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# Athesis: Patriotism and antipathy toward nonbelievers in the United States

Matthew Laird Milne  
*Iowa State University*

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**Athesis: Patriotism and antipathy toward nonbelievers in the United States**

by

**Matthew Laird Milne**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

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Robert Urbatsch, Major Professor

David Peterson

Dirk Deam

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER 1. ONE NATION UNDER GOD: THE ENTERPRISE	1
CHAPTER 2. WITH GOD ON TIM TEBOW'S SIDE: THE GENESIS	7
CHAPTER 3. FOR GOD AND COUNTRY: THE SUPPOSITION AND ASSESSMENT	21
CHAPTER 4. THIS LAND WAS MADE FOR YOU AND ME: FORTH	30
REFERENCES	33

**ABSTRACT**

Although religion has long been a topic closely tied to politics and academic scholarship, it was not until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that academics seriously turned their attention to issues pertaining to the nonbelievers. This inquiry is part of the budding scholarship that focuses on the atheists within the United States, and is the first of my knowledge to specifically explore the patriotic character of antipathy toward these citizens. Patriotic acts, symbolism, and rhetoric are often juxtaposed with references to deism, and attacks leveled at atheists frequently employ patriotic references. I contend these phenomena are not coincidental. On the contrary, I hypothesize that American patriotism propagates dislike for the nonreligious, as deism is so routinely drawn upon during patriotic practices, and nonbelievers are a small, largely unidentifiable minority. Empirical support for this supposition is provided through data from the General Social Survey, yet future research should be aimed at parsing out the effect of patriotism on anti-atheist attitudes – potentially in an experimental setting. Nonetheless, this analysis provides insight into the origin of negative attitudes toward nonreligious Americans, and reveals potential inroads to stifling the most socially accepted animosity toward a religious minority in America.

## CHAPTER 1

### ONE NATION UNDER GOD: THE ENTERPRISE

*“...the Constitution promises freedom of religion, not freedom from religion. We are after all not just another nation, but ‘one nation under God.’”*

—Sen. Joseph Lieberman, 2000<sup>1</sup>

Numerous surveys of United States citizens conducted over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have displayed heightened tolerance toward nearly all groups within society. This increased acceptance of minority groups has also been met with increased willingness to vote for racial and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and religious minorities. However, atheists remain inordinately repellent to American citizens – consistently ranking low in electability and high in enmity compared to other minority groups. To be certain, while atheists experience instances of discrimination (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, and Nielsen 2012), comparisons to other marginalized groups must be judicious, as atheists are not easily identifiable nor have they experienced levels of prejudice faced by other minorities. Nonetheless, intolerance, no matter its breadth and depth, influences how politics are conducted. And despite lesser willingness to fire teachers, censor texts, or stifle speech (the General Social Survey variables on tolerance examined below), it is still socially

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<sup>1</sup> From a speech delivered at Notre Dame University in 2000, while Sen. Lieberman was the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate (Lieberman 2000).

acceptable to express vitriol toward atheists (e.g., Allen 2009, quotes from political leaders throughout).

Secularization in industrial, further-developed societies is a topic with no shortage of commentators, and many in the modern era declared religion to be in its terminal stages. But the decline in religiosity throughout portions of the world has been met with resurgence in others, and it is now clear that religion is not merely a pre-industrial relic<sup>2</sup>. While topics like secularization in Western Europe, trends in religiosity worldwide, and the Christian Right in America have been magnets for academic inquiry, scholarship on the nonreligious was sparse until the turn of this century. Nevertheless, the last decade has found academics looking at the demographics of the nonreligious (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Keysar 2007, Sherkat 2008), their prevalence worldwide (Zuckerman 2007), what people think of them (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), the formation of people's attitudes toward them (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011), as well as other notions surrounding nonbelief and the nonreligious. Such inquiry has increased our knowledge on the topic significantly, yet there are still many unanswered questions regarding nonbelief in the United States.

One piece of scholarship that garnered significant attention in the press last fall was Gervais et al. (2011), which found respondents score atheists and rapists equivalently in measures of trust, while Muslims and Christians were viewed as much

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<sup>2</sup> Norris and Inglehart (2004) provide a thorough appraisal of thought on the topic, as well as empirical investigations of many theories surrounding it.

more trustworthy. The article will be examined in closer detail below, but it provides a stark contrast to the purported gains made by atheists (e.g., Fischer and Hout 2006) in the eye of the public. Gallup polls consistently show the lowest levels of support for a generally well-qualified presidential candidate in one's own party that happened to be an atheist – the only group evaluated failing to accrue a majority of respondents willing to vote for them – faring worse than homosexuals and other marginalized groups (Jones and Saad 2011). Trends in atheist tolerance will be compiled below to help illuminate the nature of atheist distaste, followed by an investigation into the origin of this negativity – namely its connection to patriotism.

It might be somewhat surprising that in 2011 a majority of US citizens claim they would abstain from voting for an otherwise qualified candidate from their party based on the candidate's religious beliefs, yet this antipathy is not as surprising given the pervasiveness of religious symbolism in American patriotic rituals and symbols. Look no further than the currency in your wallet, the vast majority of states that officially require (35) or encourage (5) the Pledge of Allegiance be recited in public schools (Piscatelli 2003), or to the majority of speeches delivered by politicians, and you will find references to God, or requests for its favor on the United States. There are countless more examples of this juxtaposition of God and country, and the culmination of which takes no minor toll on attitudes towards nonbelief.

In fact, I suggest the attitudes Americans have toward atheists are at least in part a product of their attitudes on patriotism. That is, due to the religious tones of many patriotic symbols and ceremonies, Americans are imparted with the notion that

patriotism is associated with deism, and as such those who are more emphatically patriotic are expected to display greater levels of intolerance for atheists. Though I find evidence that this relationship exists, recent developments surrounding attitudes toward nonbelievers provide inroads for parrying this trend, and the very nature of the relationship itself facilitates prescriptions for improving attitudes towards atheists. But first, it will be useful to clarify some terminology.

### **Explicating Terms**

Each of the variables employed in this inquiry are shrouded with degrees of ambiguity. Patriotism is a nebulous concept to rein in, especially when attempting to parse it from nationalism. Likewise, the term atheism is often construed many ways and has many closely associated designations. Fortunately for this analysis, the minutiae of the terms will likely be lost on much of the population, or will at least be partially muted by the methodology. However, I would be remiss if I did not clarify some definitions at the onset.

