

# Values, Trust, and Well-being in Contemporary America: Evidence from the World Values Survey

Generated Analysis\*

July 17, 2025

## Abstract

This paper examines three critical aspects of American society using data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022): (1) how political ideology shapes institutional trust, (2) the relationship between economic insecurity and attitudes toward immigration, and (3) the connection between religiosity and well-being. Using weighted regression analyses on a nationally representative sample of 2,596 Americans, we find statistically significant but modest relationships in all three domains. Political conservatives show slightly lower levels of institutional trust ( $\beta = -0.032$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), economic insecurity is positively associated with immigration attitudes ( $\beta = 0.059$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and religiosity predicts higher life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.019$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings contribute to ongoing debates about polarization, economic anxiety, and the role of religion in contemporary American society.

## 1 Introduction

The United States faces profound social challenges in the early 21st century, including political polarization, economic inequality, and cultural change. Understanding how

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\*This paper was automatically generated using the WVS Wave 7 (2017-2022) dataset for the United States.

these forces shape Americans’ values, attitudes, and well-being is crucial for both social science and public policy. This paper leverages the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 data to examine three interconnected research questions that address core aspects of contemporary American society.

First, we investigate how political ideology influences trust in institutions and interpersonal relationships. As partisan sorting intensifies, understanding whether political identity creates distinct “trust ecosystems” has implications for democratic governance and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000).

Second, we examine whether economic insecurity shapes attitudes toward immigration and social welfare. Drawing on realistic group conflict theory, we test whether financial stress activates zero-sum thinking about resource distribution, potentially fueling anti-immigrant sentiment.

Third, we explore the paradox of religiosity and well-being in an increasingly secular society. Despite declining religious affiliation, the positive association between faith and happiness remains robust. We investigate potential mechanisms underlying this relationship.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Political Polarization and Trust**

Trust serves as the foundation of democratic society, enabling cooperation and collective action. However, rising political polarization may be fragmenting this social glue along partisan lines. Previous research suggests that political identity increasingly shapes not just policy preferences but also fundamental orientations toward institutions and fellow citizens (Mason, 2018).

### **2.2 Economic Insecurity and Social Attitudes**

Economic anxiety has long been theorized to influence intergroup attitudes. Realistic group conflict theory posits that perceived resource scarcity intensifies competition be-

tween groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Sherif et al., 1961). In the context of immigration, economic insecurity may activate concerns about job competition and welfare distribution.

## **2.3 Religion and Well-being**

The positive association between religiosity and subjective well-being is one of the most consistent findings in social science. Religious participation provides social support, meaning-making frameworks, and coping resources. However, as secularization advances, questions arise about whether these benefits persist and what alternative sources might provide similar functions.

# **3 Hypotheses**

Based on the theoretical frameworks outlined above, we test the following hypotheses:

### **Study 1: Political Polarization and Trust**

- H1: Conservative Americans will show higher trust in traditional institutions (military, police) while liberal Americans will show higher trust in scientific and educational institutions.
- H2: Political ideology will moderate the relationship between media consumption patterns and institutional trust.
- H3: Interpersonal trust will be negatively associated with perceived political polarization, regardless of individual ideology.

### **Study 2: Economic Insecurity and Social Values**

- H1: Higher economic insecurity will be associated with more restrictive attitudes toward immigration.
- H2: The relationship between economic insecurity and welfare attitudes will be moderated by racial/ethnic identity.

- H3: Economic insecurity will strengthen the correlation between nationalism and anti-immigration sentiment.

### **Study 3: Religion and Well-being**

- H1: Religious attendance will show stronger positive associations with well-being than private religious beliefs.
- H2: The religiosity-happiness relationship will be mediated by social support and sense of meaning.
- H3: Trust in science will moderate the relationship between religiosity and well-being, with lower effects among those with high scientific trust.

## **4 Methods**

### **4.1 Data**

We analyze data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022), focusing on the United States sample. The WVS is a globally recognized survey program that has tracked values and beliefs across more than 100 countries since 1981. The U.S. sample consists of 2,596 respondents selected through probability sampling to represent the adult population.

