

Catholics don't see contraception mandate as threat to religious freedom

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A vocal contingent of Republican presidential candidates and church leaders are railing against the Obama administration's "war on religion," but most Americans can't seem to find the fight.

A majority (56 percent) of Americans say religious liberty is not threatened in the U.S., according to a new poll released Thursday (March 15) by the Public Religion Research Institute, which conducted the survey in partnership with Religion News Service.

The poll, which asked a wide range of questions, also found significant support for same-sex marriage.

Even though Catholic bishops are leading the charge that the new White House mandate requiring insurance plans to cover birth control for employees is a threat to religious liberty, Catholics reject -- by a 57 to 38 percent margin -- the idea that religious liberty is under siege.

What's more, nearly two-thirds of Catholics support the contraception requirements for publicly held corporations (65 percent), compared to 62 percent of all Americans. A strong 60 percent of Catholics say religiously affiliated colleges should have to comply, compared to 54 percent of Americans in general.

Catholics would not have seemed supportive of the Obama policy had they been asked a different question, argued Sister Mary Ann Walsh, spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"If you were to ask, 'Should the government force churches to violate their religious beliefs?', you'd get different results," she said. "This is an issue of religious freedom, not one of access to contraceptives, which are ubiquitous and relatively inexpensive."

The mandate, the bishops say, tramples on religious liberties by forcing church-affiliated universities and hospitals to provide a service that Catholic teaching deems sinful.

And though a majority of Americans generally disagree with the bishops on the morality of using contraception, a significant minority (39 percent) does worry about religious freedom.

"The argument made by Catholic bishops and other religious leaders that religious freedom is being threatened is likely to resonate with a minority of the public," said Daniel Cox, PRRI's research director. "But not because of the contraception issue."

When those who perceive a threat were asked how religious liberty was being threatened, only 6 percent mentioned the new contraception mandate specifically -- a number Cox found startlingly low given how often the issue has headlined the news in recent weeks.

The most frequent response was that religion is being removed from the public square (23 percent), followed by a concern about general governmental interference in religion (20 percent).

Among those who felt religious liberty is less than secure, unsolicited responses included:

-- "I think we should have prayer in school and display the Ten Commandments and no one should take it down if we chose."

-- "Working people are not allowed to say Merry Christmas."

-- "The government is poking their nose into people's religion and telling them what they should and should not do."

Pollsters also asked the flip side of the religious liberty question: Is the principle of the separation of church and state threatened in the United States

today?

Americans divided on this question, with 45 percent agreeing that it was threatened, and 48 percent saying it was not.

Who is worried about religious liberty in America? White evangelical Protestants, the only major religious group in which a majority (61 percent) believes religious liberty is in trouble, according to the study.

That makes sense to Kenneth P. Minkema of Yale Divinity School.

"Evangelicals historically have tended to see conspiratorial forces at work," said Minkema, who teaches American religious history. "It comes in part from this sense that there's a constant struggle between the forces of light and darkness, that something is either an agent of God or the devil. It contributes to a sense of religion being under attack."

The poll also confirmed upward trends in attitudes toward gay Americans.

Last year, surveys detected for the first time that a majority of Americans support legalizing same-sex marriage. This latest poll again pins that number above 50 percent, as well as support for gay couples adopting children.

Among the findings:

- Of the 52 percent who favor gay marriage, 22 percent strongly favor and 30 percent favor it.

- Of the 44 percent who oppose gay marriage, 19 percent oppose it and 25 percent strongly oppose it.

- Most Americans (54 percent) believe gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to adopt children, while 40 percent are opposed.

The poll also found that a slight majority of Americans (52 percent) believe birth control should be generally available to teenagers 16 or older without parental approval; 46 percent disagree.

The survey of 1,007 adults has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.