The term patriotism originates from the Greek *patriotes* meaning “fellow countryman,” referring to one’s origin from their *patris*, or “fatherland.” Nationalism is a more modern term – as the nation-state is a relatively recent development in history – and emerged around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Though each can generally be thought of as devotion to one’s country, scholarship on the terms has stressed their independence (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989, Li and Brewer 2004).



The notions of patriotism and nationalism share the characteristic of ingroup bonding, yet only nationalism also entails belligerence toward the international community (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989). Further, nationalism is marked by antipathy toward internal diversity (Li and Brewer 2004). Li and Brewer (2004) also highlight the subtlety of the difference in the notions by providing evidence that patriotism still associates with aversion toward minority groups (to a lesser degree than nationalism, mind you), but is not strictly incompatible with positive attitudes to diversity. For the purposes of this analysis, the distinction between these terms is not crucial, as the variable employed was chosen with caution to avoid measuring xenophobia rather than ingroup affinity.

The term atheism originates from the Greek *atheos* meaning “without god.” However, atheism is also commonly conceived as the assertion that there is no God. These are distinct concepts – one being defined negatively, the other positively. Atheism also runs very close to the notion of agnosticism, which stems from the Greek *agnostos* meaning “unknown, or unknowable,” and is less an absence of theism than recognition of our inability to be certain on such matters. The terminology becomes even more arduous when you add the myriad of associated groups to the fold, such as: humanists, secularists, secular humanists, naturalists, Brights (Dennett 2003), etc.

These divisions are tangible yet subtle, and at least one – Brights – has emerged as an attempt to create some distance from the word “atheist,” which is argued by some (e.g., Dennett 2003, Harris 2007) to be at least partially to blame for

negative attitudes directed at nonbelievers. I am sympathetic to such claims, as some atheists are just as dogmatic and fervent in their certainty on the supernatural as religious zealots. As such, many nonbelievers are reluctant to label themselves as an atheist, as evidenced in a Pew Research Center report showing only 24% of Americans who do not believe in God refer to themselves by the designation (Pew 2009). However, Swan and Heesacker (2012) explicitly test whether Americans are averse to the label “atheist” specifically, or one “without belief in God” generally. They find negative attitudes persist across both formulations of the questioning, and do not vary significantly. Furthermore, they found that when asked for an open-ended definition of an atheist, 85% of a sample group provided an answer close to “someone who does not believe in God.” So it seems the multitude of divisions delineating flavors of nonbelief does not alter perceptions in the minds of the public. Or, more specifically, there is not a stigma attached to the label “atheist” as much as there is sweeping distaste for nonbelievers. This will surely dishearten those that hope a new image is all the irreligious need to garner greater acceptance, but it appears the animosity runs deeper. That said, for evaluative purposes here, it seems safe to assume analysis of attitudes towards atheists will not be sensitive to fluctuations in terminology. And atheism will be used interchangeably with nonbelief and irreligion throughout.

## CHAPTER 2

### WITH GOD ON TIM TEBOW'S SIDE: THE GENESIS

*“Before all else, we seek, upon our common labor as a nation, the blessings of Almighty God.”*

—Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957<sup>3</sup>

One need not look long to find instances in which citizens of the United States convey interesting attitudes on religion<sup>4</sup>. A most outstanding display of this can be seen in a recent poll finding 43% of Americans believe Tim Tebow’s string of come-from-behind victories in the 2011-12 NFL season was at least partially attributable to divine intervention – outnumbering those who replied “no” by one percentage point, or about 10 respondents (Jones 2012). Clearly Tim Tebow enamored the United States population this year, but how do they feel about atheists? And how do attitudes toward the atheists compare to other segments in America?

#### **Trends on Tolerance**

The General Social Survey (GSS) provides one of the most comprehensive and consistent survey data sets on a myriad of social metrics for the United States. One of the trends it tracks is tolerance of groups within society. The tolerance questions are posed in three forms, coded dichotomously: whether an proponent of the group should be allowed to speak in one’s community (allowed/not allowed), whether an

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Pres. Eisenhower’s second inaugural address on January 21, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> Putnam and Campbell (2010) provide numerous interesting anecdotes on faith in America.

individual from the group should be allowed to teach at a college or university in the community (allowed/not allowed), and whether one would favor removing a book promoting the specified group from the public library – upon the suggestion of a fellow community member (remove/not remove).

The types of individuals inquired about includes: an anti-religionist “somebody who is against all churches and religion,” a racist “a person who claims Blacks to be inferior,” a communist “an admitted communist,” a militarist “a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country,” and a homosexual “an admitted homosexual.” All of the preceding questions were initiated in the 1970s and have been asked in subsequent iterations of the survey (generally two-year intervals)<sup>5</sup>.

It should be mentioned that the GSS definition of an atheist is particularly inadequate because atheism does not precipitate being “against all churches and religion”, but defining the term can be cumbersome generally (as highlighted above). Interestingly, what the question is really getting at is attitudes toward *antitheism*, yet we have seen that people generally deduce a standard meaning from different expressions of nonbelief. For continuity, I have labeled the anti-religionist response rates as “atheist.”

Below are graphs displaying the percentage of respondents who expressed tolerance toward the group by allowing the particular activity.

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<sup>5</sup> Socialists (defined as “a person favoring government ownership of all railroads and big industries”) were included in the tolerance battery for three years of the survey, but were excluded here due to the absence of a more extensive time series.

