

Newsweek Poll on religious life

Daniel Stone, April 7, 2009.

# One Nation Under God?

The latest NEWSWEEK Poll finds shifting American attitudes about religion and faith. Still, the U.S. remains a deeply religious land.

A nation facing problems of biblical proportions appears to be looking less and less to religion for answers. According to a new NEWSWEEK Poll, the percentage of Americans who think faith will help answer all or most of the country's current problems dipped to a historic low of 48 percent, down from 64 percent in 1994.

The poll also shows changing perceptions about the religious makeup of the United States and its politics. Since Barack Obama took office earlier this year, the number of people who consider the U.S. a Christian nation has fallen to 62 percent, down from higher numbers during the Bush administration (69 percent last year and 71 percent in 2005).

Last summer, when George W. Bush was still in office, one third of Americans thought that religion played too big a role in U.S. politics, compared to 25 percent who said it had too little influence. The numbers have switched in the new Obama era. Now, 26 percent think religion is too influential, compared to 31 percent who say faith doesn't carry enough weight in the political system.

"It has to do with the context of the White House," says Larry Hugick, chairman of Princeton Survey Research Associates, the firm that conducted the poll. "When you talk about religion in politics, it usually has to do with the role of evangelicals. Bush was an evangelical, but Obama isn't, so people see the leadership of the country differently now."

Sixty-eight percent said religion is losing influence on American life, up from 58 percent in 2000, 39 percent in 1984 and 32 percent in 1962. Previous periods where more than 60 percent thought religion was losing influence included 1994 and 1968.

When asked about their attitudes on social issues, survey respondents revealed a continued shift toward liberalism. One quarter of those surveyed say school boards should be able to fire homosexual teachers, down from 51 percent in a 1987 poll. Those who claim to have "old-fashioned values about family and marriage" has also decreased 13 points in that time, to a current 74 percent.

Still, Americans' personal beliefs about religion haven't changed much in the last 20 years. The number of Americans with faith in a spiritual being—nearly nine in 10—has not changed much over the past two decades, according to historical polling. Seventy-eight percent said prayer was an important part of daily life, an increase of 2 points since 1987. Eighty-five percent said religion is "very important" or "fairly important" in their own lives—a number that hasn't changed much since 1992. Nearly half (48 percent) described themselves as both "religious and spiritual," while another 30 percent said they were "spiritual but not religious." Only 9 percent said they were neither religious nor spiritual.

An interesting measurement of the poll looked at the number of people who leave one faith for another. The percentage of Americans who identify as non-evangelical Protestant (25 percent) is 5 points lower than the number who said they were raised that way. While 22 percent of respondents said they were Roman Catholic, 26 percent said they were born into Catholic families. The faith groups with net gains in believers were evangelical Protestants (29 percent compared to 25 percent who were brought up in the faith) and people who are agnostic, atheist or report no religion (also called "seculars"), up 3 points to 11 percent.

The pursuit of both religious and secular voters in the 2008 presidential race required candidates to walk a middle line, as it appears voters are evenly split on whether faith dictates their politics. The new poll measured that 51 percent of those surveyed, the vast majority of them evangelical Protestants, said their religion can have an impact on their personal politics. A bit less, 46 percent, reported that their faith is much less likely to affect how they vote on a candidate or an issue.

Measuring party identification by religion is not predicted as intuitively, but the poll shows that the GOP has lost ground to Democrats among all measured faith groups. The number of religious respondents who identify with the Republican Party has fallen nearly 10 percent among non-evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Often viewed as a Republican stronghold, more evangelicals now identify as Democrats (35 percent) than Republicans (34 percent). And other religions contain bigger divides. Among Catholics, the spread was the biggest—50 percent Democrats to 17 percent Republicans. Seculars also include a higher percentage of Democrats than Republicans (35 percent to 13 percent), but the majority (44 percent) of seculars identify as independents.

The survey was conducted among 1,003 adults, age 18 and over, on April 1 and 2, 2009. The margin of sampling error is 3.5 percentage points for results based on total adults. In addition to common sampling error, the practical problems of conducting surveys can also introduce error or bias into polls.