

Does religion affect political engagement of the youth at the tertiary level of education? The case of undergraduate students at a South African university

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Dates:

Received: 27 May 2019

Accepted: 23 Nov. 2019

Published: 24 Feb. 2020

How to cite this article:

Amoateng, A.Y., 2020, 'Does religion affect political engagement of the youth at the tertiary level of education? The case of undergraduate students at a South African university', *Theologia Viatorum* 44(1), a21. <https://doi.org/10.4102/TV.v44i1.21>

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The aim of this study is to examine religion's effect on the political engagement of the youth using data from a sample of undergraduate students at the North-West University in South Africa. The logit regression model analysis showed that contrary to what the participation literature would expect, socio-economic factors such as parental education, age and gender were not significant predictors of the political engagement of the youth. However, consistent with the study's conceptualisation of political engagement as a multi-dimensional concept, gender, race, ethnicity and family structure were all significantly predictive of different aspects of political engagement of the youth. Males were more likely than females to engage in politics, while black Africans were politically more active than the white and mixed race South Africans. While both self-rated religiosity and importance of religion in the life of the youth predicted their political engagement, their influences were in opposite directions. Finally, civic skills acquired in non-religious contexts were positively associated with every aspect of political engagement of the youth.

Keywords: religion; political engagement; youth; civic skills; logit regression.

Introduction

Despite the age-old debate about the schism between church and state, the empirical evidence about religion's effect on civic engagement of the youth is thin. This relative paucity of empirical evidence on the effect of religion on the political participation of the youth is questionable in the face of what appears to be the increasing importance of religion in the lives of young people, in modern, secular society (Smith 2003; Smith & Denton 2005). Nowhere has the paucity of the empirical evidence on the effect of religion on young people been more manifest than in the area of youth development where religion has been one of the social forces that have been responsible for the emergence of a paradigm that conceptualises youth as an unproblematic period in the life span (Gore 2003; Lerner 2002; Lerner et al. 2002; Smith 2003).

Many empirical studies across myriad areas of concern with regard to the youth have associated various measures of religion with a variety of positive, desirable outcomes in many contexts. For instance, in the United States, many scholars have found measures of religion to be inversely associated with juvenile drug, alcohol, tobacco use, delinquency (e.g. Evans et al. 1995; Wallace & Williams 1997), thoughts of suicide, attempted suicide and actual suicide among American teenagers (Donahue 1995). On the other hand, religiosity has been found to be associated with lower levels of depression and hopelessness (Smith & Denton 2005; Wright, Frost & Wisecarver 1993).

In South Africa, the empirical evidence on the inverse association between measures of religion and various risk behaviours by the youth has been mounting over the years (e.g. Amoateng, Barber & Erickson 2006; Amoateng, Setlalentoa and Udomboso 2017; Chauke, Van der Heever & Hoque 2015; Flisher et al. 1996; Morojele et al. 2006; Seggie 2012). Existing evidence is quite emphatic that religious participation may be associated with greater political and civic involvement, especially during young adulthood (Serow & Dreyden 1990; Smith 1999; Youniss, McLellan & Yates 1999). In explaining how religion affects political participation, Smith (2003) has observed that religion provides the organisational contexts and cultural substance which engenders spiritual experiences of the youth which help cement their moral commitments and constructive life practices. Other studies have confirmed this feature of organised religion by observing that associational membership generally correlates with almost every measure of political engagement (e.g. Diaz 1996; Djupe & Grant 2001; Putnam 1993a, 1993b), while others

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have observed that religious organisations' central role is that they serve as important conduits of political information and recruitment (Ammerman 1997; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995). This positive approach to problems associated with the youth projects the notion that positive adolescent development entails a merger of moral and civic identity which results in engagement with civil society institutions such as religion by the youth (Crompton 1998; Lerner et al. 2002).

The present study

The introduction has shown that despite the growing empirical evidence about the role of religion in engendering positive attitudes and behaviours among the youth in areas of concern such as drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and risky sexual behaviours, there has been a glaring gap in our knowledge of the role that religion plays in the lives of the youth with regard to their political participation. There are two plausible reasons for this void in the literature. First, while the explosion of studies in the area of religion's role in substance abuse and risky sexual behaviours among the youth is a welcome development, these behaviours constitute a tiny fraction of the wide range of behaviours of the youth that are of interest to policy-makers and academics alike. Second, the context in which religion has been found to be an enabler of positive behaviours is mainly Western and therefore cannot be generalised to other non-Western contexts.

For example, historically in the African context, the line between religion and politics blurred in pre-colonial society because of the critical role that priests and priestesses played in the affairs of the state. This blurring of the line between religion and politics deepened further during the decolonisation period with the emergence of the so-called Independent or African churches and the political stances they adopted against colonial oppression. The brand of liberation theology preached by these churches thrust them into the political limelight as church leaders began to question hitherto political structures that disadvantaged the African majorities in the colonies.