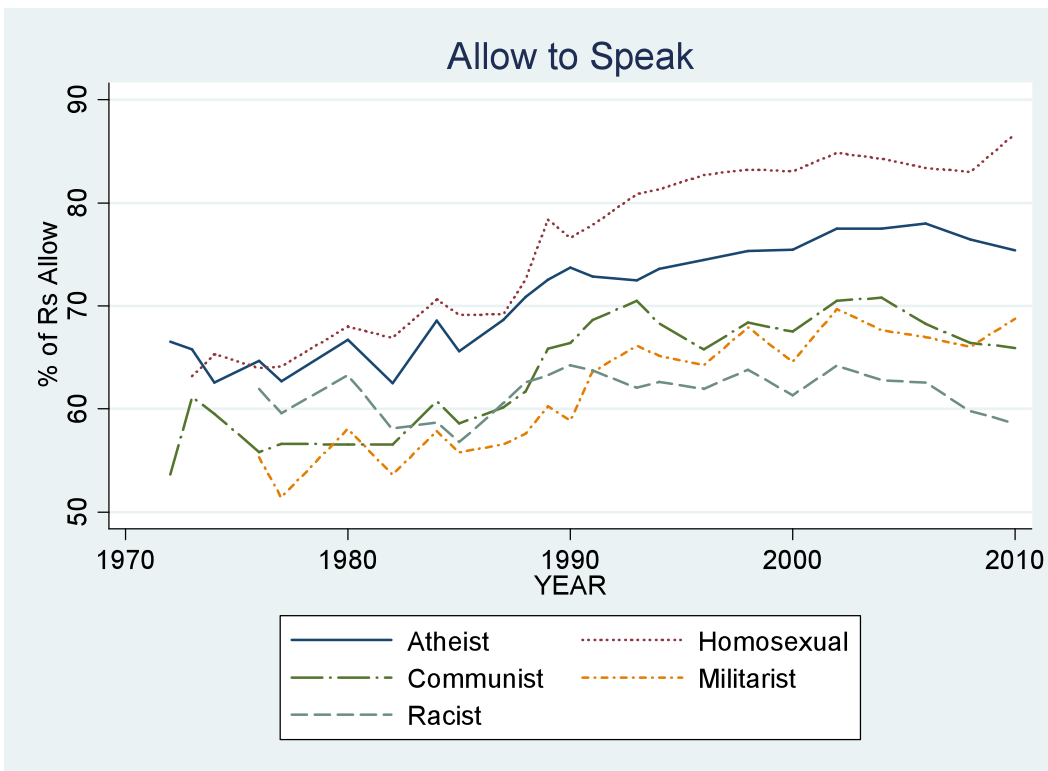


Figure 2.1: GSS rates of allowing such an individual speak in your community.

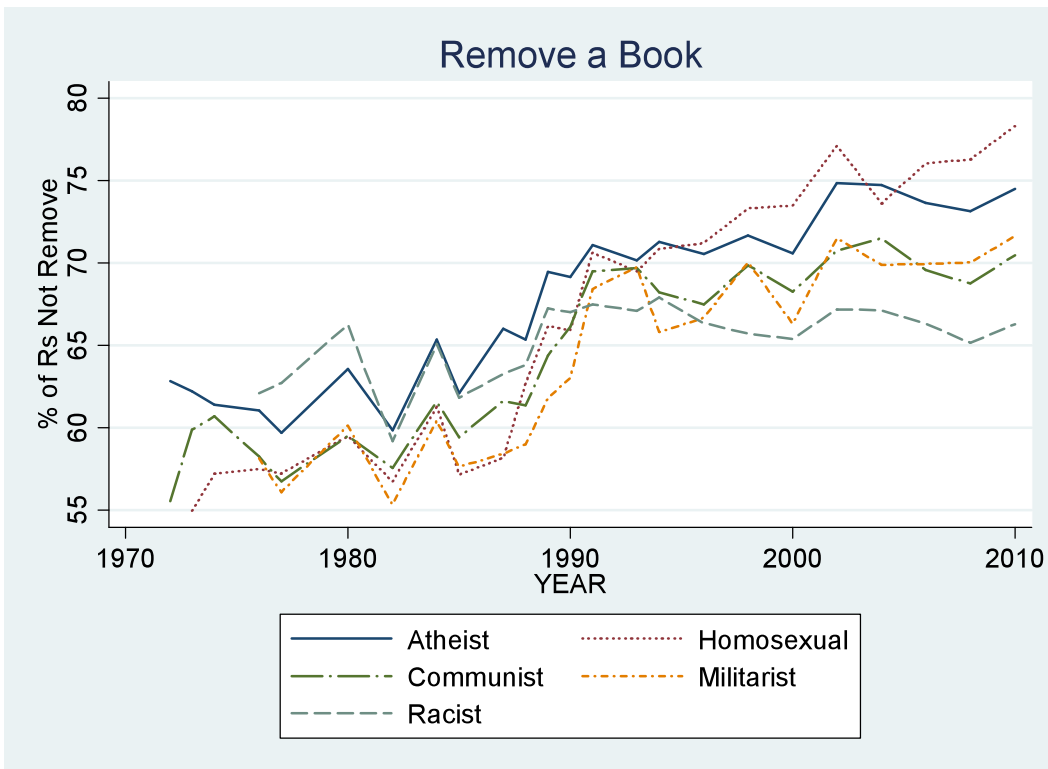
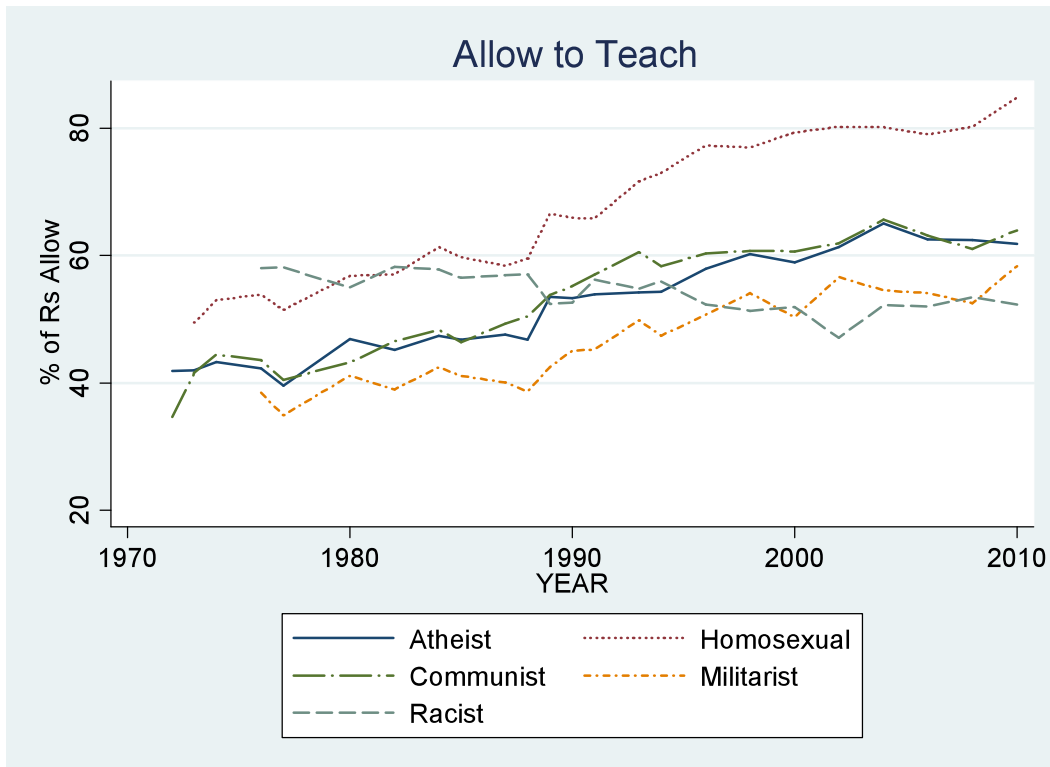


