

**Morality and Medical Marijuana:  
The 2018 Vote on State Question 788 in Oklahoma**

John David Rausch, Jr.  
Bivins Professor of Political Science  
Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice  
West Texas A&M University  
jrausch@wtamu.edu

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## **Abstract**

At the June 2018 primary election, Oklahoma voters considered a citizen initiative to allow the licensed cultivation, use and possession of marijuana for medicinal purposes. The initiative was successful receiving over 57 percent of the vote in a state that most observers consider to be reliably conservative. Many of the post-mortem examinations consider the role rurality in the opposition to medical marijuana. The present research analyzes the role of morality in the vote differences seen in different parts of the state. Using OLS regression, this paper examines the vote on the initiative at the county-level and considers the role of religious affiliation, political party identification, and rurality in the success of the initiative. The findings suggest that support and opposition to the state question is the result of many factors.

## **Morality and Medical Marijuana: The 2018 Vote on State Question 788 in Oklahoma**

On June 26, 2018, Oklahoma voters approved a ballot proposition (called State Questions in Oklahoma) allow the licensed cultivation, use and possession of marijuana for medicinal purposes. The citizen-initiated state statute<sup>1</sup>, State Question (SQ) 788, received the support of 57 percent of the state's voters who cast ballots in the primary election. Many observers consider Oklahoma to be a politically and socially conservative state so there was significant nationwide surprise at SQ 788's success. In taking this action, Oklahoma became the 30<sup>th</sup> state to have comprehensive public medical marijuana/cannabis programs (National Conference of State Legislatures 2018). While over half the states have enacted public medical marijuana programs, SQ 788 is unique in that it was enacted without requiring specific medical conditions to qualify for a medical marijuana license. This paper assesses the county-level vote on SQ 788 to better understand the contours of support and opposition to the initiative.

### **STATE QUESTION 788 – THE MEDICAL MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION INITIATIVE**

The successful campaign to approve State Question 788 in 2018 was one of several attempts to place a proposition on medical marijuana on the Oklahoma ballot. In 2014, Oklahomans for Health circulated petitions for a statewide vote but the group was unable to obtain the required number of signatures. In 2015, Green the Vote also failed to gather enough signatures to place the issue on the ballot. Oklahomans for Health tried again in the Spring of 2016. This time the group successfully obtained the required number of signatures but the

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<sup>1</sup>It is important to note that voters in Oklahoma are able to enact both statutes and constitutional amendments through the use of the initiative process (Rausch 1998). State Question 788 is a citizen-initiated statute. Like any statute, the Oklahoma Legislature may amend and repeal a citizen-initiated statute.

proposition became the subject of a lawsuit after the group accused then-Attorney General Scott Pruitt of changing “the wording of the ballot to sound as if the state question was calling for full legalization, including recreational use.” In a short ruling issued on March 27, 2017, the Oklahoma Supreme Court sided with Oklahomans for Health and ordered that the original ballot language be restored. On January 4, 2018, Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin, a Republican, issued a proclamation scheduling the vote on medical marijuana for June 26, 2018, the same day as the state’s primary elections.<sup>2</sup> The final ballot language as seen by voters was:

STATE QUESTION NO. 788  
INITIATIVE PETITION NO. 412

This measure amends the Oklahoma State Statutes. A yes vote legalizes the licensed use, sale, and growth of marijuana in Oklahoma for medicinal purposes. A license is required for use and possession of marijuana for medicinal purposes and must be approved by an Oklahoma Board Certified Physician. The State Department of Health will issue medical marijuana licenses if the applicant is eighteen years or older and an Oklahoma resident. A special exception will be granted to an applicant under the age of eighteen, however, these applications must be signed by two physicians and a parent or legal guardian. The Department will also issue seller, grower, packaging, transportation, research and caregiver licenses. Individual and retail business must meet minimal requirements to be licensed to sell marijuana to licensees. The punishment for unlicensed possession of permitted amounts of marijuana for individuals who can state a medical condition is a fine not exceeding four hundred dollars. Fees and zoning restrictions are established. A seven percent state tax is imposed on medical marijuana sales.

