

On the left and right, activists are driven by religious convictions: Strong convictions, different positions

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Long-held assumptions about religious activists on the left and right have been confirmed in a new 40-page report issued in mid-September: the only thing both sides seem to have in common is that faith is a big part of their lives—bigger than among the general public.

Beyond that, the two poles differ dramatically on political priorities and biblical interpretation.

If you're a male evangelical who reads the Bible literally and views fighting abortion and same-sex marriage as the top political priorities, you're more likely to be a conservative religious activist.

On the other hand, if you're a woman who attends a mainline Protestant church, holds an expansive view of scripture and thinks health care and poverty are top priorities, you're more likely to be labeled a progressive religious activist.

The survey was released on September 15 in a week when many commentators said that the public outbursts of entertainers, athletes and politicians seemed to reflect the rising polarity and hostility in U.S. society. While religious activists might be expected to act with more civility, activists on the two sides are no less ardent about their causes.

John C. Green, one of the coauthors of "Faithful, Engaged and Divergent," said that the surveys depict two groups that aren't just at loggerheads with each other, but hold wildly different views of hot-button political issues.

“What this suggests is that these groups are talking past each other,” said Green, director of the Bliss Institute for Applied Politics in Akron, Ohio. “They have, really, very different priorities. . . . A lot of what’s going on is an argument about what the political agenda ought to be.”

The report is significant in part because it reflects dramatic changes in the nation’s faith-based activism, said E. J. Dionne, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who was invited to comment on the project findings.

“I don’t think this project would have occurred to anyone ten years ago because I don’t think people took the idea of progressive religious activism seriously ten years ago,” said Dionne, a *Washington Post* columnist. (A half-hour CBS documentary on religious advocacy, produced in collaboration with the trifaith Interfaith Broadcasting Commission, was scheduled to air September 27 on many network affiliates.)

On another trend, Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, said the survey answers questions about whether Democrats could succeed in narrowing the so-called God gap that had seen religious voters flocking to the GOP.

“Clearly, from this data, it’s not only closing,” he said. “It’s closed.”

Robert P. Jones, a coauthor of the report, said the surveys indicate differences in the ways the two groups mobilize their activism.

For example, progressive religious activists are more wired, engaging in online activism, while conservative religious activists are more involved in state campaigns and ballot initiatives. But no matter what their rate of activity, religious activists on both ends of the ideological spectrum said their faith is an important driver of their work.

“Both religious activist groups cite faith as an important factor in their voting decision,” said Jones, “but conservative activists were more likely to say that their faith was the most important factor in their voting decision.” Jones is president of Public Religion Research, which issued the report.

Widely varied responses on two issues—health care and the environment—mirror the conservative-liberal political differences in the U.S. “Only 6 percent of conservative religious activists agree that the U.S. should have comprehensive

national health insurance even if it resulted in fewer choices for patients, compared to nearly 8-in-10 (78 percent) progressives activists who agree,” noted the study’s executive summary.

“Only 13 percent of conservative activists agree that more environmental protection is needed even if it raises prices or costs jobs, compared to nearly 9-in-10 (87 percent) progressive activists who agree.”

Beyond clearly delineated differences, the groups face at least one challenge in common: the age of activists. Close to 50 percent of both groups (49 percent of conservatives and 43 percent of progressives) were older than 65.

Researchers mailed surveys to random samples of participants in major activist organizations. There were 1,886 usable responses from progressive organizations and 1,123 usable responses from conservative organizations. Among conservative groups, 54 percent identified as evangelical Protestant and 35 percent as Catholic. Among progressive activists, 44 percent identified as mainline Protestant and 17 percent as Catholic.

Some participating groups chose to remain anonymous, but progressive groups included Interfaith Alliance and Sojourners, and conservative groups included Concerned Women for America and the National Right to Life Committee. *-Religion News Service*