Figure 2.2: GSS rates of acceptance of a text written by such an individual.



**Figure 2.3:** GSS rates of allowing the employment of a teacher belonging to such a group.

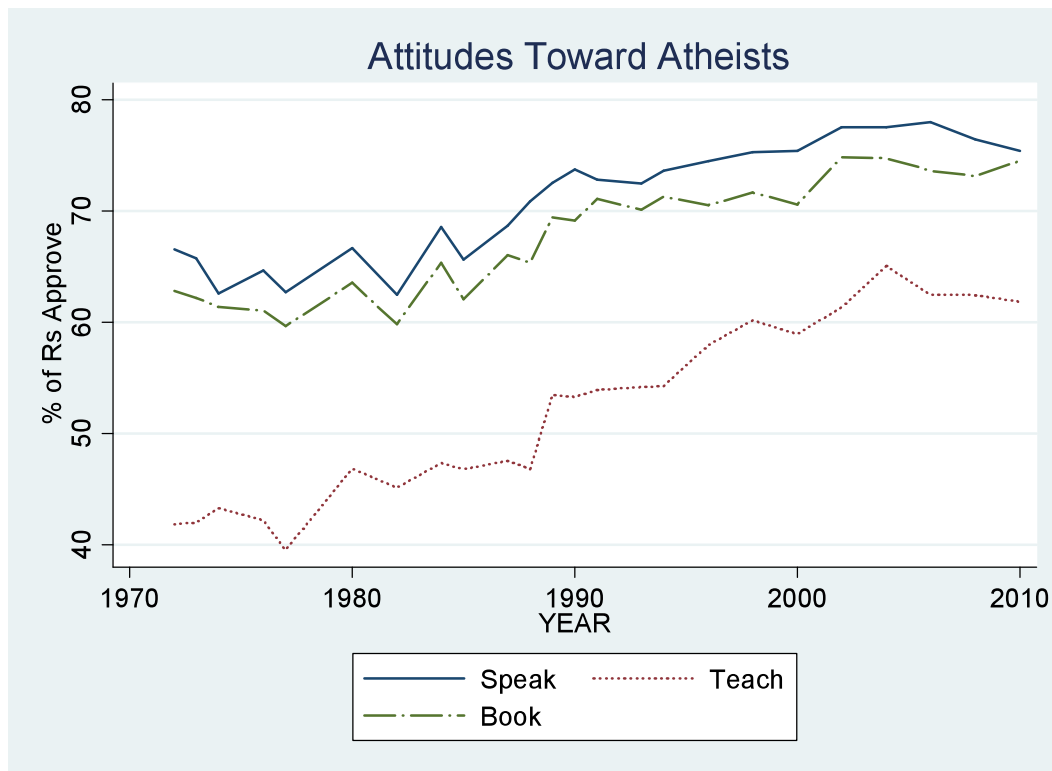
First, it is apparent, due to the overall positive slopes, that Americans have become more tolerant over time. Or, more specifically, citizens are less willing to restrict minority groups' speech, print, and employment as university faculty. While all three formulations of questions show increased acceptance over time, the magnitudes of the slopes vary in degree. The scales are also noteworthy, as the public speech and public library book variables receive markedly greater acceptance than public teachers from the evaluated groups. This is not particularly surprising, as a teacher is likely more influential on an individual than a speech or a book, and respondents might be more willing to censor information children take in (despite the question explicitly referencing institutions of learning for adults). Overall, Americans

are much more accepting of speech from these unpopular groups than the other formulations of tolerance.

A number of interesting trends emerge when looking at the particular differences between groups, but it is important to note that the only thing most of these categories have in common is their inclusion in the GSS survey, and I do not intend to imply they share characteristics by placing them in the same graph – they are included to be comprehensive.

Racists are the only group that remained relatively static or experienced a decline in acceptance. They presently receive the least acceptance in all three categories, though have not been categorically the most likely to be censored. Communists and militarists have remained near the least favorable. Communists are unique in that they comprise a two-pronged “threat” as a Cold War rival and a community of atheists, making it unsurprising that they fall below atheists in terms of acceptance. Homosexuals are the only ones that fare better than atheists in their acceptance as speakers and educators. Overall, homosexuals have really made strides in garnering acceptance over the last two decades – an indication that the gay rights movement has been successful in changing American’s minds.

Next, Figure 2.4 shows the GSS trends exclusively on atheists to remove some of the noise of the other graphs.



