Assessing public support for international religious freedom

Evidence from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey

Luke M. Perez[1]

Abstract

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) provides the US government with additional tools and information to promote the rights of religious minorities around the world. In addition to mandating annual reporting by the State Department, the law created an independent watchdog agency to monitor religious freedom around the world and provides the president with additional sanctioning powers for states that abuse religious minorities. Little is known, however, about the extent of American knowledge of and support for these policies. Most studies to date have focused on the influence of religious affiliation (using the tri-partite schema of "believing," "belonging," and "behaving") on respondent preferences for discrete US policies. This paper investigates the contours of American public opinion regarding international religious freedom, relying on original data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey. The data suggest that many respondents are unaware of the law, but among those who are knowledgeable of the scope of IRFA, support for international religious freedom remains strong. The data also indicate that US respondents who believe US-China competition is among the most important national security concerns are among those most likely to believe that IRFA policies strengthen US national security.

Keywords International Religious Freedom Act, FoRB promotion, religious freedom, policy support, public opinion, Cooperative Congressional Election Survey.

1. Introduction

In 1998, the US Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA; Public Law 105-292) by overwhelming margins and, in doing so, gave the US President broad powers to defend international religious freedom in US foreign policy. Since then, the law has been modified several times, most recently in 2016 when

[1] Luke M. Perez is Assistant Professor in the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the 2018 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference and a special expert seminar hosted by the International Institute for Religious Freedom. The author would like to thank Brenden Apfeld, David Leal, Oindrila Roy, and the anonymous reviewers. All mistakes and errors remain my own. This article uses American English. Article received 5 May 2020; accepted 16 March 2021. Email: lukemperez@asu.edu.

a Republican-controlled Congress passed – and a Democratic President signed – provisions that added atheism as one of the protected religious classes and elevated the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom to report directly to the Secretary of State. IRFA requires the State Department to produce annual reports on the status of religious freedom in every country in the world. Moreover, it established the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which is tasked, among other things, with evaluating and critiquing the State Department's report from the previous year. In 2018, the US State Department held the first ever Ministerial – a high-level diplomatic conference – on international religious freedom, and another one took place in the following year.

Given the long history of religion and politics in American history (Morone 2004) and the breadth of international engagement in US foreign policy (Snyder 2018), none of those developments are terribly surprising. What is surprising, however, is how little we know about public attitudes toward these policies. To date, no study has asked Americans what they think about international religious freedom, or whether they approve, disapprove, or don't care about their government's pursuit of this goal.

The US is unique in its approach to advancing religious freedom. Although nearly every developed country in the world has an office of international human rights, only the United States has offices inside its foreign affairs institutions for both international religious freedom and human rights. Maintaining two such offices increases internal costs, and Congress could easily have subordinated or collapsed the two. Their ongoing separate existence indicates a genuine interest in making international religious freedom a core objective of US foreign policy.

This paper explores the link between public knowledge and support for international religious freedom. Testing the American electorate on this issue is a first step toward understanding views of religious freedom globally, because of the magnitude of influence that the US exerts on global affairs. The original data for this project are drawn from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES). The data show that traditional predictors of respondent attitudes such as gender, education, and partisanship influence support for international religious freedom in foreign policy. Stronger support appeared among those who tend to be more religious, and also among those who think long-term competition with China is the most important foreign policy issue in the US.

2. Literature review: international religious freedom as an objective of US foreign policy

The history of US foreign relations features a tight coupling of religion and politics. However, we do not know much about the independent influence of foreign policy decision making on religion, religious freedom, and related ideas. Although the

passage of IRFA in 1998 could imply that religious freedom foreign policy emerged relatively late in American history, policy antecedents can be found throughout the twentieth century and even as far back as the nineteenth. As Philip Hamburger (2002) demonstrates, Americans thought of religious freedom narrowly in the nineteenth century, but twentieth-century public beliefs toward religion became more inclusive, first acknowledging Catholics, then Jews, then others.[2]

One important watershed in the twentieth-century development of US foreign policy and religious freedom occurred during the American annexation of the Philippines. President William McKinley's justification for annexing the Philippines was, in part, framed in terms of a Christian duty to evangelize, but then American policymakers faced the task of ensuring religious freedom for Muslims and Catholics against indigenous violence (Preston 2012:207-32; Su 2016:11-35). Other such junctures can be found, such as Woodrow Wilson's (eventually aborted) effort to add a religious freedom clause to the League of Nations Charter (Su 2016:46-47).

