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Gambling, Governments & God

At one time, state governments opposed most forms of gambling. But as Charles Clotfelter and Philip Cook observed in their 1989 book, *Selling Hope: State Lotteries in America*, “The complete about face from prohibition to promotion in one state after another [has been] remarkable.” The number of states with lotteries has grown from seven in 1973, with \$2 billion in total sales, to 38, with total sales in 1997 of \$34 billion. In 1998, \$12 billion in proceeds from state lotteries went into government programs.

Recent gubernatorial contests and referendum fights in several southern states have highlighted the incongruous role state governments play as active promoters of gambling, especially state lotteries. But less attention has been paid to the influence of religiosity in the lottery debates, or to gambling’s position as part of a cluster of social issues that show similar patterns of public attitudes.

Lotteries stand out from other kinds of commercial gambling in a number of ways. They are the most widespread form—the only one played by a majority of Americans during any given year. They are also the only type of gambling that is virtually a state monopoly. In addition, the odds in state lotteries are the worst, and the payoffs are the highest.

The South also stands out in the many statewide battles over legalized gambling. Twenty-six non-southern states had already instituted lotteries by the time Virginia and Florida became the first southern states to have them in 1988. North Carolina is currently the largest state in the country without a state lottery, and that issue figured prominently in its 2000 gubernatorial campaign.

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In 1999, Alabama defeated a state lottery referendum, and in 2000, South Carolina voters approved such a ballot measure by only a narrow margin.

The contention over state-sponsored gambling in the South has emphasized particular arguments for and against state lotteries. Proponents argue that lotteries help state governments raise needed revenues without raising taxes.

In 16 states nationwide, these revenues are earmarked in whole or in part for public education, and in the southern debate, Democratic governors and gubernatorial candidates have advocated state lotteries for that purpose.

Opponents, for their part, believe state-sponsored gambling is morally wrong, that it diverts money from other purchases that are taxable, and that it acts like a regressive tax. In addition, they argue, state sponsorship of gambling may aggravate problem gambling, leading to increased crime, divorce, and broken homes. Opposition has come from a number of sources, most notably religious organizations.

The 1999 Gallup Social Audit survey found that 63% of Americans nationwide approved of legal gambling or betting, and 32% disapproved. Those who approved did so primarily because they saw it as a personal choice (30%), an enjoyable activity (29%), or a source of state revenue (18%).

Those who disapproved were mainly concerned about people going into debt (25%) or becoming addicted (20%), or about an increase in crime (16%). Fourteen percent disapproved out of religious conviction.

Among the various forms of betting legalized by states to raise revenues, state lotteries and bingo had the highest level of public approval (75% and 74%, respectively) in the Gallup survey. Fifty-seven percent of Americans said they had bought a lottery ticket, and about one-third had gambled at a casino during the past year. According to a 1997 Maritz Marketing survey, 22% of Americans said they played the lottery at least once a week on average.

The Gallup survey also found majorities of the public disapproving of the legalization of video poker machines (55%) and of betting on professional sports (57%) as ways of raising state revenues. Nearly two-thirds (63%) approved of casinos as a way to raise state revenues, but, according to a 1998 *Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University* survey, Americans were split in their opinions of legalized casino gambling in their own states (47% in favor, 48% opposed) when raising revenues was not mentioned.

Many Americans have ambivalent feelings about gambling. According to an August 2000 Harvard/ICR poll, more think legalization helps (51%) rather than hurts society (37%). But when asked in 2000 by NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* which consideration was the more important when it came to legalized gambling, 50% cited the crime and social problems it creates, while only 36% pointed to the revenue and economic growth it produces.

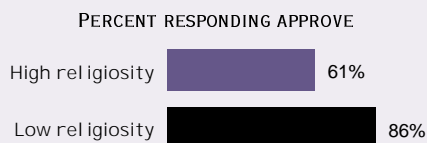
A majority (58%) in the Gallup Social Audit survey agreed that legalized gambling provided needed revenue for programs, but 55% also believed it was creating a compulsive gambling problem in this country. About one in four

Figure 1

Gambling Attitudes by Religiosity

Question:

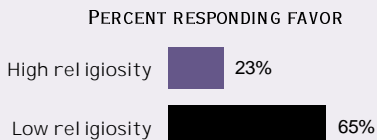
[Do] you approve or disapprove of each of the following types of betting as a way to help your state raise revenues... lotteries for cash prizes?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, April 30-May 23, 1999.