**Figure 2.4:** GSS rates of acceptance for atheists across all three questions.

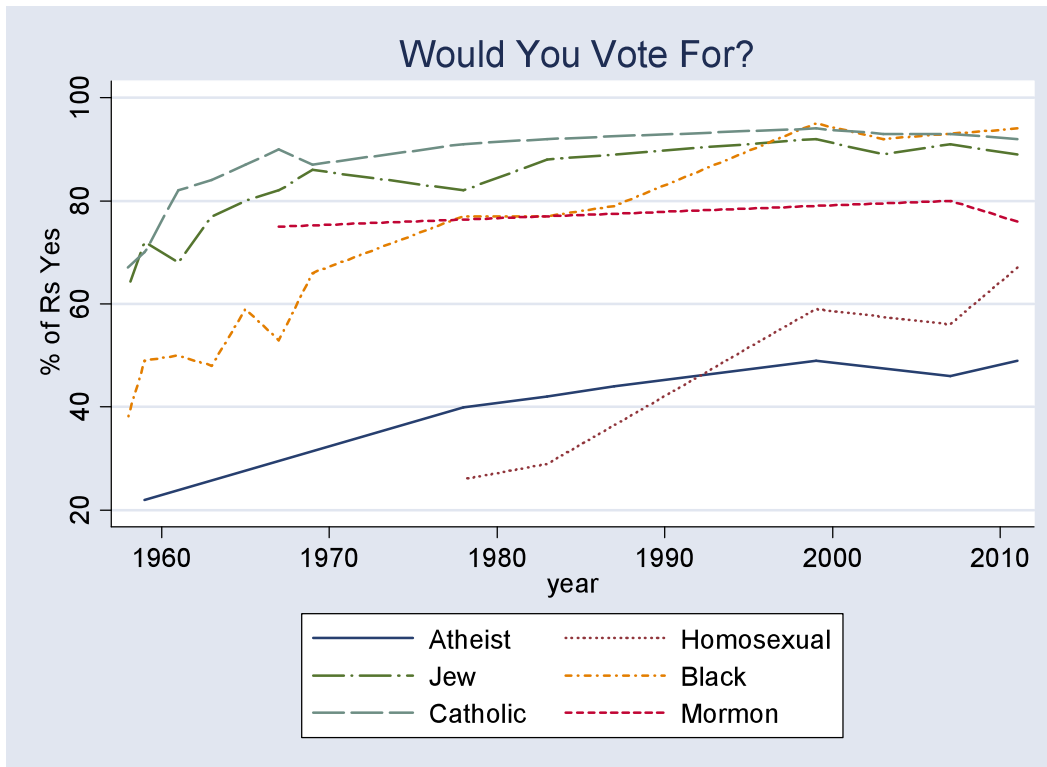
As mentioned, there has been a pronounced decline in citizens being willing to categorically exclude atheists from public life on account of their religious dispositions, but there seems to be a drop in attitudes since the turn of the century. And there is still much headway to be made.

Figure 2.5 provides a visual display of the Gallup poll indicating one's willingness to vote for a generally well-qualified presidential candidate of their party that is also part of a marginalized group. It should be noted that these polls show evidence that particular candidates may cue respondents, rather than the group itself. For example, in Jones (2007) liberals are more willing to support individuals from all categories listed, except Mormons – indicating their aversion might have actually



been to Mitt Romney. Generally, signs that a poll is measuring something other than it purports is worrisome, but I contend the results are still meaningful. For one, there has not been a major presidential candidate that is an atheist (to public knowledge), so a particular candidate could not drive respondents' aversion. And the dearth of atheist candidates is unlikely to be the root of unwillingness to vote for one, as there has not been a homosexual candidate, or a Jewish major party nominee.

As we see, atheists are consistently ill favored – the only subset that fails to reach a simple majority of support. Homosexuals have seen a sharp increase in electability, though they still fare much better out of the political context. One can also see the obstacle faced by the Catholic President Kennedy during the 1960 election. Overall, it is clear that atheists face significant distaste from the citizens of the United States.



**Figure 2.5:** Gallup poll results of willingness to vote for a presidential candidate that is generally well qualified and from your party, as well as one of the listed qualifiers.

### Scholarship on Nonbelievers

Religious “nones” – those expressing no religious affiliation – were the focus of early investigations into the category of individuals deviating from traditional belief in America (Vernon 1968), and are presently a rapidly growing group (Putnam and Campbell 2010). It was not until more recent history that researchers narrowed their focus to exploring nonbelief specifically. As such, we now have a general idea of who is more prone to having these views, and how the larger citizenry regards persons who hold them.

Investigations over the past decade have reported as few as 3%, and as many as 8%, of US citizens do not believe in God (Zuckerman 2007), and there are a number of demographic characteristics that are correlated with nonbelief. While authors stress avoiding lumping atheists, agnostics, and other skeptics into one mass (Keysar 2007), the differences between these groups are not pronounced, and still effectively differentiate them from the general public. Nonbelievers tend to be young, white, male, and well educated (Sherkat 2008). Sherkat (2008) also finds that being married or widowed is associated with higher religious conviction. Geographically, nonbelievers are rather scarce in the South, and are most prevalent in the Pacific Northwest (Keysar 2007). Literature has also shown positive correlations between IQ and atheism in the US (Kanazawa 2010) and internationally (Lynn, Harvey, Nyborg 2009). While the correlation between IQ and atheism exists, establishing causation is tricky, and it is not clear cross-national comparisons are fruitful, so it is not explicit what conclusions to draw from these findings (if there are any).

The distaste for atheists in America and elsewhere has inspired a few researchers to look into the nature of this aversion. Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann (2006) provide one of the most and revealing explorations into attitudes toward atheists. They conducted a random-digit dial telephone survey that included 2,081 Americans in 2003, followed by in-depth interviews to other individuals by graduate students in 2004. Their goal was to determine how willing respondents were to draw barriers between themselves and others in public and private life. Their metric for public acceptance was whether particular groups share

their “vision for America,” and for private acceptance they asked whether they would approve of their son or daughter marrying an individual from the particular group. The groups inquired about were atheists, Muslims, homosexuals, conservative Christians, recent immigrants, Hispanics, Jews, Asian Americans, African Americans, and White Americans – though recent immigrants and homosexuals were excluded from the marriage question. In each of the formulations, atheists topped the list of the least accepted – by a significant margin. Thirty-nine percent of respondents did not feel atheists shared their vision for America, and forty-nine percent would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. Muslims trailed atheists in both categories by about 13 percentage points.

