

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGION SURVEY

A new Pew Research Center survey, "Changing World: Global Views on Diversity, Gender Equality, Family Life and the Importance of Religion," offers many fascinating insights on these subjects. What it has to say about religion, in particular, has grave political implications.

Almost 6 in 10 Americans (58%) believe that religion plays a less important role today as compared to 20 years ago. Just as many (57%) believe this is a bad thing for society.

The survey also found that 73% say religion plays an important role in their lives (47% said it is "very important" and 26% said it is "somewhat important"). A Gallup poll released last December came to the same conclusion: 72% said religion was important to them.

Does this matter? Two months into his presidency, Donald Trump's job approval with those who are "highly religious" was 51%; it was 32% with those who are "not religious."

What these surveys suggest is that the issue of religion in public life could be problematic for Democrats. They are, as every survey in the past few decades suggests, the party of secularists, many of whom have grown more extreme in recent years. A look at the Platform of the two parties underscores this phenomenon.

The 2016 Republican Party Platform cites "religious freedom" six times; it also cites "religious liberty" six times. The 2016 Democratic Party Platform has no mention of "religious liberty," and its references to religious freedom, and to religion more generally, raise some serious issues.

One of the three times where "religious freedom" is cited in

the Platform is simply a nominal reference to the role of religious freedom in civil society. The other two evince the Platform's political colors.

"We support a progressive vision of religious freedom that respects pluralism and rejects the misuse of religion to discriminate." Nowhere does it define what a "progressive vision of religious freedom" means, or how it differs from other visions. But we are not left in the dark: This sentence appears in a section titled, "Guaranteeing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights."

In other words, when the First Amendment right to religious liberty collides with the non-constitutionally recognized rights of homosexuals and the sexually confused, the former must yield. The majority of Americans who think that the declining role of religion in society is a bad thing are not likely to applaud.

The other normative reference to religious liberty notes that Donald Trump's "vilification of Muslims" is proof that this "violates the religious freedom that is the bedrock of our country." It does not attempt to show a cause and effect, but it is interesting to note that the only time religious freedom is cited as "the bedrock of our country" is in reference to the rights of Muslims, not Christians or Jews (upon which our Judeo-Christian heritage is anchored).

Besides Muslims, the 2016 Platform of the Democratic Party shows great respect for the religious rights of Indians.

We are told of "our sacred obligation to the Indian nations and Indian peoples"; it fails to note how many Indian nations there are in America. No matter, we also learn of the need to respect "tribal sacred places" and of the right of Indians to "maintain and pass on traditional religious beliefs, languages, and social practices without fear of discrimination or suppression." Even the "religious rights of Native

prisoners” merit a shout-out.

If the Democrats showed as much respect for the religious rights of Christians and Jews as they do Indians, they would even the playing field with Republicans on this issue.

Finally, it is ironic to note how adamantly the Platform opposes “attempts to impose a religious test,” given the enthusiasm that leading Democrats have shown for imposing a religious test on Catholic candidates for the federal bench. So what’s the difference? The difference can be explained by what we left out.

Here is the sentence in its entirety. “We reject attempts to impose a religious test to bar immigrants or refugees from entering the United States.” Score another win for Muslims.

As the survey found, the role of religion in American society is waning, and most do not believe that is a good thing. To turn things around, we will have to have both parties committed to the religious liberties of all people of faith, and not just a few protected groups.