The 21st century exemplar of this phenomenon of Africanisation of the churches is clearly manifest in the role played by the clergy as personified in, for example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. It is our contention that this syncretism of the sacred and mundane in regard to the organisation of religion in Africa would ensure that religion plays a different role in the continent compared to other contexts. Thus, the importance of understanding religion's role in political engagement of the youth cannot be overemphasised, especially in the face of the scramble among both politicians and academics in Africa to seek solutions to violent aspects of political engagement of the youth in recent years.

It is against this background of the paucity of empirical evidence on the relationship between religion and political participation of the youth in South Africa that this study is undertaken. Specifically, the study examines whether religion affects political engagement among the youth in South Africa

by using as a case study a sample of undergraduate students at the University of North-West in South Africa. To examine the independent effect of religion on the political engagement of the youth, we control for the effect of social structural factors such as gender, race, ethnicity and family structure.

Review of the literature

Political engagement or participation is often skewed because of the fact that political actors do not come from homogenous backgrounds. The empirical evidence suggests that social, economic, demographic and cultural factors such as age, gender, education, religion, social class and ethnicity all have important bearings on political participation (e.g. Chatora 2012; Isaksson 2014). For example, the existing literature shows that age is consistently identified as the most powerful demographic predictor of political involvement. Numerous national and cross-national studies have found age gaps in political participation, particularly in electoral participation (Cross & Young 2008; Grasso 2013). Despite the consensus that young people engage in politics through a variety of ways, the empirical evidence suggests that young people participate to a lesser extent in politics than their older counterparts. For example, a report by the UNDP (2013) showed that young people aged 15–25 years who constitute a fifth of the world population are not represented in political institutions such as parliaments and many do not participate in elections.

In the United States, many studies have found that young people are less likely to vote or engage in any civic or political behaviours prior to elections (e.g. Flanagan & Levine 2010; Garcia-Penalosa & Konte 2013). In South Africa, in a study of undergraduate students at the University of Johannesburg, Amoateng (2015) found a positive association between age and political participation. Specifically, he found that younger adolescents were less likely to engage in political activities compared to their older counterparts.

There have been some attempts to empirically assess the role of religious practices in shaping political participation. The argument is that those with significant involvement in religious groups are more likely to vote or be politically active and committed. For instance, Esser and De Vreese (2007) found that religiousness (religious attachment) was a strong predictor of youth turnout in the United States and in Europe. Teney and Hanquinet (2012) showed that belonging to a religious organisation leads to a greater political participation. They found that young people involved in religious organisation and attending religious services tended to be more politically engaged than religious youth who did not take part in any religious activities. Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) found that in the United States while variation in ethnic group participation was related to socio-economic differences among them, it was derived from the acquisition of civic skills through their associational memberships and, in particular, from their experiences in church. According to them, Catholic and Protestant churches develop different levels of skills so the relatively low level of Latino political participation was explained by

a predominantly Catholic affiliation. In explaining this role of religion, they noted (Verba et al. 1995):

Even when church activists pursue endeavours with no demonstrable political content...they have opportunities to develop skills that are relevant for politics. These skill-endowing opportunities can serve as a compensatory function, enhancing political resources among church activists whose educational and occupational levels might otherwise predispose them to political quiescence. (p. 4)

Gender has been identified as an important predictor of political participation in the broader literature. Owing to the patriarchal nature of most societies, politics (i.e. political affairs and decision-making) is mostly viewed as a male domain (e.g. Sossou 2011); it is therefore likely that political involvement will be affected by gender roles or norms. As predicted, there is a persisting gender gap with respect to most forms of political engagement, and it is generally unevenly gendered in favour of men (Inglehart & Norris 2000). Broadly, research on gender gaps in political involvement in the developing world, including Ghana, reveals similar global patterns (Isaksson 2014; Isaksson, Kotsadam & Nerman 2012; Kuenzi & Lambright 2010). In his study involving undergraduate students at the University of Johannesburg, Amoateng (2015) found this gender gap in that the male political participation rate was about 10 percentage points higher than their female counterparts.

The social psychological approach or the socio-economic status model (e.g. Kam & Palmer 2008; Verba & Nie 1972) argues that individuals, especially those from upper-status backgrounds, develop 'civic' attitudes that predispose them to participate in politics. These are individuals who generally possess resources such as good education and their relative financial security allows them to invest time and money on organisation which gives them further advantage in the political domain. Thus, the socio-economic status (SES) model highlights education as a key determinant of political participation as it is theorised to develop civic skills required for political engagement (Resnick & Casale 2011). Thus, it is consistently found that the higher or better-educated are more likely to be interested in politics, become politically involved and/or to vote (Armingeon & Schädel 2015; Isaksson 2014; Kuenzi & Lambright 2010).

However, some research suggests a clearer impact of education in some countries than in others. For example, Bratton (1999) found that education had no impact on overall political participation in Zambia. Nonetheless, the level of educational attainment is found to positively shape political activism in the youth: higher education has a very strong influence on youth participation in most political activities (e.g. Sloam 2013). Grasso (2013) shows that education levels have a differential impact on young people's political involvement in both the United Kingdom and Italy. Educational status exerted a particularly strong impact on the political engagement of the youth in Britain, in which young educationally qualified people tend to be more politically engaged (Henn & Foard 2014; Henn, Weinstein & Forrest 2005).