The authors go on to construct models for predicting antipathy to atheists and find a number of characteristics to be significant predictors. African Americans, individuals with higher incomes, persons with higher religious involvement, those who are conservative Protestants, and religious determinists are all more likely to reject atheists in public life. Whereas better educated individuals, those who report religious diversity in their social networks, and respondents in Democratic-leaning areas are more likely to accept atheists in public life. Interestingly, those who live in areas with more religious adherents are also less likely to reject atheists as sharing their vision for America. Additionally, those who say they value religious diversity, are sympathetic to African Americans, say America is strong so long as we all follow the same rules, and those who believe the government should guarantee equal treatment of all religions are all less likely to reject atheists. And those who desire the

nation's laws to be rooted in common religious belief are more likely to reject atheists. Most relationships persist with respect to approving of an atheist son- or daughter-in-law, yet the only demographic characteristic that remains significant through all the private-life models is age – older respondents are less accepting of an atheist marrying their child.

While all of these factors are significant predictors of anti-atheist attitudes, the strongest predictor of the public rejection is whether one feels society's evaluations of right and wrong should be based on God's law – even stronger than one's level of religious involvement. Conversely, for the private metric, religious involvement exerts the most influence, which is not particularly surprising. Nonetheless, it is clear that Americans are at least partially averse to atheists because they feel God's law is integral to shaping the direction for our country – a notion embodied by President Eisenhower's quote that rings in the chapter.

An inquiry by Will Gervais, Azim Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan (2011) also looks into the origin of anti-atheist attitudes. Their main contention is that religion is a mechanism to promote cooperation in society, and as such the root of anti-atheist antipathy is distrust. In particular, they attempt to delineate whether the antipathy is driven by distrust, disgust, or general dislike.

First, they distributed a survey to Americans to determine their attitudes toward atheists compared to those of homosexuals as a litmus test for how people perceive individuals that deviate from religious norms – using a feeling thermometer for general warmth. Further, they asked respondents to score them on distrust and

disgust scales. As they predicted, they found atheists were less desirable than homosexuals, and that atheists scored higher on distrust than disgust, while homosexuals were high on disgust and low on distrust. This finding is not particularly extraordinary, especially since homosexuality entails sex acts – an association that is in itself more likely to promote disgust rather than distrust.

Moving on, they then investigate, using University of British Columbia students, how likely students were to say an individual who was of a particular group committed cheating behavior – each respondent receiving one of four random descriptors. The descriptors were a Christian, a Muslim, an atheist, and a rapist. Their intent was to determine whether atheists would receive lower scores than a religious majority, religious minority, or someone who has been proven to betray trust. As it turns out, and this is why the article received attention (in turn piquing my interest in this topic and partially motivating this inquiry), atheists are deemed likely to commit a hit-and-run and take money from a lost wallet without seeking out the owner at higher rates than the other three groups. Rapists came in at a relatively close second, while Muslims, followed by Christians were not deemed very likely to do such things. The results are enlightening in that they show atheists are not trusted, but it is not immediately evident why rapists would evoke distrust rather than disgust themselves. In fact, I suspect rapists would have scored off the charts on the disgust meter, more so than distrust. As such, I think they could have found a better proxy for someone who has betrayed society's trust that would have been more interesting to see compared to atheists (e.g., a burglar, a robber, or a free-rider of any variety). It would

be much more insightful to see how an atheists stack up against someone “with a background of betraying trust” that does not inspire such a visceral reaction of disgust – the very thing they deemed important to distinguish distrust from.

In any event, it is evident that atheists are distrusted, and they go on to show that this distrust is not merely a dislike, the distrust is partially triggered by belief in God, and that it will hinder them from being desired for high-trust positions (caring for children). In another article, this time by authors Gervais and Norenzayan (2012), the depth of this distrust is put to test. In these experiments, participants are primed by watching one of two videos that reference the effectiveness of the Vancouver police department, and then their perceptions of atheists are evaluated. As it turns out, reminders of secular authority reduce atheist distrust, and this effect does not persist for other unfavorable groups, nor does it reduce the level of disgust for other groups. This provides one insight into how to mitigate anti-atheist attitudes.

A perplexing aspect of the hostility toward atheists is they are a small, unidentifiable, and largely disorganized segment of the population. So it is surprising that they garner such animosity, as intolerance is generally dependent upon the perception that the group is threatening – and the greater that threat, the more fervent the intolerance (Gibson 2006). Due to their scarcity and relative anonymity it is not evident that atheists pose much of a threat. Gervais (2011) looks into this relationship and finds the inverse relationship for atheists: as their perceived prevalence increases, attitudes toward them improve. This finding, in addition to the evidence that reminders of secular authority improve attitudes toward atheists, provides signs that

there are inroads to countering the persistent aversion to the group. In light of the trends observed above, these results are encouraging. Further, I believe I have found another area in which negativity directed at atheists can be inhibited.



**CHAPTER 3****FOR GOD AND COUNTRY<sup>6</sup>: THE SUPPOSITION AND ASSESSMENT**

*I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God."*

—Pres. George H.W. Bush, 1987<sup>7</sup>

Patriotism, as distinct from nationalism, is a sentiment that is particularly useful in a country like the United States, which is geographically expansive and ethnically and racially diverse. The US has experienced massive shifts in culture throughout our history, due partly to the character of the original colonies, as well as the massive influx of immigrants from all over the world throughout time. Though these shocks have not been without complications – a civil war no less – America has overcome many obstacles other states are still wrestling with. Citizens' affinity for the country, and its core principles, is partially to credit for this. That said, part of my personal adoration for the United States is its history of recognizing instances where its practices did not align with its creed and remedying them accordingly. Of course, many of these cases were ones where the country faced some of its most difficult periods, as rectifying entrenched credo is difficult. Again, I want to be cautious in drawing comparisons across history, as doing so is commonly fraught with

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<sup>6</sup> The motto of The American Legion, a patriotic veterans organization established after WWI.

<sup>7</sup> The reputability of this quote has previously been called into question, as the reporter who fielded the response was a print journalist (this was many moons before digital media and gaffe-fiendish pundits); however, documents from Bush Sr.'s Presidential library corroborate his telling.

exaggerations, and can quickly become disrespectful to roads previously forged. Nonetheless, I believe the pervasive “ceremonial deism” – as judges have phrased it – and the flagrantly religious rhetoric we hear from politicians, is at least partially responsible for the antipathy directed at nonbelievers in the United States. Dislike, or distrust as it were, of atheists is something that persists in most countries, yet I think the United States is markedly less accepting of nonbelief with respect to other industrialized nations, at least in part, because of how patriotism is characterized. As such, I have found empirical support for this link, and I believe it serves as motivation to reconsider the intent and consequences of some of these practices.