Question:

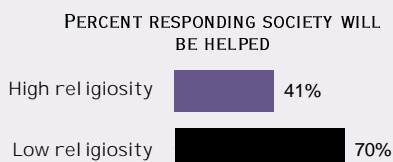
Do you favor or oppose legalized casino gambling in your state?



Source: Survey by *Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, July 19-August 18, 1998.

Question:

Which comes closer to your own view about the increasing number of states that are legalizing gambling, and the increased number of lotteries and games of chance that state governments are sponsoring? (a) Society will be hurt, because gambling breeds crime and making it available will increase the number of compulsive gamblers; or (b) Society will be helped, because gambling will occur anyway and legalizing it allows governments to regulate and tax it.



Source: Survey by Harvard School of Public Health/International Communications Research, August 16-20, 2000.

in a September-October 2000 Harvard/ICR poll said it was wrong for states to promote gambling, while 70% said it was not.

A more sharply defined picture of the spectrum of opinion on gambling emerges from an analysis of results from seven questions from five recent surveys. Such an examination reveals significant differences in attitudes about state-sponsored gambling by age and party identification, as well as by measures of religiosity and attitudes about other social issues.

On all seven questions, 18 to 29 year old respondents took pro-gambling positions more often than Americans aged 65 and over, by a range of 13 to 28 percentage points. The younger group of adults showed greater approval of casino gambling in general (59% to 34%) and of lotteries as a way to help their states raise revenues (84% to 56%). They were also significantly less likely than their elders to see gambling as wrong (16% to 41%), less likely (41% to 60%) to think that the social problems caused by gambling outweighed the benefits of gambling-generated revenues, and more likely (62% to 35%) to see society as being helped rather than hurt by state-sponsored gambling.

Similarly, Democrats took pro-gambling positions more often than Republicans on all seven questions. The differences by party ranged from 8 to 25 percentage points, but on four of the questions, majorities of both parties took the same side. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to favor casino gambling in general (52% to 41%) and to see society as being helped rather than hurt by state-sponsored gambling (58% to 43%). They were less likely (46% to 54%) to think that the social problems caused by gambling outweighed the benefits of gambling-generated revenues.

Gender mattered on two of the measures, as did race. For instance, men

were more likely than women to see society as being helped by state-sponsored gambling, by a margin of 57% to 46%, and African Americans were more likely than whites to favor casino gambling in general, by the same margin. Attitudes did not seem to vary much by education and household income.

Perhaps more surprisingly, given their region's late start in instituting state lotteries, southerners were not consistently less supportive of gambling than adults in other regions; nor were there significant differences between Catholics and Protestants.

While all these variations are interesting, the biggest differences in attitudes about state-sponsored gambling were found on variables measuring religiosity and related moral concerns.

A scale for measuring religiosity was constructed for the 1998 *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey of Americans on Values from respondents' reports of the importance of religion in their own lives, frequency of religious attendance, and frequency of prayer. For the Virginia Commonwealth University survey, religiosity was based on respondents' own reports of how much guidance their religious beliefs provide in their daily life. For all other surveys included in the analysis, religiosity was based on respondents' own reports of the importance of religion in their own lives.

On all seven measures of attitudes toward gambling, highly religious people, regardless of religious preference, were significantly less likely than less religious ones to take pro-gambling positions, by a range of 22 to 42 percentage points.

Highly religious respondents were less likely to approve of casino gambling in general (23% to 65%) and of lotteries as a way of raising state revenues (61% to 86%). They were more likely to see

state-sponsored gambling as wrong (35% to 13%) and as making new compulsive gamblers (69% to 44%), and less likely to see it as providing needed money for state programs (44% to 68%). Highly religious Americans were more than twice as likely as the less religious (49% to 21%) to think state-sponsored gambling hurts society.

The next step in the analysis demonstrated that gambling attitudes are part of a larger constellation of moral concerns. We can see this by their remarkable similarity to attitudes about other social issues, as shown by three of the surveys. Americans who took a pro-life position or found abortion unacceptable were significantly less likely (36% to 59%) to approve of casino gambling and more likely (50% to 25%) to think state-sponsored gambling hurts society.