It has been found that well-educated young Africans are more likely to engage in protest activities to express dissatisfaction (Resnick & Casale 2011), although education levels did not correlate with youth voter turnout in sub-Saharan Africa (Resnick & Casale 2014). In South Africa, analysis of gender differences in electoral participation has revealed that educational attainment has no significant impact on voting for both men and women (Roberts, Struwing & Grossberg 2012), while Amoateng (2015) did not observe any statistically significant relationship between maternal education and political engagement of the youth for his student sample.

Data and methods

The data for this study are obtained from the *Religion and Positive Youth Development Project*, an initiative of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus). Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used in a mixed-method approach. To this effective, both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used to interview a total of 1430 undergraduate students across the three campuses of the University (i.e. Mafikeng, Potchefstroom and Vaal campuses). In the probability sampling procedure, stratified random sampling design was employed by disaggregating the samples from each campus based on faculty using proportional allocation to size based on the population of students in the faculties. In the non-probability sampling procedure, the faculty samples were disaggregated based on the year of study, whereby the sample numbers allocated to each year of study were random. Generally, the least sample numbers were allocated to the first-year students, while the greatest sample numbers were allocated to the third- and fourth-year students.

Finally, in selecting the students to be included in the sample, convenience sampling was used whereby trained students interviewed the numbers of students in each faculty, school and gender as determined *a priori* through the stratified random sampling procedure. Out of the target sample of 1430 students, 1144 students completed the interview, yielding a response rate of 80%. Students responded to a battery of questions relating to issues such as religious affiliation, religiosity, spirituality, belief in God, sexuality, political behaviour, attitudes towards foreigners and attitudes towards and use of various licit and illicit substances. Data collection took place between September 2015 and April 2016.¹

Measures of variables

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is political engagement of the youth which has four dimensions, namely family political discussion, peer political discussion, political party discussion and attempts to influence the political process. The four dimensions of political engagement represent

¹Data collection was halted towards the end of 2015 because of the student unrest on campuses around the country.

non-electoral political engagement as opposed to electoral engagements such as registration to vote or actual voting for a particular political party or candidate. The four dimensions of political engagement are measured by:

How often youth discuss politics with.... parents/other family members; friends/classmates with similar and different political views on campus; members of political organisations on and outside campus; and attempts to influence the political process?

These four dimensions of political engagement are measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, 'never'; 2, 'rarely'; 3, 'sometimes'; 4, 'often' to 5, 'always'. Each of the four dimensions of civic engagement is created as a summated score of the respective items after conducting principal component analysis (PCA) of the items using Varimax rotation. Table 1 shows the number of items for each of the constructs of political engagement, their factor loadings and alpha levels.

Independent variables

Religion is the main independent variable in this study and is measured as a multi-dimensional concept with four main dimensions as follows: (1) *Self-rated religiosity*. This is measured by asking the respondent, 'How religious do you consider yourself to be?' It is measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all religious' to 'extremely religious'; (2) *Perception of the importance of religion in one's life/a family's life* which was measured by asking the student: 'How important is religion in your life/your family's life?' This is measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all important' to 'extremely important'; (3) *Frequency of church attendance*. Students are asked to indicate 'How often do you and your family attend church/mosque/temple/synagogue services?' Frequency of family church attendance is measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0, 'never'; 1, 'Only on special occasions'; 2, 'occasionally (several times a year)'; 3, 'frequent attendance'; 4, 'fairly regular (almost weekly)'; 5, 'Regular (Weekly)'. (4) *Religious affiliation* is measured by three categories. For this dimension, students are asked to indicate the religious organisation they belong to and three

broad affiliations are measured after collapsing categories with fewer cases: Christian (Protestant), Christian (Catholic) and other. Besides the four dimensions of religion which was the main independent variable in the study, we also control for a number of individual background socio-demographic characteristics including age, gender, race or ethnicity (home language), family's SES and parental educational attainment.

Age is measured as a continuous variable, while both mother's and father's educational attainments are measured at the ordinal level with the question: 'Please indicate the highest level of your mother's or father's education'. The responses range from 1, 'no education' to 7, 'postgraduate degree'. Family structure is measured at the nominal level with the question: 'at home, which parents or guardian do you live with?' The responses ranged from 1, 'living with both biological parents at home'; 2, 'living with a single parent'; 3, 'living with other relatives'.

Family's SES is measured at the ordinal level with the question: 'How would you describe your family's socio-economic status compared to other families in the area where you live?' The responses range from 1, 'poorer than most'; 2, 'about the same as most' to 3, 'richer than most'. In addition to these socio-demographic characteristics, we control for the student's perception of the importance of participating in selected political activities. This variable is measured by the question:

How important is it for students to participate in the following activities (Elections for national government; Elections for provincial government; Elections for local government; and Elections for student political associations?).

Importance for students to participate in the political process is measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, 'not at all important'; 2, 'Slightly important'; 3, 'neutral'; 4, 'moderately important' to 5, 'very important'. It is expected that students who perceive the importance of such civic responsibilities will be more likely to engage in the various civic activities. Finally, we control for civic skills of the respondent which is a summated scale of five items. The question asked to the

TABLE 1: Factor analysis of political engagement variables.