### **Theoretical Development**

Finding instances where American patriotism and deism are amalgamated is no chore. And though there is no denying the religious piety of the Founding Fathers, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the largest promulgation of state-endorsed deism in the country’s history. Contextually, the US spent a large portion of the last century competing with the communist Soviet Union, leading to many lines being drawn in the sand distinguishing “us” from “them.” This differentiation took many forms, and one of the distinctions heavily drawn upon was the USSR’s state-sponsored atheism versus the largely devout (and primarily Protestant) US population. While this relationship was fodder for the inclusion of deism into our patriotic practices, it very well could have been justification for those looking for such an overlap to begin with.

In any event, it is pertinent to look at some of the instances of deism in patriotic rituals and symbols with an eye to their origin.

First, as Sen. Joseph Lieberman reminds us in the epigraph of Chapter 1, as well as Pres. George H.W. Bush at the beginning of this chapter, the US Pledge of Allegiance explicitly states we are “one nation under God.” Schools in 70% of US states are required – with varying degrees of ability for individuals to opt out – to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and another 10% are encouraged to, as decreed by state legislation. Seventeen of these states enacted such legislation in 2002 and 2003, during the post-9/11 wave of patriotism (Piscatelli 2003). I recited this pledge as a child in Arizona, and my parents did so as well; however, when my grandparents recited it the phrase “under God” was not there, as it was added in 1954. The other most blatant endorsement of belief in God by the US was also adopted under President Eisenhower: “In God We Trust” being adopted as the national motto in 1956. The phrase first appeared on coins in 1864 “largely because of the increased religious sentiment existing during the Civil War” (U.S. Department of the Treasury), and is now also on paper currency.

There are many other, more traditionally rooted, governmental expressions of belief. For example, the marshal of the Supreme Court begins each session by crying: “God save the United States and this Honorable Court!” And the National Day of Prayer has origins in our founding. These pronouncements of deism have experienced numerous challenges in court – cited as violations of the Establishment Clause to the Constitution – and some judges have agreed with plaintiffs, but in all

cases these rulings have been overturned due to the “secular” purpose the displays serve (i.e., promoting patriotism) (Corbin 2010). These “secular” displays of deism are referred to by the courts as “ceremonial deism,” and are deemed secular because they do not promote religion over another. Further, they do not inflict harm to nonbelievers (“social exclusion” has been deemed harmless), so these rituals are unlikely to go away any time soon.

I contend these pervasive juxtapositions take their toll on the American psyche, as evidenced by the quotes throughout, which is in no way an exhaustive list of condemnations of atheists on patriotic grounds. I am more than willing to grant that questioning a foe’s patriotism is a common straw man argument, yet even attempts at defending atheists allude to the notion that they are perceived as less patriotic (see Pres. George W. Bush’s quote that kicks off the concluding chapter). This trend seems too common and persistent over time to be independent phenomena. Literature on the formation of attitudes helps cast light on the where this negativity may stem. On topics where individuals have little specific knowledge – as is the case with Americans on atheists – their general attitudes are employed to form a specific response (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). This hierarchical formulation of attitudes seems to be fitting for viewpoints on atheists: American citizens have general notions of what patriotism entails, often involving acknowledgement of a deity, coupled with little knowledge on atheists or their prevalence, so they perceive them as not ascribing to American ideals and look disparagingly upon them as a consequence. Support for this comes from Gervais (2011), as when provided with the

impression that they are prevalent – knowledge they did not possess previously – they then recognize atheists are likely to ascribe to similar values of citizenship, and are more genial in their dispositions toward them.

Furthermore, there is nothing explicitly unpatriotic about nonbelief. Just because references to God are part of citizen's shared history, that fact does not necessitate one has to ascribe to the notion in order to have adoration for the United States. Indeed, there are many ideals once held that are better left as relics of history, and it is likely there will be many more – time may find ceremonial deism to be within this category.

### **Empirical investigation**

The General Social Survey provides the opportunity to test the effect of patriotism on attitudes toward atheists, and is to my knowledge the only data source that captures values for both patriotism and attitudes on atheists – though patriotism was only measured in 1996 and 2004. As the aforementioned narrative suggests, I hypothesize that patriotism will be negatively associated with acceptance of atheists.

The metric I use for patriotism was selected for its rather tempered expression of devotion for the country, in hopes of capturing patriotism rather than nationalism. An additional criterion was the desire for a variable that provided some deviation across scores – that is, one that did not have a majority of respondents responding identically (a tricky task when measuring American patriotism). I settled on the variable “ambetter” (displayed as “Patriotism”), in which respondents are asked to the

extent they agree the US is “generally speaking, a better country than most other countries.” I then recoded the variable so higher scores were indicative of greater patriotism – the logic here being a more emphatic patriot is likely to embrace patriotic symbols more literally, as well as be more likely to base more specific attitudes on the general notions surrounding patriotism.

The measure selected for attitudes toward atheists is the variable for approval of an “anti-religionist speaking in your community” – the same variable highlighted above. I recoded it so a higher score equates to approval for an “atheist” speaker. I believe this variable best captures public attitudes on civic participation – following the example of Edgell et al. (2006).

I also employ a multitude of controls that have been shown to impart influence on attitudes toward atheists – most being demographic variables. The demographic variables are standard inclusions when investigating attitudes, and the variables concerning religion also have roots in the literature (Edgell et al. 2006, Keysar 2007, Sherkat 2008).

Age is included in the model, as younger individuals have been shown to be more prone to nonbelief, which might mute the effect of patriotism. I control for sex by measuring whether the respondent is a female. Women tend to report greater religiosity than men, which will likely influence their attitudes on atheists. As detailed above, education is a significant predictor of nonbelief, and it is likely better educated individuals have a more cosmopolitan perspective on the world – which likely has implications for their patriotic dispositions. Attitudes on faith and patriotism

vary across ethnic and racial groups, so controlling for such is desirable when measuring attitudes. GSS provides limited data with respect to their respondents, so the only racial group included is Blacks – who report higher levels of religiosity in America. Income has been shown to be a significant predictor of support for atheism, so it is controlled for to reduce its effect on the model. Party identification is included, with leaning moderates lumped with the party they lean toward. Party identification is formative in, as well as indicative of, attitudes toward certain groups, and also correlates with religiosity. Primary religious categories were included, as they are likely influential in attitudes toward nonbelievers, as well as the dynamics of church-state relations. Religiosity, as measured by frequency of church attendance, is included as well as it has been shown religiosity influences attitudes toward atheists. Finally, geographic region was controlled for, as regional culture has been shown to impart influence on attitudes toward atheists, and presumably influences the fervency and character of patriotism.

