

Poll shows Catholics side with bishops on religious liberty, but warm to Obama

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) A new poll shows that American Catholics tend to agree with their bishops' concerns that religious liberties are at risk in the U.S.

Nevertheless, Catholics seem to be warming to President Obama, even as the bishops lambaste his administration in their fight to roll back a federal mandate that requires employers -- with some exceptions -- to cover birth control in their health plans.

The poll, released Wednesday (Aug. 1) by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life as the contraception mandate took effect, found that among Catholics who are aware of the bishops' protests, 56 percent say they agree with the bishops' concerns, as opposed to 36 percent who disagree.

That's stronger than among Americans at large who have heard of the bishops' concerns, where 41 percent agree with the bishops and 47 percent disagree.

Catholic attitudes on the religious freedom issue seem to have changed since March, when a Public Religion Research Institute survey showed that most Catholic Americans rejected -- by a 57 to 38 percent margin -- the idea that religious liberties are under siege.

The Pew poll was welcomed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which in June launched a "Fortnight for Freedom" campaign to highlight what they perceive as threats to Americans' religious freedom.

"The positive response of Catholics who have just learned about the religious liberty campaign launched with the Fortnight is very encouraging," said Sister Mary Ann

Walsh, the USCCB's chief spokeswoman. "It has been only recently that the bishops have come to recognize the relatively new threats to religious liberty in the U.S."

As for Catholic voters' presidential preferences, 51 percent say they support or lean toward Obama; 42 percent back Romney. That's not too different from all Americans -- the poll found they prefer Obama to Romney, 50 percent to 43 percent.

Though Obama certainly hasn't locked down the crucial Catholic vote, the trend appears positive for the president. In an April Pew poll, Obama trailed Romney among Catholic voters, 45 to 50 percent.

"Catholics in recent elections tend to closely resemble the electorate as a whole," said Gregory A. Smith, the poll's lead researcher.

The poll's best news for church leaders may be their approval ratings, especially after 10 years of the clergy sex abuse scandal that took a toll on the hierarchy's credibility.

"Most Catholics are satisfied with the leadership of the Catholic church today," Smith said.

More than eight in 10 American Catholics report they are very or somewhat satisfied with the leadership provided by Catholic nuns (83 percent), and about the same proportion say the same about their parish priests (82 percent).

Seven in 10 Catholics say they are very (24 percent) or somewhat satisfied (46 percent) with the leadership of the American bishops in general, up from the 51 percent a decade ago who said they were either very or somewhat satisfied with their leadership.

The Pew poll of 619 Catholics between June 28 to July 9 has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.6 percentage points.