Construct	Number of items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha of construct
Family political discussion	How often do you discuss politics with your father?	0.646	0.730
	How often do you discuss politics with your mother?	0.683	
	How often do you discuss politics with your family members other than parents?	0.627	
Peer political discussion	How often do you discuss politics with your friends and classmates with different views?	0.908	0.898
	How often do you discuss politics with your friends and classmates with similar views?	0.908	
Political party discussion	How often do you discuss politics with members of political organisations on campus?	0.902	0.891
	How often do you discuss politics with members of political organisations off campus?	0.902	
Attempts to influence the political process	How often do you participate in attempting to influence the political views of others?	0.525	0.918
	How often do you participate in writing letters to the newspapers about political matters?	0.398	
	How often do you participate in presenting your views to politicians (e.g. by signing petitions)?	0.621	
	How often do you participate in the activities of a political party?	0.774	
	How often do you participate in political protest marches/political sit-ins/demonstrations?	0.743	
	How often do you participate in attending political rallies?	0.744	
	How often do you participate in the activities of the youth movement of a political party?	0.767	
	How often do you participate in attending any mass meetings/rallies dealing with student politics on campus?	0.583	

students is: 'Are you/did you participate in the following activities recently?' (community youth club activities, community environmental activities, community sanitation programmes, neighbourhood safety activities and sports and games). The response categories are 1, 'Yes'; 2, 'No'. These are aggregated to form the *civic skills index*.

Statistical approach

Data analysis is conducted at three levels, namely univariate, bivariate and multivariate using simple frequency distributions, proportions, cross-tabulations and multiple regression. Table 1 shows the results of the factor analysis, using Varimax rotation. This was conducted to examine the factor structure of the main dependent, political engagement of the youth. This part of the analysis yielded four dimensions of the dependent variables (family political discussion, peer political discussion, political party discussion and actual attempts to influence the political process). The general strategy is to examine the relationship between the socio-demographic variables and control variables on the one hand and each of the dependent variables on the other hand. Finally, for the multivariate analysis, we use the logit regression model by dichotomising each of the four dimensions of political engagement variables. Each of the four dependent variables is dichotomised into 'low' and 'high' engagement by splitting the summated scores at their means. In the logit regression model, the independent variables are the set of covariates $X = X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k$ in the model, given as:

$$\text{logit}(p) = \log \left[\frac{\pi}{1-\pi} \right] = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k \quad [\text{Eqn 1}]$$

Where $\frac{\pi}{1-\pi}$, the odds ratio, is the ratio of probability of 1 to probability of 0. Mathematically, the odds ratio is bounded between 0 and $+\infty$, and the log odds assume any number between $-\infty$ and $+\infty$. Taking the exponent of both sides of the equation, it is very straightforward to conduct the maximum likelihood estimation in order to obtain the parameter estimates of the intercept α and slopes $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_k$ in the model. The reference categories of each levels of the independent and control variables have an odds ratio value of '1'.

Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of the sample characteristics. There are more female participants (60%) than male participants (40%). Twenty-seven per cent of the respondents aged between 17 and 19 years, while 73% of the respondents aged between 20 and 26 years. Sixty-nine per cent of the respondents are black African, 26 per cent are white people, while mixed race, Indian or Asians and other groups constitute 5% of the total sample. Fifty-one per cent and 50% of the respondents' fathers and mothers have tertiary educational qualifications, while 40% of the fathers and mothers have some secondary and secondary education, respectively; only 9% and 10%, respectively, of the parents have no education or primary education.

Sixty per cent of the respondents live with both parents at home, while 29% live with a single parent. Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents perceive their families as having the same socio-economic level as other families in their neighbourhoods compared with 19% and 13%, respectively, who perceive their families as being poorer and richer than most families in their neighbourhood. Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents are Christian (Protestant), 20% are Christian (Catholic), while other religious groups constitute 11% of the total sample. For the purposes of this study, it is significant to note that the mean age of the respondents is 21.11 years. Thus, the bulk of the youth in the study were born before or around the time of the democratic transition in 1994, a cohort of South Africans that has been dubbed the 'born frees'.

Table 3 presents the results of the bivariate analysis of the relationship between selected background characteristics of the respondents and religions variables on the one hand and the four political engagement variables on the other hand. The only religion variable that is significantly associated with all the political engagement variables at the bivariate level is

TABLE 2: Sample characteristics.

Variable	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	448	39.6
Female	682	60.4
Age		
17–19 years	275	27.4
20–26 years	727	72.6
Race		
Black people	779	69.2
White people	291	25.8
Mixed race people (Indian, Asian or Others)	56	5.0
Home language		
English	129	11.5
Afrikaans	302	26.9
IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele, SiSwati	147	13.1
North Sotho, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi	494	44.0
Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Other African languages	51	4.5
Father's education		
None or primary education	93	9.3
Some secondary or matric Grade 12	397	39.9
College diploma, undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree	505	50.8
Mother's education		
None or primary education	105	9.5
Some secondary or matric grade 12	445	40.1
College diploma, undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree	559	50.4
At home, live with which parents or guardian		
Living with two parents	676	59.8
Living with a single parent at a time	324	28.6
Living with other relatives (aunt, uncle, grandparent)	88	7.8
Living with guardian or foster parent or living alone	43	3.8
Family socio-economic status		
A lot or a little poorer than most	215	19.0
About the same amount of money as most	768	67.8
A lot or a little richer than most	149	13.2
Respondent's religious affiliation		
Christian (Protestant)	678	68.0
Christian (Catholic)	203	20.4
Other religion	116	11.6

TABLE 3: Relationship between covariates and political engagement.