Similarly, those who opposed physician-assisted suicide were less likely (34% to 59%) to approve of casino gambling and more likely (50% to 26%) to think state-sponsored gambling hurts society. People who saw homosexuality as intolerable or who thought we have gone too far in accepting homosexuality were less likely than those with more tolerant views to approve of casino gambling (38% to 58%) and more likely (60% to 45%) to consider the social problems caused by gambling to be more important than the revenues it generates.

Moreover, attitudes about these and other social issues were highly correlated with religiosity. Highly religious Americans were not only significantly less likely than less religious adults to approve of gambling, but were also less likely to be pro-choice, believe that physician-assisted suicide should be legal, favor stem cell research, and be tolerant of gays.

On each of these measures, the differences were quite large, and on most of them, majorities took opposite sides

Figure 2

Social Attitudes by Religiosity

Question:

Which of the following four statements comes closest to your own views on abortion? Abortion should be generally available to those who want it; abortion should be available, but under stricter limits than it is now; abortion should be against the law except in cases of rape, incest, or to save the woman's life; abortion should not be permitted at all.

PERCENT RESPONDING SHOULD BE GENERALLY AVAILABLE OR AVAILABLE UNDER STRICTER LIMITS



Source: Survey by Harvard School of Public Health/International Communications Research, August 16-20, 2000.

Question:

On the whole, how much do you favor or oppose medical research that uses stem cells from human embryos—do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this?

PERCENT RESPONDING STRONGLY OR SOMEWHAT FAVOR



Source: Survey by Virginia Commonwealth University, August 23-September 2, 2001.

Question:

Which of the following statements comes closer to your feelings about the way our society deals with homosexuality? (a) We have gone too far in accepting homosexuality; or (b) We have not gone far enough in ending discrimination against homosexuals.

PERCENT RESPONDING HAVE NOT GONE FAR ENOUGH



Source: Survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal, March 2-5, 2000.

depending on whether they were highly religious or less religious. Two-thirds of less religious respondents to the surveys took a pro-choice position on abortion and favored physician-assisted suicide, compared with about one-third of the highly religious. Similarly, 71% of less

Governor Jim Hodges, who had argued during his election campaign for a state lottery like Georgia's to help fund education. Not surprisingly, according to a Voter News Service exit poll, a large majority of Democrats and African Americans supported the referendum,

religious Americans favored stem cell research, compared with 38% of the highly religious. On the two measures we used, slight majorities of the less religious had tolerant views of gays, attitudes that were shared by only one in five highly religious Americans.

The pattern of gambling attitudes nationwide carried over to the South. On all seven measures, highly religious southerners were less likely than less religious southerners to take pro-gambling positions, by a range of 21 to 44 percentage points. They were less likely to approve of casino gambling in general, and of lotteries as a way to raise state revenues. Highly religious southerners were also more likely to see state-sponsored gambling as being wrong and hurting society, and as responsible for making new compulsive gamblers.

In 2000, a state lottery referendum in South Carolina demonstrated some of the cleavages in attitudes about state-sponsored gambling. The hotly contested referendum, which passed 54% to 46%, was supported by Democratic

while Republicans opposed it. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of younger South Carolinians voted for the referendum, compared with only 37% of those aged 60 and over.

While we do not have any direct measures of religiosity in the South Carolina survey, only 44% of white Protestants voted for the referendum, compared with 71% of all others. Only about one-fourth (27%) of those white voters who identified themselves as part of the religious right voted for the referendum. Overwhelmingly, the main reason given by "Yes" voters for supporting the referendum was education. Morality was by far the biggest reason "No" voters gave for their stance.

Most Americans (86%) have gambled at some time in their lives, and state-sponsored gambling has been a rapidly growing business over the past 25 years. But differences in gambling attitudes reveal important rifts in American society, not only by age and party identification, but by measures of religiosity more broadly indicative of a pattern of differences in moral and social concerns.

This is important from a political standpoint because for some time, apart from enduring core constituencies (minorities such as African Americans, who remain overwhelmingly Democratic, and free enterprise sorts, who remain loyal Republicans), the parties have been sorting increasingly by differences in religiosity and forms of religious practice.

These cleavages along moral and political lines are clearly evident in the recent lottery debates in a number of southern states. While gambling was not a major issue in the 2000 presidential campaign, it is not likely to go away at the state level. The results of this study suggest that it may re-emerge on the national stage as part of a broader discussion of values.

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