The Cold War transformed the US understanding of religious freedom and elevated its role to a core objective of national security. Both Presidents Truman and Eisenhower wasted little time ensuring that the strategy of Soviet containment was matched with rhetoric designed to mobilize the American public (Herzog 2011). Both relied heavily on theological rhetoric, casting the United States as defenders of Christendom or, at least, of religious freedom against atheistic Soviet communism (Inboden 2008). The religious freedom component of Cold War strategy reached its apogee in the 1970s when Henry "Scoop" Jackson successfully advocated for his landmark bill requiring the Soviet Union to permit Jews to emigrate before it could be granted Most Favored Nation trading status with the United States (Beckerman 2010; Feingold 2007).[3] The networks of activists that formed during the closing decades of the Cold War to advance the goals of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment and the Helsinki Final Accords continued even after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Snyder 2011; Morgan and Sargent 2016; Morgan 2018).

These policies were not limited to the Cold War context either. Many of the IRFA's original drafters looked to the Jackson-Vanik Amendment as a template (Hertzke

[2] The constitutional jurisprudence of the First Amendment is crucial to understanding American attitudes about religion. As Hamburger notes, the standard history begins with a letter by Thomas Jefferson (1802) to the Danbury Baptists, a letter that has become somewhat mythical in stature but that set the tone for American thinking on the separation between church and state. James Madison's 1785 Memorial and Remonstrance is also important. There, the "Father of the Constitution" argued, two years before the 1787 Constitutional Convention, that religious freedom protects religion as much as it protects government.

[3] Feingold observes that the Jackson-Vanik Amendment was "the first piece of human right legislation passed by Congress aimed at ameliorating the condition of an oppressed foreign minority" (p. 146). It may have been the first international human rights law passed by a domestic lawmaking body.

2004). American policymakers have continued to promote religion in the subsequent decades. Although the US policy priorities would become distracted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Presidents Bush (Bumiller 2002), Obama (Mandaville 2013), and Trump (Schwartz 2019) all supported religious freedom as a core objective of US foreign policy.

3. Conceptualizing mass attitudes toward international religious freedom

Given the thoroughness of religion's role in US foreign policy, the lack of a robust research literature investigating American attitudes toward these policies is all the more curious. When scholars have examined the relationship between religion and foreign policy, their emphasis has usually been on how religion influences voter preference on discrete policies (Guth 2009; Collins et al. 2011). However, US foreign policy is not made in a vacuum. Policymakers are accountable, at least in principle, to the general electorate, not to certain religious or secular groups to the exclusion of others. The absence of a link between public opinion and US foreign policy toward religious freedom would raise concerns over democratic accountability.

Scholars of US public opinion often conclude that connections between policymakers and the general public are relatively weak. Jacobs and Page (2005) argue that foreign policy outputs often track the attitudes of elites in think tanks and business more closely than those of the general public. This does not mean that no signals from the general populace reach policymakers; on the contrary, the policy preferences that do reach leaders exert some measurable influence. But the link between opinion and policy is perhaps best understood as an imprecise thermostat that sends only rough signals of hotter or colder (Wlezien 1996). During periods of intensive international competition, this mechanism can often send clear and unambiguous signals, leading to the maxim that "politics stops at the water's edge." In practice, however, even when public signals do reach those who occupy high offices, decision makers can employ lumping or splitting interpretive strategies to defend the decisions they want to make (Druckman and Jacobs 2011). Additionally, as Mo Fiorina (2017) has argued, the polarization among elites has distorted the vote choice among the electorate. As a result, the standard linkage between voters and policy may be artificially weaker than it would be under more optimal conditions.

Overall, scholars' findings in this regard seem rooted in the underdeveloped theory of voter-elite linkages over foreign policy. In his description of the domestic sources of foreign policy, Hill (1993) discusses the "belief systems debate," which began with Philip Converse's (1964) examination of the disparity between mass and elite opinion. At issue is whether the horizontal range of beliefs among the general public constrains elite agency. If it does not, then what the public thinks matters lit-

tle in policymaking. In contrast, the model developed by John Zaller (1992:40-51) serves as a useful way to conceptualize respondents' attitudes about international religious freedom policies. According to Zaller, respondents accept (or resist) arguments commensurate with their level of cognitive engagement, to the extent that the message confirms (or challenges) their prior beliefs. Voters who are more engaged will tend to have stronger opinions than those who are only tepidly engaged.

