

U.S. religious landscape in dynamic flux: Protestants losing majority status

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A massive new study of the American religious landscape shows that Protestants are losing their majority share of the nation's population and that the country's broad religious diversity is accompanied by great shifts in religious affiliation.

The first study in recent years to combine a huge sample size with in-depth questions on Americans' religious affiliations showed that 28 percent of adults have left the faith of their childhood for another religious tradition or no religion at all. When those who have moved from one Protestant denomination to another are included, the figure leaps to 44 percent of adults.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released on February 25 the first set of results from a survey of 35,000 respondents taken between May and August last year.

"Everybody in this country is losing members, everybody is gaining members, even though . . . there are some net winners and some net losers," said Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum, in a conference call with reporters announcing the survey results. "It's a very competitive marketplace, so if you rest on your laurels, you're going to be history."

Among the most striking findings is that Protestants now constitute a slim majority—51 percent—of U.S. adults. Evangelical Protestants make up half that number (26 percent). As recently as the 1980s, similar surveys showed that Protestants constituted nearly two-thirds of the population.

The Roman Catholic Church has maintained the share of adults—about 24 percent of the population—that past studies have shown. However, Catholic numbers have been boosted in recent years by massive immigration by Latinos, the vast majority

of whom are Catholic, whereas native-born Catholics are converting to Protestantism, changing religions or leaving organized religion in significant numbers.

Mainline Protestants continue to move farther from their status as the closest thing to an established religious group that the U.S. has ever had. The study showed that Protestants affiliated with traditionally white, moderate-to-progressive denominations constitute only 18 percent of the population. Adults in black Protestant churches total 7 percent.

The decline in Protestantism is due to several factors, including declines in births and failure to attract new members and immigrants, said John Green, a Pew Forum senior scholar. "Protestantism is not just losing influence as a whole, but it is losing influence because of its divisions internally," he said.

Baptists—including those the survey counted as evangelicals and those counted as mainline or in a separate category for historically African-American denominations—have not been immune to the tendency of Americans to switch faiths. While 21 percent of adults said they were raised Baptist, only 17 percent of the population are currently members of Baptist churches. A full 8 percent of those surveyed said they were raised Baptist but no longer identify as such.

Baptists fared slightly better than Catholics. About 10 percent of those surveyed said they were raised Catholic but have left for another faith or none at all.

The ranks of the religiously unaffiliated appear to have the biggest gains. The survey found that more than 16 percent of adults are not affiliated with any particular faith or local congregation. Surveys in the past generally showed an unaffiliated figure of under 10 percent.

However, the survey did not show an increase over similar polls in the percentage of the population who consider themselves atheist or agnostic. Only 4 percent of respondents said they believe that God doesn't exist or that there may be a supreme being who does not intervene in human affairs.

At the same time, the majority of people who said they were not affiliated with a particular religion in childhood now say they are associated with a religious group. – *Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*