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Faith, Hope, and Charity
Who gives to whom, and why.
by Martin Morse Wooster
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Who Really Cares

*The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism:
America's Charity Divide--Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why it Matters*
by Arthur C. Brooks
Basic Books, 256 pp., \$26

Ever since the New Deal, a well-worn piece of equipment in the liberal tool kit of debating points is the notion that liberals are more compassionate than conservatives because they want to raise taxes on the rich in the name of helping the poor.

Conservatives, the liberals insist, are skinflints. Instead of aiding the less fortunate, the left says, right-wingers wallow in wealth. They're Scrooges and Social Darwinists who cheer on the fat cats while kicking away the bottom rungs of the social ladder so that poor people never have a chance to advance.

Leftists, by contrast, believe *they're* the people in America who are the most compassionate. They're so concerned about the poor that they want to raise taxes on the rich to strengthen the safety net.

These liberal shibboleths have been somewhat weakened by the welfare reform legislation of 1996. But it's an easy prediction to say that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi will rally their fellow Democrats this year by railing against the Republicans as misers who want to make the rich richer and the poor more miserable.

How accurate are these arguments? Are liberals more compassionate than conservatives? The answer, says Arthur C. Brooks in this thoughtful and engaging book, is no. All the evidence, he argues, suggests that conservatives are more generous than liberals.

Despite the subtitle, *Who Really Cares* is not a book about "compassionate conservatism," if you define this term to be the Bush administration's policies towards aiding faith-based charities. Although Brooks has some thoughtful suggestions about how government can increase giving, he really isn't that concerned about federal policy. Rather, this is a book about what current social science tells us about who gives to charities and why people give.

Brooks, who teaches public administration at Syracuse, brings several formidable skills to his task. He's expert at sorting through dense, well-established social surveys and discovering what research within them is worth writing about. Most of us, after all, don't read the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics or the University of Chicago's General Social Survey for fun. We need interpreters, and Brooks is very good at interpreting the available evidence.

Readers should also be aware that Brooks's argument about conservatives being more charitable comes with one important caveat. There is a strong correlation between religious faith and charity. The more religious you are, the more likely you are to give to charity. (Europe's fading churches, by the way, are one reason Europeans are far less likely to give and to volunteer than Americans are.)

Brooks sees "four forces in American life that are primarily responsible for making Americans charitable. These forces are religion, skepticism about the role of government in economic life, strong families, and personal entrepreneurship."

These beliefs, he contends, aren't just limited to the right. There are plenty of churchgoing liberals with strong marriages who are big givers to charity. "The truth," Brooks writes, "is that conservatives only *tend* to be more religious and charitable than liberals." But Brooks shows that the beliefs held by the most generous Americans are far more likely to be held by the right than by the left.

This tendency towards conservatives being more generous produces some striking findings. One of them is that the redder the state is, the more likely its residents are to be charitable. Twenty-four of the 25 most generous states were red ones (only Maryland was a charitably minded blue state). The five states that gave more than 60 percent of their votes to President Bush in 2004 are ones whose residents give 3.5 percent of their incomes to charity, nearly twice as much per person as residents of the five states (including the District of Columbia) where John Kerry got 60 percent or better. This finding, Brooks reports, occurs even though residents of the deep-blue pro-Kerry states, on average, earned 38 percent *more* per household than their red-state counterparts.

Another interesting point of Brooks's research concerns support for government income redistribution with charitable giving. A 2004 survey conducted by Syracuse University, for example, found that if you took two people who were identical in age, income, education, gender, religion, race, and political views, but whose only disagreement was that one person thought it was the government's job to redistribute income from the rich to the poor while the other thought that income redistribution was none of the state's business, the person who opposed government income redistribution was likely to contribute \$267 more to charity each year than the income redistribution advocate.

"In other words," Brooks writes, "people in favor of forced income redistribution are privately less charitable than those who oppose it, regardless of how much money they earn."

Economists, of course, have long known that if the state expands, the private sector shrinks. (They call this process the "public goods crowding-out effect.") Brooks cites an interesting but neglected paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in 2005 in which economists Jonathan Gruber and Daniel M. Hungerman explored this "crowding-out effect" on charities during the New Deal. They found that while the welfare state between 1933 and 1939 expanded from zero to four percent of the gross domestic product, religious charities shrunk by 30 percent during the same period.

Brooks finds a similar crowding-out process taking place today. Under today's welfare laws, states set the payments under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the principal government welfare program. Tennessee's TANF payments are 61 percent lower than New Hampshire's, but Tennesseans give, on average, 4.3 percent of their incomes, well above the 1.8 percent in New Hampshire. Brooks calculates that if Tennessee raised its welfare payments to New Hampshire's level, charitable giving in Tennessee would fall by 42 percent.

Once Brooks has demolished the notion that conservatives are wealth-hoarding misers who hate poor people, he gets on to the second purpose of his book--getting *everyone* to give more. One way to do

that, he argues, is for the left to quit picking on rich people who make big donations. For example, in 2004, the billionaire mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, cut government funding to 800 nonprofits in that city, and supplanted the government funds with \$140 million in donations from his personal fortune.

The *New York Times*, of course, thought that Bloomberg gave for cynical reasons. "Mr. Bloomberg's personal wealth has made him a modern-day Medici," wrote *Times* reporters Sam Roberts and Jim Rutenberg, "a role that, some critics say, can also stifle dissent from institutions that have quietly absorbed city budget cuts because they worry that what the mayor gives he can also stop giving."

But wouldn't it be more productive for reporters to honor Mayor Bloomberg for his generosity--and write more positive stories about large donors, particularly those who use their wealth to fund innovative ways to help the poor and struggling?

Of course, you don't have to be named Gates, Buffett, or Bloomberg to give. Brooks shows the unsung heroes of philanthropy are the janitors and clerks who tithe to their church or volunteer at their schools or local homeless shelters. The really rich, Brooks shows, give proportionately more of their incomes, but the working poor are also surprisingly generous givers.

Here government can provide some help. Allowing everyone to deduct charitable donations from their income taxes (instead of the current practice of only allowing those who itemize to deduct) would do a great deal of good.

Some deregulation would also help. For example, suppose you live in New Jersey and want to coach your son's Little League team. The New Jersey Office of Recreation mandates that every volunteer attend a three-hour orientation session "that addresses the perspective of the specific population(s) involved (for example, young, senior, novice, and skilled athletes)." New Jersey law requires that any organization providing such a training program "shall issue a certificate of participation to each participant" who completes the course.

It's perfectly understandable that many potential volunteers might well find other things to do when faced with this state-mandated training session. But Brooks uses the anecdote to show how well-meaning bureaucrats issue regulations that discourage voluntarism.

"It seems ridiculously obvious that the government should not suppress charity through bureaucratic rules and procedures," Brooks writes. "Yet this occurs with depressing regularity."

This is a thoughtful look at why Americans give and what can be done to encourage giving. Anyone interested in American charities will learn a great deal from Arthur C. Brooks's important book.

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