FOR THE PROPOSAL – YES  
AGAINST THE PROPOSAL - NO<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Laura Eastes, George Lang, Ben Luschen, and Jacob Threadgill, “Marijuana Quest,” *The Oklahoma Gazette*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.okgazette.com/oklahoma/cover-marijuana-quest/Content?oid=3314451>.

<sup>3</sup>This language is duplicated from the sample ballot found on the website of the Cleveland County Election Board:  
<http://www.clevelandcountyelectionboard.com/sites/www.clevelandcountyelectionboard.com/files/State%20Question%20No.%20788%20Sample%20Ballot.pdf>

A close reading of the ballot language reveals a feature of the state question unique among the states that have acted on medical marijuana: there are no qualifying conditions needed to obtain a medical marijuana license. SQ 788 supporters argued that the lack of qualifying conditions allows physicians more flexibility in prescribing medical marijuana. The broad coalition opposing the question included the Oklahoma State Medical Association, the Oklahoma Hospital Association, the Oklahoma Academy of Ophthalmology, the Oklahoma County Medical Society, the Tulsa County Medical Society, among other groups of medical professionals.<sup>4</sup>

Governor Fallin's proclamation spurred a spirited campaign. Oklahomans for Health was the organization that led the drive to place the issue on the ballot. The group also participated in the campaign to approve SQ 788. Two political action committees registered to support SQ 788: Vote Yes on 788 and Oklahomans for Health SQ 788. Leading the opposition was Vote No SQ 788. According to research by the *Tulsa World*, "energy companies led the way among donors contributing funds to oppose State Question 788."<sup>5</sup> The No campaign received nearly \$1.3 million with almost half of that money coming from energy companies headquartered in Oklahoma, Colorado, and Texas. Forward Oklahoma City, a political arm of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce gave \$190,000 and the Chickasaw Nation donated \$100,000. SQ 788's opponents were primarily concerned with the impact of medical marijuana

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<sup>4</sup>"Physician Opposition to SQ 788 Speaks Volumes," *The (Oklahoma City) Oklahoman*, 22 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup>"Who Were the Biggest Donors to the Anti-SQ788 Campaign?" *Tulsa World*, 2 August 2018, [https://www.tulsaworld.com/photo/video/slideshows/who-were-the-biggest-donors-to-the-anti-sq-campaign/collection\\_18cc90d2-965a-11e8-aabb-737d495e78eb.html#4](https://www.tulsaworld.com/photo/video/slideshows/who-were-the-biggest-donors-to-the-anti-sq-campaign/collection_18cc90d2-965a-11e8-aabb-737d495e78eb.html#4); Clifton Adcock, "Campaign Filings Show Oklahoma Anti-Medical Marijuana Group was Heavily Financed by Energy Industry," *The Frontier*, 1 August 2018, <https://www.readfrontier.org/stories/campaign-filings-show-oklahoma-anti-medical-marijuana-group-heavily-financed-energy-industry/>.

use on employers. The paper found that most financial contributions to groups supporting SQ 788 came from individuals contributing small amounts. A Tulsa business owner contributed \$6,850. New Health Solutions Oklahoma, cannabis industry group, “donated about \$130,000 from April 1 to June 30.”<sup>6</sup>

Near the end of the campaign, SQ 788 opponents spent \$453,000 on advertising opposing the issue. According to one report, “The vast majority, \$443,000, went to an Oklahoma City marketing company for media buys. The remaining \$10,000 was evenly divided between Jones PR, an Oklahoma City political and public relations consulting firm catering to candidates and causes and business groups, and the Student Development Institute, a nonprofit operated by Paul Abner, an evangelist who also heads a group of religious leaders opposed to SQ 788.”<sup>7</sup>

Election day was not without some controversy. Voters in several counties reported issues in receiving ballots with State Question 788. Many of the reports appeared on social media outlets, “such as the Oklahomans for Cannabis Facebook post.” Some poll workers were asking voters if they wanted a State Question 788 ballot instead of automatically giving a ballot to each voter. All voters were supposed to receive that ballot automatically. The state election board reported correcting any problems and inconsistencies across counties.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>“Who Were the Biggest Donors to the Anti-SQ788 Campaign?”; Adcock.

