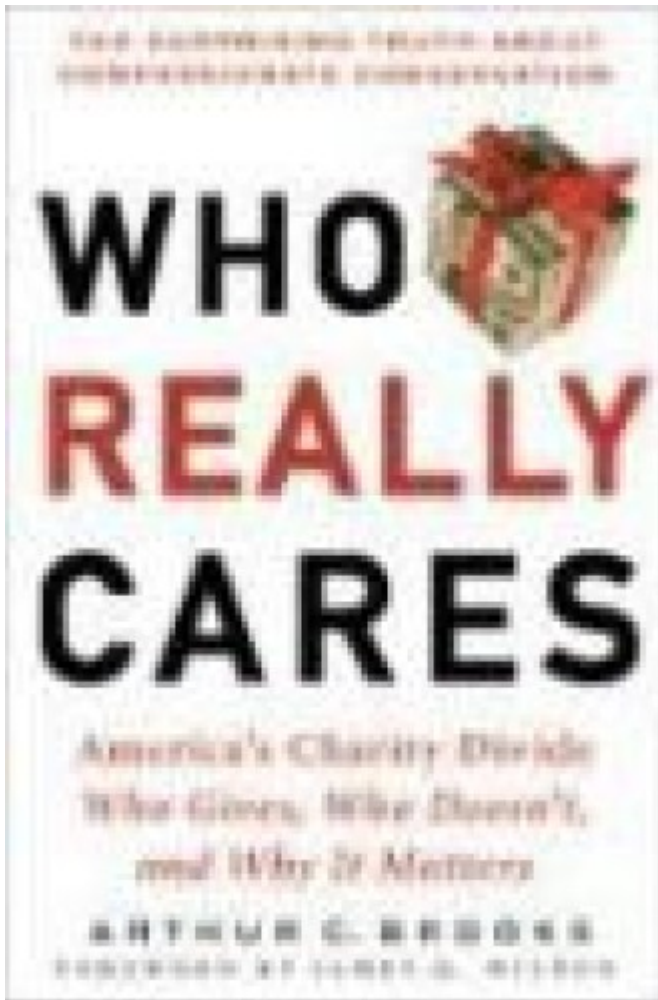


# Politics of charity

By [James Halteman](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## **Who Really Cares: America's Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters**

Arthur C. Brooks  
Basic Books

This is a provocative book on charitable giving in the United States and a variety of other countries. Approximately 75 percent of U.S. households make charitable contributions each year. They give away 3.5 percent of their \$51,500 average annual income, with one-third of the giving going to religious causes. But there is much hidden behind these averages.

Arthur Brooks's findings, some of which are counterintuitive, are based on extensive statistics. Brooks, professor of public administration at Syracuse University, is surprised by the findings and appears to have altered his political perspective from liberal to conservative as a result of his explorations. There is much to be gleaned from this book, but some cautions are in order.

His thesis is that acts of charity are fostered primarily by conservative political and religious commitments and cultivated within a strong family context, and that such acts result in happiness, good health and more income for the giver. People who are skeptical about the government redistributing income also tend to give more. In contrast, the people who give and volunteer the least are more likely to be secular liberals from less stable families who support government redistribution programs. However, Brooks makes it clear that there are many exceptions to these tendencies.

Separate components of this thesis are highlighted in separate chapters. One point is that religious people tend to give a significantly higher proportion of both money and volunteer time. Attendance at a house of worship dwarfs all other variables as a predictor of the percent of time and money given.

The second finding relates to political preferences. The data are clear that those who see the government as an appropriate player in income redistribution are likely to be less charitable than those with more politically conservative ideas. Although politically conservative religious people are much less likely to see disparity in incomes as a problem, they are more likely to give to charitable causes than are nonreligious political liberals.

The next topic concerns the impact of income and wealth on charity. The data here are sliced in many ways, leading to a variety of conclusions. The rich give approximately 3.5 percent of their income, and the poor approximately 4.5 percent. Brooks makes much of the fact that poor people who receive welfare give less than working poor people with similar incomes who are not receiving direct government transfers of income.

The fourth finding is the least surprising. People from intact homes are more charitable than those from broken homes and those who live alone. The modeling effect of loving parents, the effect of family solidarity on happiness, and the fact that religion and family solidarity can be expected to go together all contribute to this finding. Brooks presents less evidence about the relationship between religion and family solidarity than about the relationship between conservative political views and family solidarity, but the data imply that there is a connection among all three.