I had originally included variables for year, Judaism, and Mountain region, but all of them possessed collinearity when I initially ran the model, so they were dropped. Table 3.1 provides a summary of the variables and descriptions of their coding.

Variable	Description
Age	Age in years (18 to 89)
Female	Sex variable (0=Male, 1=Female)
Education	Years of formal schooling (0 to 20)
Black	Race variable (0=Other, 1=Black)
Income	Inflation adjusted real income - in 2000 dollars (ln Income 6 to 12)
Democrat	R a Democrat (0=Other, 1=Str Demo, Wk Demo, Dem leaning Ind)
Independent	R an Independent (0=Other, 1=Independent)
Republican	R a Republican (0=Other, 1=Str Rep, Wk Rep, Rep leaning Ind)
Religiosity	Freq. of church attendance (0=Never to 8=More than once a week)
Protestant	Protestant religious identification (0=Other, 1=Protestant)
Catholic	Catholic religious identification (0=Other, 1=Catholic)
None	None religious identification (0=Other, 1=None)
East	Region code (0=Other, 1=East)
South	Region code (0=Other, 1=South)
Central	Region code (0=Other, 1=Central)
Pacific	Region code (0=Other, 1=Pacific)
Patriotism	Generally speaking, America is a better country than most others (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly agree)
Atheism	Allow an atheist to speak in your comm. (0=Not Allow, 1=Allow)

**Table 3.1:** Variable summary.

My dependent variable is binary, so I utilized logistic regression to determine the effect patriotism has on acceptance of atheists. Table 3.2 provides the descriptive statistics for the model.



Atheist	Coef.	Std. Err.	P>z
Patriotism	-0.413	0.124	0.001
Age	-0.024	0.006	0.000
Female	-0.155	0.199	0.437
Education	0.176	0.038	0.000
Black	-0.665	0.291	0.022
Income	0.308	0.105	0.003
Democrat	1.622	0.663	0.014
Independent	1.152	0.687	0.094
Republican	1.396	0.659	0.034
Religiosity	-0.072	0.039	0.068
Protestant	0.368	0.441	0.404
Catholic	-0.248	0.454	0.585
None	0.585	0.537	0.276
East	0.410	0.415	0.323
South	-0.061	0.389	0.875
Central	0.433	0.405	0.286
Pacific	0.355	0.439	0.419
constant	-2.938	1.515	0.052
Number of obs:	746		
Pseudo R2:	0.1555		

**Table 3.2:** Logit model results. Source: General Social Survey.

As Table 3.2 illustrates, the relationship between patriotism and atheist approval is negative and significant with a p-value of .001, so patriotism is associated with less support for atheists. A number of the controls reach significance as well. Being young, identifying as a Democrat, and having greater amounts of formal education are all significant predictors of acceptance of atheists. The income variable is positive and reaches significance as well, so increasing ones income increases their acceptance of atheists. Being Black and attending church more frequently are both significant predictors of disapproval of atheists. So, for better or for worse, the connection between patriotism and antipathy toward atheists is present.

**CHAPTER 4****THIS LAND WAS MADE FOR YOU AND ME: FORTH**

*“The great thing about America is that you should be allowed to worship any way you want. And if you chose not to worship, you’re equally as patriotic as somebody who does worship.”*

*—Pres. George W. Bush, 2005<sup>8</sup>*

President Bush’s quote above, while refreshing in light of the epigraphs that precede it, is indicative of the nature of anti-atheist prejudice, as it shows one speaking for tolerance of nonbelievers feels the need to defend their patriotism. Conversely, favorable comments on atheists from politicians are rare, so the quote might embody the increased acceptance for atheists the GSS survey has displayed over the years. Yet presently, those who do not hold religious belief face serious barriers to private and public life. And I contend these barriers ought to be permeated. Because if a group is systematically denied holding public office for their religious beliefs, we have cause for concern, as democracy is strengthened through pluralism. What is more, given the finding that perceived prevalence of atheists improves attitudes toward them, nonbelievers holding public office could potentially stifle some of the antipathy toward the group as a whole.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from a 2005 press conference in which Pres. George W. Bush was asked his opinion on how faith is employed in political debates.

In any event, the finding that enmity toward nonbelievers is partially born out of patriotism gives cause for reconsidering whether rituals of ceremonial deism serve merely a secular purpose. And while the evidence above is some indication that there are unintended consequences of patriotic displays that reference God, more investigations into the matter would be valuable. In particular, an experimental setting would allow causation to be further established, as prompts of ceremonial deism – or other forms of patriotic symbolism – could be carried out preceding the measurement of attitudes toward nonbelievers and other minority groups. Also, due to the deviation in ceremonial deism across states (e.g., the pledge requirements), evaluating attitudes toward atheists in an across-state comparative context could be fruitful. GSS only provides region, and each of those regions contain states that require the pledge be recited as well as those that do not, so another data set will be required for such an investigation.

In any event, if more evidence emerges that our patriotic practices are in fact partially to blame for the negativity directed at these groups, then we might decide it appropriate to change the content of some of our rituals once again. To be sure, there are a lot of moving parts with respect to both the independent and dependent variables, so it is unlikely that changes to our patriotic practices will herald warmth for nonbelievers overnight (in fact, it might bring the opposite at the onset), but that might not be the only point. At the very least, references to deism provide an air of legitimacy to claims against the patriotism of atheists, and whether institutionalizing

practices that promote intolerance is something Americans are willing to support is an emphatically political question. And I contend it is one worth asking.

It is important to once again acknowledge that most nonbelievers do not face extreme forms of prejudice. However, that is not worthy of chalking up the problem as irrelevant. Access to public life is not only crucial for those in the minority; it is also to the benefit of the majority.

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