

Poll: Americans of all faiths see a civility problem in U.S. politics

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(RNS) Whether they rally behind Fox News' Glenn Beck to "Restore Honor" or Comedy Central's Jon Stewart to "Restore Sanity," Americans agree on one thing: our political system has a civility problem.

Four out of five Americans, regardless of party or religious affiliation, think the lack of respectful discourse in our political system is a serious problem, according to a PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll released Thursday (Nov. 11).

The findings echo sentiments expressed by a range of religious leaders, including Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary and author of "Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World," and Rabbi Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

Alarmed by the 2010 campaign season, which 4 in 10 Americans consider more negative than past elections, Mouw, Gutow and others are calling for a kinder, gentler tone -- even on hot-button topics like Islamophobia, homosexuality or abortion.

"We've had heated public debates before, but the level of discourse in this campaign and even following the campaign has been atrocious," Mouw said, citing as an example Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's pledge to prevent President Obama's reelection, as opposed to advocating

for policy shifts.

"There's a real hostility now, and Christians with very strong and more conservative convictions really don't seem to be contributing much to a civil discourse and a calming of the heated discussions in the larger culture," Mouw said.

In fact, white evangelicals and Republicans are less likely than other Americans to say the 2010 election's tone was more negative than past campaigns, which PRRI research director Daniel Cox said may reflect their satisfaction with the outcome.

Mouw has another theory: evangelicals are more accustomed to inflammatory rhetoric from the pulpit, and therefore don't see it as a problem in politics.

Other findings from the poll, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, include:

-- One-third of white evangelicals report that the election was more positive than past elections, a figure that's significantly higher than among white mainline Protestants (17 percent), the unaffiliated (17 percent) or Catholics (23 percent).

-- Two-thirds of Americans say that people in their local community work well to overcome differences, and more than eight in 10 Americans who attend religious services say people in their congregation work well to overcome differences.

-- Nearly 6-in-10 Americans think the country is more divided over

politics today than in the past; more than four in 10 Americans said the country is more divided over religion than in the past.

-- About half of white evangelicals and black Protestants think the country is more divided over religion than it was in the past, compared to less than 40 percent of Catholics and white mainline Protestants.

-- Young adults (50 percent) are less likely than seniors (61 percent) to say Americans are more divided over politics, but more likely to say Americans are divided over religion (42 percent of young adults and 33 percent of older adults, respectively).

Americans are justifiably afraid and upset about the stagnant economy and terrorism, Gutow said, but he agreed with Mouw that 24/7 cable news channels and the blogosphere have encouraged and magnified negative, fear-based rhetoric.

In his organization's new Statement on Civility, prompted by polarizing debate over Israel as well as domestic concerns, Jews agree to "treat others with decency and honor and to set ourselves as models for civil discourse, even when we disagree with each other."

The JCPA pledge has collected more than 1,100 signatures since it was launched Nov. 1, and will form the basis for dialogue amongst Jews and with people of other faiths.

"I don't think this country, and I don't think our community, are going to make good decisions if people can't talk to each other rationally and pragmatically," Gutow said. "We need to lean back, talk to each other, look each other in the eye and respect each other's humanity."

Calls for civility have clear religious roots. In Judaism, Talmudic study encourages back-and-forth conversation, Gutow noted. In the New Testament, Mouw said, the Apostle Peter tells Christians to express their convictions "with gentleness and reverence."

"In the world where our Savior has not yet returned to make all things right, we're going to have to find our way of coping in the present and trying to do as much good as we can without oppressing other people, without bearing false witness against other people," Mouw said.

"We have to defend the faith, that's clear, but it says to do it with `gentleness and reverence.'"

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll was based on telephone interviews conducted Nov. 5-8, after the midterm elections, with 1,022 U.S. adults. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.