

How, or if, you give thanks speaks volumes

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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(RNS) Whether it's a mere "Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub," or a more solemn supplication, millions of Americans will bow their heads this Thursday in gratitude for the bounty of food before them.

Even a murmured "Thanks be to God," before carving the Thanksgiving turkey speaks volumes about the person praying, especially if it's a daily habit, according to scholars.

In fact, not only is saying grace one of the best indicators of how religious a person is, but it also has strong connections to partisan politics, according to scholars Robert Putnam and David Campbell.

Grace, of course, is the prayer said before meals, either in thanks to a deity who generously provides the food, to the workers who prepared it, or even to the animals about to be gobbled up.

Like many other rituals, Christians probably picked up saying grace from Judaism, according to scholars; nearly every culture has some form of pre-meal prayer.

These days, 44 percent of Americans report saying grace or a similar blessing almost every day before eating; 46 percent almost never say it, leaving just a statistical sliver in between, Putnam and Campbell report

in their recently published book, "American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us."

"We are hard-pressed to think of many other behaviors that are so common among one half the population and rare among the other half -- maybe carrying a purse," Putnam and Campbell write.

Yet unlike wearing a purse, grace is often a private act of quiet prayer around a kitchen table, a quick thanks in a crowded restaurant, or a bowed head before a bowl of soup.

"Saying grace is a very personalized form of religious expression," Campbell said in an interview. "It's something you do in your home, with your family."

The privacy of saying grace -- it's not often shouted from rooftops -- makes it a better measure of religious commitment than asking people if they go to church, Campbell said. Giving thanks for food isn't generally said or done to impress the neighbors.

But the private prayer has strong connections to public positions, especially political ones, according to Putnam and Campbell. "Indeed, few things about a person correspond as tightly to partisanship as grace saying," the scholars write in "American Grace."

The more often you say grace, the more likely you are to identify with the Republican Party, Putnam and Campbell report. By turns, of course, the less you say grace, the more likely you are to identify with Democrats, the scholars said.

But there is one big exception to the prayer-politics connection. Eighty-five percent of African Americans report saying grace daily, a far higher rate than even Mormons, evangelicals, and mainline Protestants, the runners-up in grace-saying. The rate for evangelicals, for instance, is 58 percent. Yet, blacks remain stalwarts in the Democratic Party.

Lawrence A. Mamiya, a professor of religion and Africana studies at Vassar College and co-author of "The Black Church in African American Experience," said offering thanks before meals is consistent with a community bound by a history of faith and hope.

"The whole point is to acknowledge something greater than themselves," Mamiya said. "Even during slavery it was the belief in God that saved blacks from being utterly dehumanized."

And if Sunday services remain the beating heart of the black church, the plentiful meals afterwards are its lifeblood. But before the meal, of course, comes prayer, said Mamiya, a tribute to the amazing grace that leads to home.