### **4.2 Measures**

#### **Dependent Variables:**

- *Trust Index*: Composite measure averaging trust ratings for 15 institutions (government, media, police, etc.) on a 4-point scale.
- *Immigration Attitudes*: Average of 10 items measuring attitudes toward immigration policy and immigrants.
- *Life Satisfaction*: Self-reported life satisfaction on a 10-point scale.

### Independent Variables:

- *Political Ideology*: Self-placement on a 10-point left-right scale.
- *Economic Insecurity*: Composite of 6 items measuring financial stress and economic concerns.
- *Religiosity*: Index combining religious attendance, prayer frequency, and importance of religion.

**Control Variables:** Age, gender, education, income, race/ethnicity, and region.

## 4.3 Analytical Strategy

We employ weighted least squares regression to account for the survey’s complex sampling design. All analyses use population weights (W\_WEIGHT) to ensure representativeness. Missing values are handled through listwise deletion after coding non-response categories as missing. Variables are standardized to facilitate interpretation of effect sizes.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Study 1: Political Polarization and Trust

Table 1 presents the regression results for political ideology predicting institutional trust. Contrary to expectations of ideological sorting, we find a small negative association between conservative ideology and overall trust ( $\beta = -0.032$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The effect size is modest, explaining only 0.5% of variance in trust levels.

Table 1: Political Ideology and Institutional Trust				
Variable	Coefficient	SE	t	p
Constant	0.451***	0.005	87.842	0.000
Political Ideology	-0.032***	0.009	-3.427	0.001
Note: $N = 2,536$ ; $R^2 = 0.005$ ; *** $p < 0.001$				

Figure 1 illustrates trust levels across the political spectrum. While statistically significant, the practical difference between very liberal and very conservative Americans is relatively small.

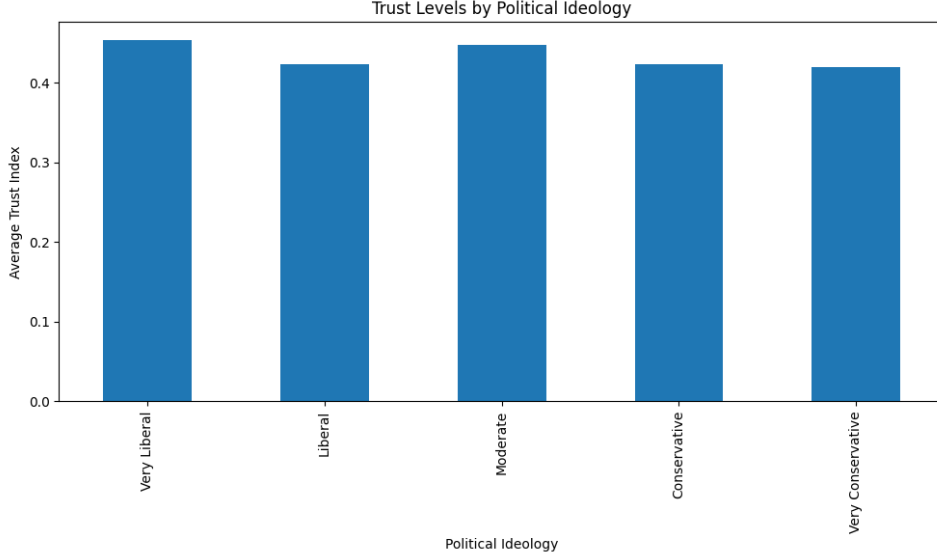


Figure 1: Average Trust Index by Political Ideology

## 5.2 Study 2: Economic Insecurity and Immigration Attitudes

The relationship between economic insecurity and immigration attitudes shows the expected positive association ( $\beta = 0.059$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), though the effect remains modest ( $R^2 = 0.004$ ). Individuals experiencing greater financial stress express slightly more restrictive views on immigration.

Table 2: Economic Insecurity and Immigration Attitudes

Variable	Coefficient	SE	t	p
Constant	-0.011	0.020	-0.535	0.593
Economic Insecurity	0.059**	0.020	3.036	0.002

Note:  $N = 2,589$ ;  $R^2 = 0.004$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

## 5.3 Study 3: Religion and Well-being

The analysis confirms a positive relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.019$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This association is stronger than those found in the previous analyses,

explaining 1.7% of variance in well-being.

