsidize. To some extent Congress has done this by adding the decency clause to NEA guidelines, eliminating grants to individual artists, and focusing funding on cultural institutions. It might go further and eliminate funding for contemporary art museums and theater in favor of institutions that preserve the great art of the past (Lipman 1992; Kramer 1992). Though this could diminish religious and sexual controversy, it might strengthen concerns about the elitist nature of arts subsidies. Alternatively, legislatures could beef up the NEA decency clause, but (1) the Constitution limits how restrictive such constraints can be, allowing controversy to continue; (2) strong restrictions would run counter to the values of artists and the broader arts community, increasing arguments over censorship; and (3) such restrictions would not contribute to the dynamism of government-subsidized art.

Government could shift its support away from both artists and art institutions to arts education, exposing more children and young adults to politically and socially uncontroversial art. If arts education advocates are correct, universal exposure could have many potential benefits, from enhanced intelligence (for instance, the "Mozart effect"; Rauscher, Shaw, and Ny 1995) to less juvenile delinquency (MacArthur and Law 1996). Currently, arts audiences are less religious and more sexually permissive than other Americans, but that may simply be because people with these values tend to be attracted to the arts as they currently exist. Broader arts education could enlarge arts audiences, especially for art that supports traditional religious and sexual values. If exposure to the arts corrupts morals, however, greater arts education could change the face of the culture war.

In contrast to ending direct arts subsidies, government might follow a European model and dramatically *increase* funding for the arts, so that the portion spent on controversial content becomes insignificant and unworthy of mention. If government were to become the prime sponsor of symphony orchestras and opera companies (as in most of Western Europe), a few thousand dollars spent on indecent photography might no longer taint public subsidies. Such changes are unrealistic for the United States unless public priorities, tax laws, and philanthropic activity shift dramatically. Even if possible, such changes might not avoid controversy in the U.S. context: The NEA funding battle centered on grants that accounted for 0.03 percent of its budget.

Arts administrators face a difficult balancing act. They and their stakeholders (artists, donors, and patrons) have stronger tastes for offensive art than the general public. Public funds are tempting in themselves and tend to leverage private donations as well, but they come with implied strings on content. Sexually explicit, overtly political, and religiously controversial art are more likely to generate protests if public dollars are attached, and matching requirements mean that public dollars are attached to much greater portions of arts organizations' budgets than they directly fund. Administrators who take the strings too seriously are likely to lose the arts community's respect and their reputation for cutting-edge work. Those who don't take them seriously enough are likely to end up in the hot seat.

Given continuing public support for some level of arts funding, and given the values differences between the arts community and the rest of America, we may simply need to accept some level of controversy over offensive art. As Jesse Helms correctly noted, "Americans for the most part are moral, decent people," but the cost of eliminating the small number of controversial grants that "denigrate, offend, or mock [them] with their own tax dollars" may be too high in terms of the chilling effect on artistic freedom.

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Notes

1. Alternative sources place the size of the grant at $500 or $750. Signed silk screens of the poem now sell for $300 (see www.parisreview.com/print%20series.htm).
2. "The AVA may be the most scrupulously and democratically organized exhibition in the country. Each year 100 art professionals nominate 500 geographically dispersed artists from which 10 are selected by a five-person jury" (Atkins 1989, 37). The Rockefeller and Equitable Foundations cosponsored the AVA.
3. Their targets included the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* for its depiction of a weak, too-human Christ, Pepsi for modifying Madonna's *Like a Prayer* video for a commercial, 7-Eleven for selling *Hustler* and *Playboy*, and sponsors of television programs with excessively sexual or pro-gay content (Bolton 1992, 27).
4. The original Helms amendment, passed by the Senate when few Senators were present, used similar language, but it also prevented funding of "indecent materials" and "material which denigrates the objects of beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion; or ... denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin." Dropping the restriction on "indecent materials" appeared to limit the ban to art that met the *Miller* definition of obscenity, which requires that the work have no serious artistic value. This strict test should have made the reference to "sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts" gratuitous, as any art funded by an NEA review panel would presumptively have serious artistic value, but it was widely interpreted in the arts community as prohibiting unobscene depictions of these types of sexuality (Vance 1992b).
5. In 1996, 9.6 percent said they had given money and 7.2 percent said they had done volunteer work; in 1998, the comparable percentages were 21.7 and 16.0. The much higher arts giving in 1998 probably reflects the fact that the GSS focused on the arts in 1998 but asked about many types of charitable giving in 1996, allowing respondents to present themselves as generous without giving to the arts.
6. Respondents were asked whether members of five unpopular groups (atheists, communists, homosexuals, militarists, and racists) should be allowed to teach college, give public speeches, and have books advocating their causes in public libraries; we scored respondents' political tolerance as the percentage of those 15 civil liberties they would allow. All 15 items load heavily on the same factor. Cronbach's alpha is 0.90.
7. Respondents labeled four types of sex outside marriage as "always wrong," "almost always wrong," "wrong only sometimes," "or not wrong at all." Artists are much more willing than the general public to label teenage and extramarital sex "almost always wrong," but only 1 to 2 percentage points more likely than others to call them "not wrong at all."
8. That may be simply because artists are more likely to acknowledge behavior that society frowns upon, though they are not significantly more likely to say they have ever had extramarital sex or that they have drunk to excess. Though some of the difference in reported homosexual behavior is probably due to the greater social acceptability of homosexuality in artistic communities, much of the difference is probably real.
9. One week after forming the Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson sent direct mailings seeking donations to fight the NEA's funding of the Mapplethorpe exhibit, and the controversy raised attendance levels for that exhibit far above normal levels (Hess 1992; Bolton 1992).

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