

# POLITICS AND RELIGION: SURVEY DATA REVEAL NEW TRENDS

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A national random sample of adult Americans was taken last spring by the Bliss Institute at the University of Akron. The results have been published as the 2004 Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, under the tutelage of John C. Green. Some interesting trends are evident, as well as a few surprises.

Data were collected on ten segments of the population: Evangelical Protestants; Mainline Protestants; Latino Protestants; Black Protestants; Catholics; Latino Catholics; Other Christian; Other Faiths; Jewish; and Unaffiliated.

Within the Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant and Catholic categories, each was further subdivided into "Traditionalist," "Centrist," and "Modernist." These subcategories were determined on the basis of the respondent's orthodoxy of beliefs and level of religious engagement. For example, Traditionalist Protestants were characterized by holding a high view of the authority of the Bible and regular attendance at religious services. Modernists were the opposite and Centrists were in between.

Within the ranks of the Unaffiliated were three groups: Unaffiliated Believers (those who claim no religious affiliation but nonetheless report a high level of religious belief); Seculars (they have no religious affiliation and report only modest religious beliefs or practices); and Atheists and Agnostics (those without any religious beliefs). While 16 percent of the population falls in the Unaffiliated category, only 3.2 percent are without any religion (5.3 percent are Unaffiliated Believers and 7.5 percent are Secularists).

Generally speaking, the more Traditional a Christian is, the more likely he is to be a Republican; conversely, the more Modernist he is, the more likely he is to be a Democrat. The Unaffiliated are mostly Democrats, as are Jews and Black Protestants. Centrists tilt towards the Republicans.

Three of every four Americans agree that organized religious groups should stand up for their beliefs, but the country is almost equally divided on the question of whether organized religious groups should stay out of politics. The public seems to be saying that it is important for religious groups to speak their mind, but they should be careful about becoming too political.

It is when the discussion turns to specific issues that things become quite revealing. On the issue of school vouchers, only 39 percent are supportive; 16 percent have no opinion; and 45 percent are opposed. Of the ten segments of the population, only among Latinos is there a majority in favor of school choice (51 percent of Latino Protestants and 58 percent of Latino Catholics champion vouchers). Among Catholics, the same portion that supports vouchers—42 percent—opposes them (16 percent have no opinion). Traditional Catholics, of course, are more likely than Centrists and Modernists to support vouchers, though even here the figure is only 52 percent.

Abortion-rights gets its greatest support from Jews and the Unaffiliated (especially Atheists and Agnostics), and its least support from Traditionalists in the Evangelical, Mainline Protestant and Catholic categories. It is striking that Latinos (both Protestant and Catholic) and Black Protestants are far less supportive of abortion than white Catholics and Protestants.

The cultural divide between whites and non-whites is most glaring when it comes to the issue of same-sex marriage, with the latter being the most opposed. Respondents were given three choices: support for traditional marriage; support for civil unions; and support for same-sex marriage. Overall, the

figures were 55 percent for traditional marriage, 18 percent for civil unions and 27 percent for same-sex marriage.

It may be surprising to learn that less than half of all Catholics (48 percent) support traditional marriage (22 percent want civil unions and 30 percent want two men to be allowed to marry). The biggest support for same-sex marriage comes from the Unaffiliated and Jews; no group is more supportive than Jews.

This issue shows how great the divide is between Traditionalists, Centrists and Modernists within the Evangelical, Mainline Protestant and Catholic communities. Traditionalist Evangelicals are the most supportive of traditional marriage (89 percent), with Traditionalist Mainline Protestants (72 percent) and Traditionalist Catholics (71 percent) as the next most supportive groups. Among Christians, the Modernists are the most supportive of same-sex marriage, with Modernist Catholics being even more liberal than Modernist Protestants.