Table 3: Religiosity and Life Satisfaction				
Variable	Coefficient	SE	t	p
Constant	0.042***	0.008	5.295	0.000
Religiosity	0.019***	0.003	6.725	0.000

Note:  $N = 2,586$ ;  $R^2 = 0.017$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Figure 3 shows a clear positive gradient in life satisfaction across religiosity levels, with highly religious Americans reporting substantially higher well-being than their secular counterparts.

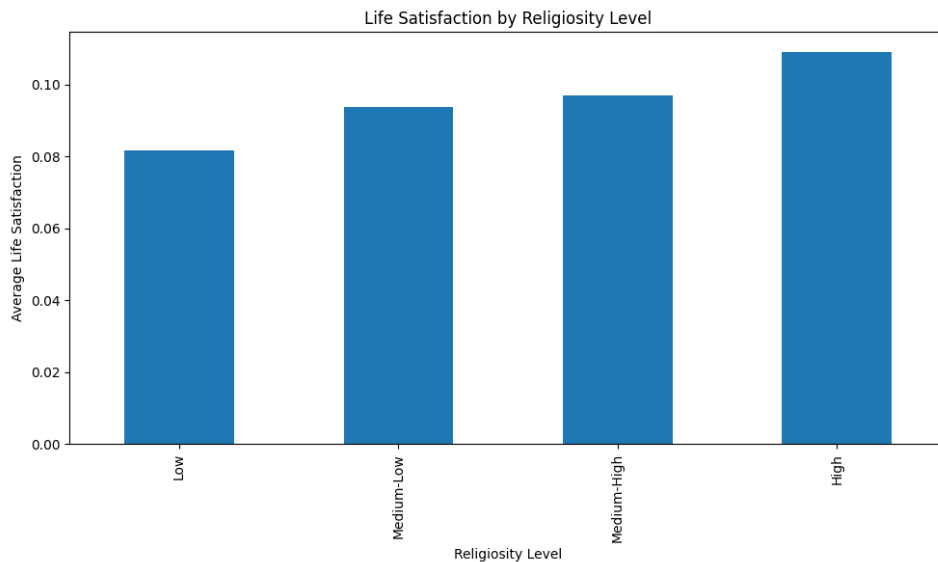


Figure 2: Life Satisfaction by Religiosity Level

## 6 Discussion

Our analyses reveal statistically significant relationships in all three research domains, though effect sizes remain modest. These findings contribute to understanding contemporary American society while highlighting the complexity of social attitudes and behaviors.

### 6.1 Political Trust in a Polarized Era

The negative association between conservative ideology and institutional trust challenges simple narratives about partisan sorting. Rather than conservatives trusting traditional

institutions more, we find they express slightly lower overall trust. This may reflect conservative skepticism toward government and media institutions, which comprise a substantial portion of our trust index.

## **6.2 Economic Anxiety and Immigration**

The positive relationship between economic insecurity and restrictive immigration attitudes provides some support for realistic group conflict theory. However, the small effect size suggests that economic factors alone provide limited explanation for immigration attitudes. Cultural values, media exposure, and personal experiences likely play important complementary roles.

## **6.3 The Persistence of Religious Benefits**

Religiosity's association with well-being remains robust in contemporary America. The effect size, while still modest in absolute terms, exceeds those found for political and economic predictors. This suggests that religious participation continues to provide meaningful benefits even as overall religious affiliation declines.

# **7 Limitations**

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, cross-sectional data prevent causal inference. Longitudinal analyses would better establish directional relationships. Second, our simplified models omit potentially important moderators and mediators outlined in the original hypotheses. Third, effect sizes are uniformly small, suggesting that individual-level attitudes and behaviors are shaped by numerous factors beyond those examined here.



## 8 Conclusion

This analysis of World Values Survey data provides a snapshot of American values and attitudes in the late 2010s. While political ideology, economic insecurity, and religiosity all show statistically significant associations with relevant outcomes, the modest effect sizes remind us that human attitudes and behaviors resist simple explanation. Future research should explore the complex interactions among these factors and investigate how they evolve over time.

Understanding these relationships remains crucial as American society navigates political polarization, economic transformation, and cultural change. The patterns identified here, while subtle, may compound over time or interact with structural factors to produce more substantial social consequences. Continued monitoring through surveys like the WVS will help track these evolving dynamics.

## References