<sup>7</sup>Randy Krehbiel, “State Question 788 Foes Report \$453,000 Media Buy to Combat Medical Cannabis Ballot Measure,” *Tulsa World*, 14 June 2018, [https://www.tulsaworld.com/homepagelatest/state-question-foes-report-media-buy-to-combat-medical-cannabis/article\\_e3141fa7-b7f6-54d4-ad75-992452ac6bcd.html](https://www.tulsaworld.com/homepagelatest/state-question-foes-report-media-buy-to-combat-medical-cannabis/article_e3141fa7-b7f6-54d4-ad75-992452ac6bcd.html).

<sup>8</sup>Kevin Canfield, “Election Official Acknowledges Hiccups, But Says No Widespread Problems with SQ 788 Ballots,” *Tulsa World*, 26 June 2018.

On June 26, 2018, Oklahoma voters approved SQ 788 with 57 percent of voters casting Yes votes and 43 percent voting to reject the measure.<sup>9</sup> With the statute's approval, state health officials were given 30 days to create a new medical marijuana licensing program and develop regulations to govern the marijuana processing industry. There are some interesting patterns evident in the distribution of the vote across the state of Oklahoma. The present research seeks to better understand these patterns.

### **METHOD**

To better understand the voting patterns exhibited by the vote for SQ 788, this paper replicates a method similar to the one used by Morgan and Meier (1980) in their study of voting on moral issues in Oklahoma. Morgan and Meier use multiple regression analysis to study the county-level vote on several Oklahoma ballot questions. Their dependent variable was the percentage of each county's voters who supported the question under examination. They used a number of independent variables including rural isolation, socioeconomic status, liquor consumption, and three categories of religious affiliation. They found that support for referenda on liberalizing liquor and gambling laws was found in Oklahoma counties with higher socioeconomic status, a larger percentage of the population identifying as Catholic, and smaller percentages of both fundamentalist and other Protestants (Morgan and Meier 1980; Satterthwaite 2005a). Despite the method's relative simplicity and the level at which the data are aggregated, Morgan and Meier's finding have been cited in much additional research, especially on questions related to issues of morality (Gibson 2004; Haider-Markel and Meier

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<sup>9</sup>Andrea Eger, "Medical Marijuana Passes: See How Each Oklahoma County Voted on the State Question," *Tulsa World*, 26 June 2018.

1996; LeDuc and Pammett 1995; Oldmixon 2002; Rausch 2006; Rausch 2008; Rausch 2013; Satterthwaite 2005a, 2005b; Wald, Button, and Rienzo 1996; Wilcox and Jelen 1990). Since some opponents cast their arguments on moral grounds, the present research approaches a direct replication of Morgan and Meier (1980) and Satterthwaite (2005a). This paper also is a replication and extension of Rausch (2013).

There are several hypotheses to explain voter support for SQ 788. One hypothesis is that religious affiliation is the key indicator of voting on questions like SQ 788. The coalition organized to defeat SQ 788 included several religious organizations.<sup>10</sup> The group OK Faith Leaders, led by the Rev. Paul Abner, was formed by ministry leaders who believed that the measure, as written, is so broad that it is open to widespread abuse. Abner stated that he believed that SQ 788 was a vehicle to bring legalized recreational marijuana use to Oklahoma: “State Question 788 is recreational marijuana disguised as medical marijuana and why we say this state question should absolutely not pass.”<sup>11</sup> The Catholic Archbishop of Oklahoma City, Paul S. Coakley identified the lack of qualifying conditions as a major flaw (Coakley 2018). United States Senator James Lankford (R-OK), a Southern Baptist, stated that he was troubled by “the risks marijuana poses, especially to families and Oklahoma’s economy.” He also depicted SQ 788 as a vehicle to bring recreational marijuana use to the state.<sup>12</sup> The hypothesis that evangelical Protestants and Catholics opposed SQ 788 is tempting, but troublesome. There

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<sup>10</sup>Randy Ellis, “Coalition Created to Battle Against Medical Marijuana State Question,” *The (Oklahoma City) Oklahoman*, 16 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Carla Hinton, “Faith Leaders Speak Out Against Pot Measure,” *The (Oklahoma City) Oklahoman*, 1 June 2018.