Brooks's chapter on international comparisons is the least convincing and perhaps the most subjective. His general theme is that Europe is not religious, that it has become increasingly politically liberal and that it has deteriorating family values. All of this, Brooks contends, contributes to the loss of a culture of charity. To make the point that Europeans do not substitute taxation for charity, Brooks argues that Europeans have a lighter tax burden than people in the U.S., but he cites only the income tax. In fact, the value-added tax is the primary source of European revenues, and the European average tax rate is above that of the U.S.

Finally, Brooks argues that charity not only is correlated with good health, happiness and riches, it causes them: social networks, the satisfaction of giving and the benefits of charity used well make life better for us all. There is a distinct tone of Christian paternalism in this final chapter, which Brooks begins by presenting John D. Rockefeller as a model of charity and wealth. He argues that charity brings about wealth and riches rather than the other way around. The evidence for this is tenuous at best.

Brooks says he is not evaluating the relative merits of different types of giving. He notes only the category of the recipient. Giving to orchestras, museums, church building funds and parent-teacher associations is considered just as charitable as giving to aid the poor and disadvantaged. Sorting out motives for and benefits from giving is an impossible task, so readers can only speculate about how these variables might affect Brooks's conclusions. This complication weakens the study considerably and raises questions about the book's theme. Is the focus on caring misplaced given that Brooks simply reports who gives time and tax-deductible money to organizations deemed to be charities? After all, *giving* and *caring* are not synonymous.

It is easy to get lost in all the statistics that Brooks has woven into the prose, and one wishes that some charts and graphs were used to help organize the data.

Brooks looks at givers and nongivers, those who volunteer and those who do not, those who are self-declared conservatives and those who call themselves liberals, those who attend church and those who rarely do, and those with high income and those with low income. Brooks continuously refers to and compares various combinations of these groups, but does not systematically address the politically moderate middle third of the population. He tells us that people in this group tend to give less than 3.5 percent of their income, but he does not sort out their attitudes on the key variables in the study as he does for those at the ends of the religious and political spectrum.

Trying to sort out the comparisons among the many subgroups is no small task, and because Brooks doesn't analyze every combination of variables, readers may wonder whether he's telling the whole story. Because of this complexity and because the data are organized systematically only in the appendix, the reader must labor through the comparisons with great care, and the casual reader will glean little more than the themes of the book.

The overall thesis has many implications for the social, economic, political and religious spheres. However, the social order is not so neatly sliced up and dissected. Brooks does anticipate and speak to various potential criticisms, but there are issues that remain. First, most of the variables that Brooks lumps together in categories fit better on a continuum with incremental differences. Also, he does not adequately address the problem of subjectivity that arises when data are gleaned from questionnaires. For example, is there a common metric for happiness across people and nationalities? Does everyone measure volunteered time in a similar way? Do religious people have a tendency to overstate their participation in activities that they feel are virtuous? Brooks states his conclusions with a certainty that belies these difficulties.

The statistical analysis is also problematic. If one group gives 3.5 percent of income and another gives 2.5 percent, is that a difference from which sweeping conclusions can be drawn? In various places Brooks muddies the argument by mixing point differences with percentage differences. And then there is the question of what level of giving constitutes generosity. If church people are taught to tithe at 10 percent and their average giving is 3.5 percent, aren't they falling way below expectations? At what level do generosity and caring start?

Furthermore, Brooks's sharp critique of government redistribution efforts lacks perspective. To completely replace public aid with private charity would require an enormous increase in charity. For example, if all the annual religious contributions in the U.S. were used to offset public expenditure for the poor, the amount would fund less than 15 percent of current aid to poor people. If all charity, religious and nonreligious, were included, about 42 percent of current aid would be covered. What is missing from this book is a general theory of charity similar to or counter to the public-choice theory of government.

In treatises of this kind, people in the public sector are assumed to be self-interested utility maximizers, while charitable organizations, whether religious or secular, are assumed to be altruistic and benevolent. But the public sector is required to deal with all cases, including the tough ones, while private groups can skim off the easy cases or at least avoid the most problematic ventures. Private groups get blamed for errors of commission in their work, but public agencies get blamed for errors both of commission and omission and thus seem to be much less efficient. For example, private charities were praised for reconstruction work after Katrina, and none were blamed for not solving the problems. FEMA was blamed for what it did not do. I do not aim to excuse public inefficiencies, which are many. But private charity would probably not be as effective as it is if it were expected to shoulder a large share of the social problems now addressed by the public sector.

Despite my critique, I recommend this book highly because it is bound to stimulate discussion of topics that need to be addressed. Every group can find reasons here for self-examination. Brooks does a good job of helping us focus on the impact of charity. It is important to see that religion matters, that working toward a shared vision frequently does not require coercion, and that civil society needs strong institutions of family and religion.