These findings imply that a similar process may shape attitudes regarding religious freedom. Because of religion's tumultuous history in world and American politics, it is not altogether clear what researchers should expect to find. Religious freedom may be perceived as a domestic barrier to social progress (e.g., for advocates of gay marriage or abortion), a human right (related to freedom of conscience or worship), or potential coalition partner for activism (e.g., on behalf of civil rights or against sex trafficking). On these domains, political ideology greatly influences perceptions (Goidel, Smentkowski, and Freeman 2016; Margolis 2018). Additionally, most of the research on foreign policy preferences focuses on discrete issues rather than on a matrix of issues simultaneously. When issues are examined as a set, elite cues can influence voter attitudes, but, consistent with Zaller, they do so only to the extent that they do not conflict with ideological polarization (Guisinger and Saunders 2017).

Since Republicans in the US tend to be more religious than Democrats, one might expect Republicans to be more supportive of international religious freedom, but this is not a certainty. Religious conservatives were instrumental in the passage of IRFA, but it is possible that many Republicans view religious freedom narrowly as important for their domestic life, but not as something that should be exported overseas.[4] Conversely, Democrats tend to favor human rights more than Republicans, as well as viewing international cooperation as a way to avert military force.

Regardless of how opinions may be shaped by ideology, additional confounding stimuli may also shape respondents' opinions, though filtered through partisanship, education, and other primary worldview commitments. For instance, Republicans more often interpret foreign affairs in security terms (hard power) rather than in humanitarian or economic terms (soft power). We might therefore expect them to characterize their support as making America safer. Those with higher education should, *ex ante*, be more informed about foreign policy and may already be aware of such policies. But how education might influence their thinking remains an open question. Finally, if respondents are knowledgeable about national security issues, they may view religious freedom in positive or negative terms, depending on the extent to which they believe those policies make the US safer.

[4] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for help in thinking through this logical connection.

4. Data

Because no prior data exist on this topic, I designed a survey for the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), which is conducted nationally in the US every two years, during each congressional election year. The primary aim of the CCES is to give scholars of public opinion access to voter attitudes in relation to congressional elections. Participants in the survey are asked a battery of regular questions, such as ones on their level of ideological partisanship (often referred to as "Party ID" or "PID"), socioeconomic status (SES), and level of education. In addition, election-related questions inquire how frequently they vote. Survey modules designed by researchers are then introduced to gather more discrete data. One strength of the CCES for political survey research is its direct connection to the upcoming election, linking the practical reality of US politics to the theoretical nature of survey questions. Each module is administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents. Finally, the survey occurs twice, once in the summer of each election year and again in the fall after the November election of that year (commonly referred to as "pre" and "post"). Although some research designs are applicable to either the pre-election and post-election version of the survey and others must be contained in both versions, my data are not sensitive to this factor, since it is generally assumed that few respondents are familiar with laws and policies promoting international religious freedom.

The dependent variable under investigation was whether respondents think that US foreign policies on religious freedom make the US safer. It can be difficult or even impossible to grasp what respondents think about international religious freedom as a concept or value, because their understandings of religious freedom could vary widely. This survey instead informed participants about IRFA and related policies and then asked whether they think such laws and policies make the US safer. The survey module included two questions to determine whether respondents have high or low levels of knowledge.[5] Additional questions helped to situate their responses in foreign policy terms by asking whether participants supported economic sanctions or military interventions to protect human rights, religious freedom, and prevent ethnic genocide. Finally, the survey also asked what participants considered the most important foreign policy issue when voting.

Overall, the responses from the survey revealed broad support for international religious freedom, with 431 respondents somewhat or strongly agreeing with the proposition that international religious freedom makes America safer and only 135 saying that they somewhat or strongly disagreed. The largest group of responses, however (432),

[5] The first question asked respondents which branch of government declared war, and the second asked which branch of government approved treaties. As discussed below, because the two questions were very strongly correlated, only the first question was used in the data analysis.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Don't know	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Observations
Male	0.42	1.38	5.5	4.67	2.46	334
Female	0.87	2.01	9.45	5.88	1.9	275
No HS	0.21	0.1	0.69	0.24	0.1	284
High School	0.45	0.66	4.47	2.53	1.35	417
Some College	0.14	0.76	3.43	2.28	1.11	581
2-year degree	0.1	0.42	1.25	1	0.31	334
4-year degree	0.17	1.11	3.22	2.73	0.87	275
Post-grad	0.21	0.35	1.9	1.77	0.62	284
Democrat	0.35	1.66	5.23	3.36	0.97	39
Republican	0.38	0.66	2.91	3.57	2.01	273
Independent	0.28	0.87	4.81	2.94	0.93	223

Table 1: Proportional Support for IRF laws and policy by Gender, Education, and Party ID

selected "do not know." Table 1 shows the responses broken down by gender, education, and 3-level Party-ID scale.[6] The null hypothesis specifies no correlation between any independent variable and beliefs that IRFA policies make the United States safer. A Pearson's chi-squared test between responses for "IRF security" and party ID yielded the following results: x^2=84.817, df=16, p=0.001. For gender, the results were x^2=17.529, df=4, p=0.001, and for education, they were x^2=39.209, df=20, p = 0.006. These are sufficient to reject the null hypothesis of no correlation.