<sup>12</sup>Hinton, “Faith Leaders Speak Out.”

were a few evangelical Protestant ministry leaders who supported the state question. There also were mainline Protestant ministry leaders who opposed the question as being too broad. The OLS regression analysis reported below will demonstrate whether voting on SQ 788 broke along religious lines.

A second hypothesis considers the urban and rural population in a state. Voters in rural areas are more likely to oppose SQ 788 while those in urban area will demonstrate more support for SQ 788. The two most populous counties in Oklahoma are Oklahoma County and Tulsa County. Voters in both counties were joined by voters in Cleveland County (home of the University of Oklahoma) in exhibiting the most votes for SQ 788. Cherokee County, a more rural county in northeastern Oklahoma, had the fourth highest vote total. The five counties with the lowest support for SQ 788 are identified by the United States Bureau of the Census as being 100 percent rural.

A third possible hypothesis considers the role of political party on the vote decision. While Republican state leaders like the Attorney General worked to keep the initiative off the ballot, there is little evidence that either major political party took sides on the question. While this hypothesis has some attraction because of its simplicity, I am not convinced that there is a relationship between county party identification and vote for SQ 788. Testing this hypothesis is made easier by the fact that Oklahomans register to vote by party.

Using data collected from a variety of sources, the present research assesses the hypotheses while testing for other potential explanations of support for SQ 788. Data were collected on each of the 77 counties in Oklahoma (see Rausch 2006, 47).

The present research employs aggregate data collected at the county level. While individual-level data collected by a survey would be preferable to county-level data, the level of aggregation chosen is more practical and will allow for future comparisons across states. The reliability of the data is much greater than a survey because of issues of respondent recall. County-level data are useful for examining the political, economic, and social environment in which voters make their decisions on referenda (Giles 1977; Hero 1998; Key 1950; Morgan and Meier 1980; Oliver and Mendelberg 2000; Rausch 1994; Satterthwaite 2005a, 2005b; Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2005; Tolbert and Hero 2001).

Election return data are found on the Oklahoma State Election Board website (<https://www.ok.gov/elections/>). The data on religion were compiled by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies and published in the 2010 U.S. Religious Census (Grammich, et al. 2012).<sup>13</sup> Demographic data are from the United States Census.

## **MEASURES**

### **SUPPORT FOR STATE QUESTION 788**

The dependent variable, support for SQ 788, is measured by the percentage of voters in each of the 77 Oklahoma counties who cast a ballot in favor of the state question. The highest percentage of “Yes” votes was 64.95 percent in Cleveland County in central Oklahoma. The lowest support was 28.09 percent in Beaver County in the Oklahoma Panhandle. The mean county vote was 48.73 percent with a standard deviation of 7.83.

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<sup>13</sup>These data are published in electronic form on The Association of Religion Data Archives website: <http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/>.

## RELIGION

Data were collected on the proportion of county residents affiliated with different religions. Religion has been involved in American political life for a long time, but social scientists have only seriously researched the role of religion in politics for about the past forty years (Jelen 1998; Satterthwaite 2005a, 2005b; Wald, Silverman, and Fridy 2005; Wald and Wilcox 2006). Jelen (1998) reviews much literature that specifically examines the role of religion in political behavior. Religious conservatives became actively involved in the Republican Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s to advocate their positions on a number of social issues (Guth 1983; Oldfield 1996). It was during this period that social science experienced a growth in interest in the role of religion in American politics.

This paper incorporates three variables for religious affiliation: evangelical Protestants; mainline Protestants; and Catholics. Denominations included in the category “Evangelical Protestants” were identified by the authors of the Religious Congregations & Membership Study 2010 as follows:

Evangelical Protestant denominations emphasize a personal relationship with Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the importance of sharing faith with non-believers. Evangelical Protestantism is usually seen as more theologically and socially conservative than Mainline Protestantism, although there is obviously variation between denominations, congregations, and individuals within the “Evangelical” category (<http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/evangelical.asp>).