Variable	Family political discussion			Peer political discussion			Political party discussion			Participation in political process		
	Lo	Hi	χ^2	Lo	Hi	χ^2	Lo	Hi	χ^2	Low	Hi	χ^2
Gender												
Male	56.3	43.7	1.32	50.5	49.5	9.37	51.6	48.4	19.36	51.8	48.2	24.38
Female	52.5	47.5	0.25	59.9	40.1	0.00	65.0	35.0	0.00	66.8	33.2	0.00
Age												
17–19 years	46.9	53.1	5.99	62.5	37.5	8.37	68.0	32.0	11.28	70.3	29.7	11.63
20–26 years	56.2	43.8	0.01	52.1	47.9	0.00	56.2	43.8	0.00	58.2	41.8	0.00
Race												
Black people	58.2	41.8	13.71	47.8	52.2	62.87	51.7	48.3	67.78	54.6	45.4	39.85
White people	45.3	54.7	0.00	74.6	25.4	0.00	79.4	20.6	0.00	75.9	24.1	0.00
Mixed race people (Indian, Asian or others)	48.1	51.9	-	67.3	32.7	-	67.3	32.7	-	67.9	32.1	-
Home language												
English	48.7	51.3	16.99	51.6	48.4	51.49	61.4	38.6	59.77	62.9	37.1	30.08
Afrikaans	45.3	54.7	0.00	73.4	26.6	0.00	77.4	22.6	0.00	73.0	27.0	0.00
IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele, SiSwati	56.7	43.3	-	50.0	50.0	-	52.1	47.9	-	52.1	47.9	-
North Sotho, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi	60.1	39.9	-	48.0	52.0	-	50.4	49.6	-	56.2	43.8	-
Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Other African languages	60.4	39.6	-	53.1	46.9	-	54.0	46.0	-	49.0	51.0	-
Father's education												
None or primary education	68.9	31.1	10.26	48.3	51.7	8.82	50.6	49.4	10.46	51.1	48.9	8.48
Some secondary or matric Grade 12	54.0	46.0	0.01	54.0	46.0	0.01	56.2	43.8	0.01	59.2	40.8	0.01
College diploma, undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree	49.2	50.8	-	61.9	38.1	-	64.8	35.2	-	65.7	34.3	-
Mother's education												
None or primary education	75.0	25.0	15.52	46.9	53.1	19.34	48.5	51.5	18.85	43.0	57.0	27.13
Some secondary or matric grade 12	53.0	47.0	0.00	49.8	50.2	0.00	54.0	46.0	0.00	56.6	43.4	0.00
College diploma, undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree	51.6	48.4	-	62.6	37.4	-	65.7	34.3	-	67.7	32.3	-
At home, live with which parents or guardian												
Living with two parents	49.5	50.5	19.75	62.0	38.0	24.33	61.6	38.4	14.85	64.2	35.8	8.25
Living with single parent at a time	59.7	40.3	0.00	46.7	53.3	0.00	53.7	46.3	0.00	55.2	44.8	0.04
Living with other relatives (aunt, uncle, grandparent)	64.4	35.6	-	45.7	54.3	-	53.7	46.3	-	55.3	44.7	-
Living with guardian or foster parent or living alone	80.6	19.4	-	50.0	50.0	-	82.1	17.9	-	61.5	38.5	-
Family socio-economic status compared to other families in the area where you live												
A lot or a little poorer than most	58.6	41.4	2.70	54.2	45.8	1.88	52.2	47.8	5.67	51.0	49.0	10.01
About the same amount of money as most	53.8	46.2	0.26	55.2	44.8	0.39	60.9	39.1	0.06	62.1	37.9	0.01
A lot or a little richer than most	49.3	50.7	-	61.0	39.0	-	62.6	37.4	-	65.7	34.3	-
Respondent's religious affiliation												
Christian (Protestant)	50.9	49.1	9.26	56.2	43.8	0.26	60.7	39.3	0.26	61.7	38.3	0.16
Christian (Catholic)	63.4	36.6	0.01	56.3	43.8	0.88	58.8	41.2	0.88	63.2	36.8	0.92
Other religion	58.8	41.2	-	53.6	53.6	-	60.9	39.1	-	61.5	38.5	-
Attendance in churches, mosques, synagogues or temples												
Never or only on special occasions	55.5	44.5	0.35	53.8	46.2	4.29	58.3	41.7	5.80	58.2	41.8	1.97
Occasionally or frequent attendance	53.3	46.7	0.84	54.8	45.2	0.12	57.0	43.0	0.06	60.5	39.5	0.37
Fairly regularly or regularly	53.7	46.3	-	62.0	38.0	-	66.2	33.8	-	64.0	36.0	-
Attendance of family members in church, mosque, synagogue or temple												
Never or only on special occasions	55.3	44.7	2.45	52.7	47.3	0.90	60.3	39.7	5.43	59.4	40.6	0.51
Occasionally or frequent attendance	56.2	43.8	0.29	56.4	43.6	0.64	56.0	44.0	0.07	60.0	40.0	0.78
Fairly regularly or regularly	50.6	49.4	-	56.6	43.4	-	63.8	36.2	-	62.1	62.1	-
How religious do you consider yourself to be												
Not or somewhat religious	61.7	38.3	4.42	57.1	42.9	1.97	61.5	38.5	3.15	62.7	37.3	0.61
Moderately religious	51.7	48.3	0.11	53.3	46.7	0.37	56.6	43.4	0.21	59.5	40.5	0.74
Very or extremely religious	54.2	45.8	-	57.8	42.2	-	62.1	37.9	-	61.2	38.8	-
How important is religion in your life?												
Not at all, not very or somewhat importance	53.0	47.0	0.09	54.6	45.4	0.19	57.5	42.5	0.61	56.6	43.5	2.23
Very or extremely important	54.2	45.8	0.77	56.3	43.7	0.66	60.5	39.5	0.44	62.1	37.9	0.14
Importance of participation in politics												
Low importance	62.9	37.1	34.19	63.7	36.3	27.84	65.2	34.8	14.51	71.8	28.2	57.31
High importance	44.0	56.0	0.00	47.6	52.4	0.00	53.9	46.1	0.00	49.2	50.8	0.00
Civic skills												
Low participation	54.8	45.2	0.30	61.9	38.1	24.38	68.4	31.6	54.52	70.9	29.1	73.17
High participation	53.0	47.0	0.59	46.7	53.3	0.00	46.1	53.9	0.00	45.0	55.0	0.00

