

Op-Ed Columnist

# Bleeding Heart Tightwads

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By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

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This holiday season is a time to examine who's been naughty and who's been nice, but I'm unhappy with my findings. The problem is this: We liberals are personally stingy.

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Nicholas D. Kristof

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Liberals show tremendous compassion in pushing for generous government spending to help the neediest people at home and abroad. Yet when it comes to individual contributions to charitable causes, liberals are cheapskates.

Arthur Brooks, the author of a book on donors to charity, "Who Really Cares," cites data that households headed by conservatives give 30 percent more to charity than households headed by liberals. A study by Google found an even greater disproportion: average annual contributions reported by conservatives were almost double those of liberals.

Other research has reached similar conclusions. The “generosity index” from the Catalogue for Philanthropy typically finds that red states are the most likely to give to nonprofits, while Northeastern states are least likely to do so.

The upshot is that Democrats, who speak passionately about the hungry and homeless, personally fork over less money to charity than Republicans — the ones who try to cut health insurance for children.

“When I started doing research on charity,” Mr. Brooks wrote, “I expected to find that political liberals — who, I believed, genuinely cared more about others than conservatives did — would turn out to be the most privately charitable people. So when my early findings led me to the opposite conclusion, I assumed I had made some sort of technical error. I re-ran analyses. I got new data. Nothing worked. In the end, I had no option but to change my views.”

Something similar is true internationally. European countries seem to show more compassion than America in providing safety nets for the poor, and they give far more humanitarian foreign aid per capita than the United States does. But as individuals, Europeans are far less charitable than Americans.

Americans give sums to charity equivalent to 1.67 percent of G.N.P., according to a terrific new book, “Philanthrocapitalism,” by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green. The British are second, with 0.73 percent, while the stingiest people on the list are the French, at 0.14 percent.

(Looking away from politics, there’s evidence that one of the most generous groups in America is gays. Researchers believe that is because they are less likely to have rapacious heirs pushing to keep wealth in the family.)

When liberals see the data on giving, they tend to protest that conservatives look good only because they shower dollars on churches — that a fair amount of that money isn’t helping the poor, but simply constructing lavish spires.

It’s true that religion is the essential reason conservatives give more, and religious liberals are as generous as religious conservatives. Among the stingiest of the stingy are secular conservatives.

According to Google’s figures, if donations to all religious organizations are excluded, liberals give slightly more to charity than conservatives do. But Mr. Brooks says that if measuring by the percentage of income given, conservatives are more generous than liberals even to secular causes.

In any case, if conservative donations often end up building extravagant churches, liberal donations frequently sustain art museums, symphonies, schools and universities that cater to the well-off. (It’s great to support the arts and education, but they’re not the same as

charity for the needy. And some research suggests that donations to education actually increase inequality because they go mostly to elite institutions attended by the wealthy.)

Conservatives also appear to be more generous than liberals in nonfinancial ways. People in red states are considerably more likely to volunteer for good causes, and conservatives give blood more often. If liberals and moderates gave blood as often as conservatives, Mr. Brooks said, the American blood supply would increase by 45 percent.

So, you've guessed it! This column is a transparent attempt this holiday season to shame liberals into being more charitable. Since I often scold Republicans for being callous in their policies toward the needy, it seems only fair to reproach Democrats for being cheap in their private donations. What I want for Christmas is a healthy competition between left and right to see who actually does more for the neediest.

Of course, given the economic pinch these days, charity isn't on the top of anyone's agenda. Yet the financial ability to contribute to charity, and the willingness to do so, are strikingly unrelated. Amazingly, the working poor, who have the least resources, somehow manage to be more generous as a percentage of income than the middle class.

So, even in tough times, there are ways to help. Come on liberals, redeem yourselves, and put your wallets where your hearts are.

I invite you to comment on this column on my blog, [On the Ground](#). Please also join me on [Facebook](#), watch my [YouTube videos](#) and follow me on [Twitter](#).

Maureen Dowd is off today.

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