The Giving Gap

Is the right more generous than the left?

Katherine Mangu-Ward | December 19, 2006

'Tis the season for giving—and it turns out that conservatives and like-minded welfare skeptics more than hold their own when it comes to charity. So says Arthur C. Brooks in his new book *Who Really Cares?: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism*. Brooks, a public policy professor at Syracuse University, sums up his own results thusly: Giving is dictated by "strong families, church attendance, earned income (as opposed to state-subsidized income), and the belief that individuals, not government, offer the best solution to social ills--all of these factors determine how likely one is to give."

Brooks shows that those who say they strongly oppose redistribution by government to remedy income inequality give over 10 times more to charity than those who strongly support government intervention, with a difference of $1,627 annually versus $140 to all causes. The average donation to educational causes among redistributionists was eight dollars per year, compared with $140 from their ideological opposites, and $96 annually to health care causes from free marketeers versus $11 from egalitarians.

A 2002 poll found that those who thought government "was spending too much money on welfare" were significantly more likely than those who wanted increased spending on welfare to give directions to someone on the street, return extra change to a cashier, or give food and/or money to a homeless person.

Brooks finds that households with a conservative at the helm gave an average of 30 percent more money to charity in 2000 than liberal households (a difference of $1,600 to $1,227). The difference isn't explained by income differential—in fact, liberal households make about 6 percent more per year. Poor, rich, and middle class conservatives all gave more than their liberal counterparts. And while religion is a major factor, the figures don't just show tithing to churches. Religious donors give significantly more to non-religious causes than do their secular counterparts.

But far more striking than conservatives outbidding their liberal pals for charity points is what Brooks finds about class distinctions. Brooks finds that in families with incomes of less than $14,000 annually, working poor families gives more than three times as much as families on welfare. They also are twice as likely to give, and twice as likely to volunteer. "It is not poverty per se that makes people uncharitable—but rather the government's policy for eradicating it," says Brooks.

There is an appropriate intuition that American people are really generous, and they are. But you'd think that people give away a higher percentage of their income because they can afford to, and that's not true. It turns out that the people who give the biggest percentage of their income away are the working poor in American today. Now the "working" part is key, because the non-working poor who have the same incomes give the least. But the working
poor who have low incomes but employment, particularly stable employment give like crazy and we should all take a giving lesson from them. They're also very income mobile and so there's this virtuous cycle of giving and success. These people are also hugely interested in issues of freedom and pretty hostile to government income redistribution. We are told that the poor are a homogenous group in America and they neither homogenous behaviorally, nor attitudinally.

Asked about the relationship of the belief in freedom to the levels of giving, Brooks responds quickly: "Freedom and opportunity are the sister virtues to charity," he says. "People who do not value freedom and opportunity simply don't value individual solutions to social problems very much. It creates a culture of not giving."

Of course, conservatives have a stake in proving that private charity works, and liberals have stake in proving that government solutions work. So there may be two sides to this coin. Sure, liberals don't give to charity, but when conservatives are put in charge of social services, they tend to do a pretty awful job. No one needs to be acting in bad faith for this to be true. It's simply human nature not to focus your energies where you think they will not be best rewarded.

The people who give the least are the young, especially young liberals. Brooks writes that "young liberals—perhaps the most vocally dissatisfied political constituency in America today—are one of the least generous demographic groups out there. In 2004, self-described liberals younger than thirty belonged to one-third fewer organizations in their communities than young conservatives. In 2002, they were 12 percent less likely to give money to charities, and one-third less likely to give blood." Liberals, he says, give less than conservatives because of religion, attitudes about government, structure of families, and earned income. The families point is driven home by other results from Brooks. He writes that young liberals are less likely do nice things for their nearest and dearest, too. Compared with young conservatives, "a lower percentage said they would prefer to suffer than let a loved one suffer, that they are not happy unless the loved one is happy, or that they would sacrifice their own wishes for those they love."

Not to worry, though. The problem is one of age, not generation: "When people age," says Brooks, "they get better. I don't know exactly why that is, but one of the ways that they do so is they figure out what makes them feel good and what is good for other people and most pursue more of those activities. Giving is healthy and pro-social and so you see more of it as people get wiser."

There's something fundamental about the urge to give. Brooks explains the "helper's high" occurs when our brains reward us with pleasure-producing opioids when we help someone out—this factor, he says, promotes a virtuous cycle: "Tangible evidence suggests that charitable giving makes people prosperous, healthy, and happy. And that on its own is a huge argument to protect institutions of giving in this country, as individuals, in communities, and as a nation. We simply do best, as a nation, when people are free and they freely give."

"There's something incredibly satisfying, inherently, about voluntary giving," says Brooks. "And nobody has ever reported any brain science suggesting that you get an endorphin rush when you pay your tax bill."

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