the student's perception of the importance of religion in the youth's life; when the youth perceive that politics is important, they are more likely to engage politically. Gender is significantly associated with all the political engagement variables except family political discussion; males have high rates of engagement compared to females. Also, age is significantly associated with all the political engagement variables with the exception of family political discussion; youth aged 20–26 years have higher levels of engagement than youth aged 17–19 years.

Apart from family political discussion where white people have higher level of political engagement, black Africans have higher levels of political engagement than white people and other race groups, especially in the domain of peer political discussion. Moreover, apart from the domain of family political discussion where Afrikaans-speaking youth have higher level of political engagement, Mnguni-speaking youth have higher levels of political engagement in every other domain of political engagement than any other language group. As far as education is concerned, higher parental education appears to engender only family political discussion because in every other domain of political engagement lower parental education is associated with higher level of political engagement. Youth who live with both parents at home have higher levels of political engagement only in the domain of family political discussion, whereas those who live with single parents at home have higher levels of political engagement in all other domains of political engagement.

The SES of a youth's family is significantly associated with the engagement of the youth in the political process, while it is marginally associated with political party discussion. Finally, apart from family political discussion, the civic skills index is significantly and positively associated with political engagement.

Table 4 shows the results of the logit model of religious effects on political engagement. After controlling for all the variables in the model, the only religion variables that are significant predictors of political engagement of the youth are religiosity and the importance of religion in the young person's life. Self-rated religiosity and perception of the youth on the importance of religion in their lives are the only two dimensions of religion that significantly predict the political engagement of the youth although their influences on young person's political engagement are in opposite directions. While religiosity is positively associated with peer political discussion and attempts to influence the political process, importance of religion in the young people's lives is inversely associated with the two aspects of political engagement.

Specifically, youth who perceive themselves as moderately religious and extremely religious are 2.14 and 3.17 times, respectively, more likely to engage in peer political discussion compared to youth who perceive themselves as not religious

at all. Moreover, youth who perceive themselves as either moderately religious or extremely religious are 2.71 and 4.24 times, respectively more likely to engage in attempts to influence the political process compared to their counterparts who are not religious at all. On the other hand, the odds of youth who report that religion is very important or extremely important in their lives engaging in peer political discussion decrease by 61%, while the odds of these youth engaging in attempts to influence the political process decrease by 4% compared to those who report that religion is not at all important in their lives.

As far as the control variables are concerned, gender, race, ethnicity as measured by home language, family structure, family's SES and civic skills are the only control variables that are significant predictors of political engagement of the youth. Males are more likely than females to engage in political party discussions and also to engage in attempts to influence the political process. Specifically, the odds of female respondents engaging in political party discussions and participating in the political process decreases by 60% and 65%, respectively, compared to their male counterparts.

Race and ethnicity are significant predictors of political engagement of the youth. Both white and mixed race youths are less likely than black African youth to engage in peer political discussion and participation in the political process, while white youth are less likely to engage in attempts to influence the political process compared to black Africans. For example, the odds of whites and mixed race engaging in peer political discussions decreases by 28% and 30%, respectively, while the odds of white respondents engaging in attempts to influence the political process decreases by 19% compared to black Africans. Young people who speak Tshivenda, Xitsonga and other African languages are less likely to engage in peer political discussions compared to those who speak English.