An empirical model was used to examine the relationship between the dependent and explanatory variables. Because the responses are ordered categorical variables, the model relied on ordered probit regression.[7] The main explanatory variables considered were gender, education, and 3-level party ID. Models 1-3 are presented in Table 2. The same models were rerun on a subset of those respondents who answered the first knowledge question correctly.

[6] For simplicity and to save space, 48 "not sure" and 57 "other" responses were dropped from this summary table. 3-level Party-ID is a common metric in US survey research. It is a measure of respondent self-reporting of "Democrat," "Republican," or "Independent."

[7] Recent scholars have argued that the presence of "don't know" and "no opinion" answers on surveys about foreign policy should not be thought of as missing data or placed in an ordered position relative to other responses. See Kleinberg and Fordham (2018) for a detailed treatment of this methodological debate. I thank the anonymous reviewer who brought this issue to my attention.

	Dependent Variable: IRF laws make the US safer		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender (Female)	-0.244***	-0.235***	-0.233***
	-0.068	-0.069	-0.074
High School		0.276**	0.362***
		-0.122	-0.131
Some College		-0.211*	-0.217*
		-0.121	-0.129
2-year		0.258***	0.300***
		-0.096	-0.103
4-year		-0.062	-0.114
		-0.082	-0.087
Post-graduate		-0.029	-0.064
		-0.09	-0.094
Independent			0.456***
			-0.088
Republican			0.072
			-0.087
Observations	998	998	893
Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01			

Table 2: IRF Models 1–3

I ran both ordered logit and ordered probit regressions on the dependent variable, against the independent variables of gender, education, 3-level party ID. I also tested the dependent variable against two control variables that measure political sophistication in foreign policy. One control variable derived from the question on which branch of government declares war, the second from a question asking which branch of government ratifies international treaties. These questions should help sort which respondents gave answers based on their prior knowledge or understanding of foreign affairs and which are not. For the question on what branch of government declares war, 617 respondents answered correctly while 257 incorrectly chose another option; 546 correctly answered the question on treaty ratification, and 420 answered both questions correctly. A chi-squared test of the two questions found x^2=39.209, df=9, p-value <0.00, suggesting a correlation between knowledge of the correct answers.

The correlation results for the independent variables were significant in a handful of cases (see Table 2). Women are negatively correlated with support for international reli-

gious freedom. Respondents with a high-school diploma or two-year degree were more likely than those with no high school degree to be more supportive of international religious freedom. In those cases, results were statistically significant. Although the results were not significant, support for international religious freedom is negatively correlated for those with some college, a four-year degree, or a postgraduate degree. The lack of significance for these education groups could be due to a lack of sufficient numbers since there are fewer individuals with two-year degrees (89) and post-graduate degrees (140) than the other variables. Party ID is only significant, and positively correlated, for Independents (measured against those who identified as "Democrat").

5. Analysis and Discussion

When the data are examined as a whole, a complex picture of support for international religious freedom emerges. For instance, when the data are filtered to include only high knowledge respondents (see Table 3), the negative correlation of support for international religious freedom and women loses statistical significance. Similarly, high-knowledge respondents gain significance for those holding a 2-year degree. Independents are more supportive of international religious freedom policies than Democrats while maintaining statistical significance. Although Republicans are more supportive among high knowledge respondents, there is no statistical significance. Nevertheless, it would seem that political knowledge might carry more explanatory power than gender, education, or party ID.

Although it is unclear why gender loses significance among high knowledge respondents, one possibility is that gender and religiosity are not linearly correlated. Compared to men, women report both attending church more frequently ("more than once a week," "once per week," or "once or twice a month"), and less frequently ("seldom," or "never"). Additionally, because education and religiosity are negatively correlated, and, since reported church attendance declines with one's level of education, it is unclear which of the two is a stronger predictor of support for international religious freedom.

To test the possibility of whether religiosity is an important predictor of support, I turned to the general religion questions in the CCES survey (Table 4). All participants were asked how often they attended church, with six possible choices ranging from seldom to more than once per week. These answers were grouped into low, medium, and high frequency. Another question asked respondents if they considered themselves born-again Christians. The Evangelical community, since its modern emergence around the turn of the 20th century, has distinct attitudes about foreign policy relative to their co-religionists (Amstutz 2014; Curtis 2018).

