

Abstract

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Church Attendance and Voluntary Engagement: The Anatomy of a Causal Mechanism

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This contribution examines the causal nexus between church attendance and voluntary engagement in a longitudinal perspective relying on panel data from the GSOEP. Recent years have seen an increased interest in the role of voluntary engagement for the workings of democracy and the social integration of modern societies. Furthermore, much research suggests that next to education, religious involvement is the most powerful predictor for active engagement in voluntary organizations on the individual level.

Although this finding is well established in the empirical literature, the exact causal relationship between religious involvement and voluntary engagement is far from clear. While theory suggests that people that attend religious services on a regular basis acquire important civic skills and are integrated in social networks that will eventually lead to voluntary work, the idea of a unidirectional causal link from religion to volunteering was not left without critics. For instance, the close connection between church attendance and voluntary work could also be due to a confounding third variable which leads to a mistaken causal relationship. In addition, a reciprocal relationship with voluntary involvement also leading to more religious involvement is another thinkable option.

Therefore, the aim of our paper is to empirically scrutinize the relationship between church attendance and voluntary work and resolve the debate on the causal mechanism by tackling different problems of endogeneity — unobserved heterogeneity, reversed causation and reciprocity. Information on volunteering and church attendance is provided in a total of 10 waves, allowing for a unique test of effect directions. Preliminary results show that — controlling for unobserved heterogeneity — there is indeed a link between individual church attendance and voluntary work that cannot be attributed to a third factor. In addition, we find a reciprocal relationship, but the effect of religious involvement on voluntary engagement is larger than vice versa.

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