Family structure is a significant predictor of aspects of political engagement of the youth. Youth who live in a single-parent home are more likely to engage in peer political discussion compared to those who live in a two-parent home. The odds of youth who live in a single-parent home engaging in peer political discussion increases by 57% compared to those of youth who live with both parents at home. Youth who live with either a guardian or alone are less likely to engage in both family political and political party discussions but more likely to engage in peer political discussions. For example, the odds of youth who do not live with a family member engaging in family political discussion and political party discussion decreases by 21% and 24%, respectively, compared to their counterparts who live with both parents. However, youth who live with guardians, foster parents or alone are 2.76 times more likely than those who live with both parents to engage in peer political discussion. Finally, young people who possess civic skills are more likely to participate in every dimension of political engagement with the exception of peer political discussion.

TABLE 4: Logit model of religion effects on youth political engagement.

Variable	Family political discussion		Peer political discussion		Political party discussion		Participation in political process	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Male (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Female	0.106	1.112	-0.080	0.923	-0.509***	0.601***	-0.423***	0.655
17–19 years (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
20–26 years	-0.039	0.962	0.271	1.312	0.388	1.475	0.327	1.387
Black people (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
White people	0.275	1.317	-1.257***	0.284***	-0.929	0.395	-1.649***	0.192***
Mixed race people (Indian, Asian or Others)	0.183	1.201	-1.212***	0.298***	-0.398	0.672	-0.831	0.435
English (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Afrikaans	-0.180	0.835	-0.101	0.904	-0.192	0.826	0.381	1.464
IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele, SiSwati	-0.490	0.613	-0.510	0.600	0.037	1.037	-0.418	0.658
North Sotho, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi	-0.291	0.748	-0.277	0.758	0.183	1.200	-0.143	0.867
Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Other African languages	-0.590	0.555	-1.412***	0.244***	-0.584	0.557	-0.004	0.996
Father's education								
None or primary education (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Some secondary or matric Grade 12	-0.269	0.764	-0.092	0.912	0.333	1.395	0.363	1.438
College diploma, undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree	-0.201	0.818	0.317	1.373	0.565	1.759	0.684	1.981
Mother's education								
None or primary education (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Some secondary or matric grade 12	0.817	2.264	0.300	1.350	-0.045	0.956	-0.473	0.623
College diploma, undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree	0.920	2.509	-0.080	0.923	-0.306	0.737	-0.641	0.527
Living with two parents (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Living with single parent at a time	-0.269	0.764	0.448***	1.565***	-0.090	0.914	0.046	1.047
Living with other relatives (aunt, uncle, grandparent)	0.099	1.104	0.519	1.680	0.105	1.111	0.278	1.321
Living with guardian or foster parent or living alone	-1.587***	0.205***	1.014***	2.758***	-1.440***	0.237***	-0.498	0.607
A lot or a little poorer than most (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
About the same amount of money as most	0.127	1.135	0.200	1.222	-0.350	0.705	-0.612***	0.542***
A lot or a little richer than most	-0.040	0.961	0.001	1.001	-0.279	0.756	-0.669	0.512
Christian (Protestant) (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Christian (Catholic)	-0.288	0.749	0.034	1.035	-0.028	0.972	0.088	1.092
Other religion	-0.486	0.615	0.198	1.219	-0.079	0.924	0.139	1.149
Respondent attendance								
Never or only on special occasions (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Occasionally or frequent attendance	-0.183	0.832	-0.224	0.799	0.039	1.039	-0.340	0.711
Fairly regularly or regularly	-0.398	0.671	-0.417	0.659	0.005	1.005	-0.299	0.741
Family attendance								
Never or only on special occasions (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Occasionally or frequent attendance	0.088	1.092	-0.406	0.666	-0.238	0.788	-0.204	0.815
Fairly regularly or regularly	0.468	1.597	-0.319	0.727	-0.380	0.684	-0.207	0.813
Not or somewhat religious (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Moderately religious	0.513	1.671	0.763***	2.144***	0.573	1.774	0.996***	2.707***
Very or extremely religious	0.324	1.383	1.216***	3.373***	0.547	1.728	1.444***	4.238***
Religion not at all, not very or somewhat importance (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
Religion very or extremely important	-0.479	0.619	-0.494***	0.610***	-0.358	0.699	-0.746***	0.474***
Low importance of participation in politics (Ref.)	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000
High importance of participation in politics	0.734***	2.083***	0.909	2.483	0.815***	2.260***	1.113***	3.042***

***, significant at 0.001 level.

Discussion and conclusion

The simultaneous phenomenal growth of religious influences as manifested in the proliferation of religious organisations and the increasing role of religion in engendering positive youth development is what motivated this study. The underlying question we sought to answer in the study is: If religion is increasingly contributing to moving youth away from anti-social behaviours such as alcohol and drug use and abuse, is it diverting them towards pro-social behaviours such as political engagements? We sought to answer this question with a sample of undergraduate students across the three campuses of the North-West University in South Africa.