The final set of analyses shows a significant correlation between those respondents who reported competition with China as an important factor for their support

	Dependent Variable: IRF laws make the US safer (high knowledge)		
	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender (Female)	-0.088	-0.085	-0.101
	-0.085	-0.086	-0.092
High School		0.328**	0.492***
		-0.165	-0.172
Some College		-0.458***	-0.498***
		-0.162	-0.169
2-year		0.230*	0.277**
		-0.129	-0.134
4-year		-0.071	-0.098
		-0.108	-0.114
Post-graduate		-0.006	0.014
		-0.115	-0.121
Independent			0.519***
			-0.115
Republican			0.1
			-0.108
Observations	615	615	558
Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01			

Table 3: IRF Models 4–6

for international religious freedom (see Table 5). This result seems to reinforce the view, prominent in the Cold War period, that competition with authoritarian regimes leads respondents to associate the most egregious human rights violations with national security. Chinese suppression of churches is well known, as is the forced conversion to atheism of Uighurs (Bhattacharji 2008; Matusitz 2016). The salience of this issue could therefore be driving support for international religious freedom among those who view the long-term competition with China as an important security concern. But more data are needed to confirm this possibility, since other unobserved variables may be driving these results.

The empirical conclusion that US foreign policy strategy influences support for international religious freedom would influence future work on both strategy and public opinion. On one hand, scholars may continue to find that the general public has no real influence on policy. In this case, democratic accountability on political issues

	Model 7	Model 8
Born-Again Christians	0.215***	
	-0.076	
Medium Attendance		0.421***
		-0.138
High Attendance		0.005
		-0.115
Observations	994	417
Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01		

Table 4: IRF Models 7–8

of utmost importance would remain weak. On the other hand, overall strategy may be a function of public opinion even if discrete policies are not. Writing in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville (2012 [1835]:13) once remarked that "it is in the leadership of the foreign interests of society that democratic governments seem to me decidedly inferior to others." This comment has often been interpreted as suggesting that democratic states lack the ability to implement genuine grand strategies because electoral pressures perversely incentivize decision makers to seek short-term, personal gain rather than long-term national benefit. But the evidence here suggests, consistent with previous scholarship, that policymakers respond to large-scale signals from voters ("more," "less," "different") but then rely on policies that reconcile as many as possible of the competing stimuli they receive from the electorate.

Dependent variable: IRF laws make the US safer	
(Not all that important) **1**	−0.113 (0.444)
2	−0.051 (0.314)
3	0.054 (0.292)
4	−0.359 (0.296)
5	−0.125 (0.215)
6	0.134 (0.267)
7	−0.034 (0.253)
8	0.731*** (0.248)
9	0.491 (0.322)
(Extremely important) 10	0.764*** (0.255)
Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01	

Table 5: IRF Support and China Competition

One note of caution. If long-term support for international religious freedom is shaped by religiosity (as measured by church attendance), then as the United States continues to secularize, we should expect support for international religious freedom to decline in the years ahead. Education too may be correlated with secularization. Although few respondents had postgraduate degrees, higher levels of education may be correlated with secularization, partisanship, or both.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the factors that drive support for international religious freedom. It discussed the origin and development of international religious freedom in Cold War strategy, as well as briefly surveying the literature in foreign policy public opinion to develop our understanding of the relationship between international religious freedom policies and public opinion. Measuring these potential relationships has heretofore not been possible because few data exist. By asking several questions about IRFA policies on the 2018 CCES, this paper provides the first empirical look at public attitudes on this central and core objective of US foreign policy. The evidence suggests a rough, positive correlation between party ID and support for international religious freedom, and possibly also a similar correlation for church attendance. Other potential links yield mixed results, but concern for competition with China tracks strongly with support for international religious freedom policies.

Although the general public often knows little or nothing about US policies concerning international religious freedom, when people do learn of their existence, support seems to be correlated with well-known predictors such as partisanship. More research is needed, but the evidence presented here suggests that policymakers can increase support for international religious policies if they educate the general public about their existence and, more importantly, their purposes. As strategic tools, they offer policymakers flexibility in their efforts to sustain the broad-based underpinning of the liberal international order. Moreover, these policies have been enshrined in law on multiple occasions and are thus unlikely to be curtailed or otherwise rolled back anytime soon. But it may be possible for savvy policymakers to increase support for international religious freedom by this issue to national security. In short, religious freedom will continue to be a mainstay of US national security strategy, and scholars would be prudent to investigate public support of or opposition to such policies.

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