The figures on Catholics are astounding, especially when one considers that Unaffiliated Believers are more supportive of traditional marriage than are Catholics as a whole (58 percent to 48 percent, respectively). Those who are classified as "Other Christians" support traditional marriage big time—77 percent. So do Black Protestants (72 percent are in favor). To show how Catholics have been leaning toward gay marriage, consider that while 71 percent of Latino Protestants are in favor of traditional marriage, only 52 percent of Latino Catholics are; 20 percent of the former are in favor of same-sex marriage as compared to 34 percent of the latter.

Questions on foreign policy turn up some interesting tidbits. Those surveyed were asked about the following statement: "The U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own." Overall, 37 percent agreed, 15 percent had no opinion and 48

percent disagreed.

Of all the categories, Jews disagreed the most with the idea that the U.S. should mind its own business (76 percent). It was not surprising to learn that Jews, who strongly favor a U.S. role securing a safe Israel, would take this position. Nor is it surprising to learn that Evangelical Protestants, who favor a more literalist interpretation of the Bible, would be the most likely group to agree with Jews on this issue.

What about U.S. support for Israel? Should we support Israel over the Palestinians? The American people are split on this issue with 35 percent agreeing, 38 percent disagreeing and 27 percent without an opinion. As with the previous issue, the biggest support for Israel comes from Jews (75 percent agree that we should support Israel over the Palestinians) and Evangelicals (52 percent agree).

Support for the Palestinians over the Jews was evident among Catholics by a margin of 43 percent to 31 percent. But perhaps the biggest news in this area is the support from the Unaffiliated and those who belong to faiths other than Christianity or Judaism: 53 percent of the Unaffiliated and 70 percent of the "Other Faiths" category support the Palestinians.

The "Other Faiths" category represents a small (2.7 percent) but growing segment of the population. It includes Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Unitarians and New Age advocates. Only 22 percent of them think the U.S. should support Israel over the Palestinians. Interestingly, among Atheists and Agnostics, only 15 percent side with Israel. Even among Mainline Protestants there is more support for the Palestinians than Israel (37 percent to 33 percent).

This suggests that support for Israel is tenuous, and nowhere is it weaker than among Liberals (e.g., the Unaffiliated). Evangelical Protestants, the most conservative of the groups, are Israel's best friends. This is a fascinating alignment

given that most Jews are liberals.

Everyone in the poll was asked to identify himself as either Conservative, Moderate or Liberal. Overall, the numbers were 35 percent, 43 percent and 22 percent, respectively. The most Conservative are Evangelicals; the most Liberal are those who belong to "Other Faiths," Jews and the Unaffiliated (especially Atheists and Agnostics). Latinos who are Protestant are much more likely to be Conservative (37 percent) than are their Catholic brothers and sisters (25 percent).

Perhaps the most interesting finding is among blacks. Seven-in-ten identify themselves as liberal (and only one-in-ten chooses the conservative label), yet on social issues (abortion, stem cell research, gay marriage, etc.) they are among the most conservative in the nation. To make sense of this apparent anomaly, consider the central role that the church plays in African American communities; this is the venue where conservative social values are disseminated. At the same time, however, most blacks are convinced that since the time of FDR, it is the federal government that has given them the most political rights; this explains their tendency to identify themselves as Liberals.

Finally, each respondent was asked whether his view of God was "Personal" (meaning God is a person) or "Impersonal" (meaning God is a spirit or force) or "Unsure." The overall breakdown was 40 percent, 41 percent and 19 percent, respectively. This is profound given that more than 80 percent of Americans are Christians. While Traditionalist Catholics and Evangelicals and Mainline Protestants hold to a "Personal" view of God, the Centrists and Modernists within all categories do not (the exception being Centrist Evangelicals).

Perhaps the most significant finding was found among Catholics: only 56 percent of Traditionalists, 34 percent of Centrists and 4 percent of Modernists hold a "Personal" view

of God. It seems that New Age-type spirituality has been adopted by most Catholics.

There are many conclusions that can be drawn from the data. But one thing is very clear: we are a nation increasingly split between Traditionalists and Modernists, and between the faithful and the faithless. This is at the heart of the culture war, and which way the culture swings—toward increasing religiosity or increasing secularism—will determine what our society will look like in the future.