Four dimensions of religion were measured to see how they affect four dimensions of political engagement. We also examined the effects of gender, age, race, ethnicity, family structure, family SES, parental education and civic skills as control variables.

As far as religion's effect on political engagement of the youth is concerned, first, we found that merely being a member of a religious organisation did not predict youth involvement in political activities, a finding which is contrary to some existing studies in the Western context (e.g. Diaz 1996; Putnam 1993a, 1993b; Verba et al. 1995; Wald 1997). For example, Verba et al. (1995) found that Protestants were

more involved politically than Catholics because of the denominational differences between the two religious organisations in providing members with the ability to participate in politics; in fact, they argued that Catholic churches often provide fewer opportunities for lay involvement.

However, the finding of this study is consistent with several other existing studies, that found no denominational differences with regard to members' participation in politics (e.g. Djupe & Grant 2001; Jones-Correa & Leal 2001). For example, Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) note as their reason for the finding for the null hypothesis that there is no difference between Christian denominations and that the central importance of churches may not be that they inculcate civic skills in their members, but that they serve as important conduits of political information and recruitment (see also, Ammerman 1997; Djupe & Grant 2001).

The fact that frequency of religious attendance by the youth was not found to be a significant predictor of political engagement of the youth could be because of the differences in the emphasis different religious traditions put on politics. For example, Djupe and Grant (2001) found in their study in the United States that while African-American and Evangelical Protestants said they were active in church to better the nation, majority of them said they preferred religious activity over political activity. In a situation like this where political messages are not emphasised by a religious tradition, engagement in politics would hardly be dependent on the frequency of church attendance.

Out of the four dimensions of religion, only self-rated religiosity and importance of religion in the lives of the youth were found to be significant predictors of the political engagement of the youth, albeit their respective influences being in opposite directions. Religiosity was positively associated with youth peer political discussion and attempts to influence the political process, while importance of religion was negatively associated with these two domains of political engagement. These findings may appear contradictory but in fact they are not because the two are conceptually distinct. In fact, this finding is akin to the finding by Djupe and Grant's (2001) in regard to African-American Protestants and white Evangelical Protestants in the United States who prefer religious activity over political activity even though they are active in the church 'in order to better the Nation'. It is plausible that people who consider religion as important in their lives consider any non-religious activity, including politics, as less important.

The fact that males are more likely than females to engage in politics is consistent with the existing participation literature across several contexts (e.g. Coffe & Bolzendahl 2011; Kenworthy & Malami 1999; Nabanech 2012; Tadros 2011). This gender gap in political engagement or participation has been generally attributed to educational inequality, or the lack of education or skills or formal training for women

(e.g. Bauer 2009; Nabanech 2012). Moreover, one cannot ignore the patriarchal nature of most societies, especially, in Africa, which views politics (i.e. political affairs and decision-making) as mostly a male domain (Grasso 2013; Sossou 2011).

The finding that black Africans are more politically active than their white and mixed race counterparts in this study is hardly surprising given the historical role of black Africans, especially, African youth, in the struggle to overthrow the apartheid state. It is significant to note that this generation of black African youth is the offspring of the 1970s and 1980s generations who cut their political teeth at predominantly black radical institutions such as Fort Hare, and Universities of the North and Western Cape.

We also found that living with a single parent at home was positively associated with youth's engagement in peer political discussion compared to living with those who live with either both parents or a guardian, foster parent or living alone. We are not aware of any empirical evidence for this finding but believe that this finding makes sense heuristically because in the absence of the husband-wife dyad of the family system, single parents may be too preoccupied with running the household to be available for discussion with their children; in such a situation, the peer system becomes an attractive alternative for socialisation purposes. Civic skills possessed by the youth were positively associated with family political discussion, political party discussion and attempts to influence the political process. While with the present cross-sectional data, we are not in a position to determine whether the civic skills were church-gained or derived from secular sources; Djupe and Grant (2001) found in their study that church-gained civic skills did not increase political participation of their subjects. On the other hand, Finlay and Flanagan (2009) have noted that in the United States, young people's interest in politics and community engagement increased simultaneously as they advanced in education.

In conclusion, the answer to the question as to whether religion impacts political participation by the youth is that it ultimately depends upon which aspect of religion one is looking at. Religion as a moral force does indeed affect pro-social behaviours such as political participation as a crucial element of a society's social structure as evidenced by the role of social structural elements such as age, ethnicity, education and family structure. However, as far as non-electoral political engagement by the youth is concerned, the acquisition of civic skills by the youth is the most important factor.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings of this study, two recommendations, one methodological and the other substantive, are apparent. First, methodologically, while the study is based on a sample of youth at the tertiary level of the South African educational system and therefore may be

selective of young persons who are already morally upright, future research in the area would do well by using a more diverse sample which can be generalised to the entire population of youth in the country. Second, on the substantive level, given the intensely political nature of South Africa, religious organisations should strive to enhance the political participation of the youth by helping them to acquire vital civic skills through their teachings and practices.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr Elizabeth Biney a post-doctoral Fellow, for helping to put this manuscript together.

Competing interests

The author declares that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data are available to any interested person for purposes of replication or validation.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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