The proportion of Oklahoma county residents who are Evangelical Protestant is calculated from data published in Grammich, et al. (2012). The percentage ranged from a high of 132.41

percent to a low of 19.67 percent. The mean was 48.49 with a standard deviation of 17.63. I expect to see a relationship between Evangelical Protestant population and lower support for SQ 788.

There obviously is a problem with the data from Harmon County, a small rural county in the far southwestern part of the state. It is impossible that 132 percent of the population is Evangelical Protestant in part because the data indicate that there also are Catholic and Mainline Protestant residents in that county. The population in Harmon County decreased in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In 2000, the population was 3,283. By 2010, the population dropped to 2,922. The 2010 U.S. Religion Census report had a difficult time dealing with this population decrease. I controlled for this irregularity by removing Harmon County from the statistical analyses. The results with Harmon County were not much different from those without Harmon County so I kept Harmon County in the analysis. There are 77 counties in Oklahoma.

Similar data were obtained on the percentage of Mainline Protestants. . Denominations included in the category “Mainline Protestants” were identified by the authors of the Religious Congregations & Membership Study 2010 as follows:

Mainline Protestantism is a branch of Protestantism encompassing what are considered theologically liberal and moderate denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, The Reformed Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. While Mainline Protestantism is usually seen as more theologically and socially liberal than Evangelical Protestantism,

there is obviously variation between denominations, congregations, and individual with the “Mainline” category (<http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/mainline.asp>).

The range among all counties was from 2.29 to 47.80 with a mean of 11.58 and a standard deviation of 8.31. There is some conflict in the literature with some research suggesting that mainline Protestants may be more tolerant of marijuana use, especially for medical purposes.

The percentage of Catholics in each county was determined using the Religious Congregations & Membership Study. Only the category labeled “Catholic” was included in this classification. The percentage of Catholics ranged from zero to 17.01 percent. The mean was 2.61 with a standard deviation of 2.73. Counties with larger Catholic populations should exhibit opposition to SQ 788; however, it is possible that counties with larger Catholic populations are more diverse in other demographics that may lead to greater support for the state question.

#### VOTERS IN RURAL AREAS

The independent variable tapping the effect of residence in rural areas is the percentage of county residents who are rural according to the United States Bureau of the Census. For simplicity, the present research uses “percent rural”; therefore, the remainder of the county population can be considered urban. While there are several counties that have 100 percent of the population living in a rural area, the smallest rural population is 4.78 percent in Tulsa County. Only 6.28 percent of Oklahoma County is considered rural. It is expected that counties with a greater percentage of rural population will exhibit less support for SQ 788.

## POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATIONS

The third hypothesis holds that Oklahoma counties with differing proportions of party identifiers will exhibit different levels of voting on SQ 788. Oklahomans register to vote by political party. If a voter registers in a political party recognized by Oklahoma, he or she may vote only for that party's candidates in primary elections. Voters who register "No Party" (Independent) may not participate in primary elections. In the present research, each county's Republican registration was determined. The county with the fewest Republicans had 18.11 percent while the largest Republican population was 75.14 percent. The mean county Republican registration was 43.26 percent with a standard deviation of 14.26. It is expected that counties with more Republicans opposed SQ 788 at greater levels.

## CONTROL VARIABLES

Additional independent variables were used as controls in the analysis. These variables are the percentage of each county's population older than 25 with a high school diploma, each county's median age, and the median household income in each county. The percentage of each county's population who are white also is included in the analysis. The percentage of white population serves as a proxy for diversity; counties with larger percentages of white residents are less diverse.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The present research seeks to understand the vote on State Question 788 in which Oklahoma voters approved a statute allowing medical marijuana licenses. In order to allay any concerns about multicollinearity and to determine if there are any potential relationships between the independent variables, a correlation matrix was produced for all of the variables.

The matrix exhibited few surprises. The percentage of voters who supported SQ 788 presents a statistically significant, negative correlation between the vote and the measures of Evangelical Protestant affiliation and Mainline Protestant affiliation. Counties with a larger population identifying as Republican voted against SQ 788 at higher levels. Rural counties with older, more white populations also exhibited more opposition to SQ 788.

Table 1 presents a correlation analysis of several selected independent variables. While the variables present significant correlations, the only correlation of concern is the fact that rural counties appear to have older populations.

[Table 1 about here]

An ordinary least squares regression model was calculated. The results are presented in Table 2. The variables included in the model are the religious affiliation measures, the county median family income, the percent of each county's population over the age of 25 and a high school graduate, the percent of county voters registered in the Republican Party, the percent of population living in a rural area, the county's median age, and the percent of county residents who are white. This model explains about 58 percent of the variance in the county vote in support of SQ 788. The model is statistically significant.

[Table 2 about here]

The model presents two strong associations. The first is a strong, negative relationship between Republican registration and support for SQ 788. Counties that have more registered Republicans exhibited lower support for the state question. The other association is a negative one between rural population and support for SQ 788. There is a negative relationship between the percent of the population affiliating with a Mainline Protestant denomination and support

for SQ 788. Counties with more Mainline Protestants show less support for the state question. As expected, the association between the Evangelical Protestant percent and vote for SQ 788 is negative. Counties with higher median family incomes exhibit strong support for State Question 788. The other variables did not approach statistical significance.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The present research seeks to understand the relationship between morality and support for a public medical marijuana licensing program while also uncovering the political context in which the citizen initiative was approved in a political and socially conservative state. Three hypotheses were tested. The first suggests that counties with large Evangelical Protestant populations would strongly oppose SQ 788. The second hypothesis posits that rural populations will oppose SQ 788 than more urban populations. A third hypothesis is that counties with large numbers of Republican identifiers also will oppose SQ 788.

The data suggest that it is political party (Republican) and place (rural areas) that best predicts opposition to State Question 788. Religious affiliation plays a role, however, supporting a large body of research that stretches from the early 1980s. We would be able to learn more about voter support for State Question 788 by comparing the vote to the votes in other states. The challenge is that State Question 788 is unique in its lack of specification of qualifying conditions to receive a license to possess marijuana.

In November 2016, Oklahoma voters approved State Question 792 expanding the sale of alcoholic beverages. This legislatively-referred constitutional amendment allowed wine and full-

strength beer sales in grocery stores in 2018.<sup>14</sup> A comparison of the county vote for SQ 792 in 2016 and the county vote for SQ 788 in June 2016 might elucidate the continuing strength of morality in voting on issues of intoxicating substances. In addition, the groups that were successful in enacting the medical marijuana initiative continue to work for constitutional amendments and citizen-initiated statutes on recreational marijuana.<sup>15</sup> When these initiatives appear on the Oklahoma ballot, it will be possible to compare the support for the initiatives.

It is possible that recent state questions about intoxicating beverages have been cast in the light of economic development. With the declining fortunes present in the energy industry, it is likely that Oklahoma voters will be more willing to approve state questions that provide for additional state revenue through sin taxes.

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<sup>14</sup>David Dishman and Dave Cathey, "Raising a Glass: Oklahoma Begins New Era of Alcohol Availability as Changes are Enacted Across the State," *The (Oklahoma City) Oklahoman*, 1 October 2018.

<sup>15</sup>Dale Denwalt, "Recreational Cannabis Use a Possibility with Signature Campaign," *The (Oklahoma City) Oklahoman*, 10 July 2018.

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**Table 1**  
**Correlation Between Selected Independent Variables**

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
(a) Median Family Income	1				
(b) Percent Over 25 High School Graduate	-.416**	1			
(c) Percent Rural	-.293**	.538**	1		
(d) Median Age	-.363**	.555**	.645**	1	
(e) Percent White	.559**	.078	.137	.079	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2**  
**OLS Regression of County Vote on State Question 788**

	<b>Beta</b>	<b>p</b>
% Evangelical Protestant	-.253	.019
% Mainline Protestant	-.315	.007
% Catholic	.013	.892
Median Family Income	.326	.022
Percent Over 25 High School Graduate	-.070	.517
Percent Registered Republican	-.518	.001
Percent Rural Population	-.360	.002
Median Age	.156	.149
Percent White Population	-.090	.464
	$R^2 = .622$ Adj. $R^2 = .571$ $p = .0001$	