Unexpected results in survey on religious beliefs and identity: Challenges stereotypes of liberals and conservatives

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An ambitious Baylor University survey on religious identity and beliefs has found, contrary to some expectations, a smaller percentage of people with “no religion” and fewer people who prefer to be called “evangelicals.” It also punctured stereotypes about the faith of political liberals and conservatives.

The first wave of results from 1,721 Americans who last fall mailed back questionnaires asking 77 questions was released September 11 by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion in Waco, Texas.

About one in nine (10.8 percent) respondents have no religious ties at all. A widely used social survey from 2004 found that the so-called religious “nones” to be 14 percent of the population. But the Baylor questionnaire, unlike other surveys, asked respondents to write the name and address of a place where they worship or occasionally attend.

“Widespread speculation [about] this increased percentage of our population that are outside of organized religion really isn’t true,” said Kevin Dougherty, a member of the team of sociologists analyzing results.

Some respondents who go to nondenominational evangelical churches have been counted as unaffiliated in the past, Dougherty said. “What we’ve done is underestimate the evangelicals,” who compose one-third of American adults in this new survey, which was conducted by the Gallup Organization and funded by the John M. Templeton Foundation.

At the same time, however, only 14 percent of all respondents in the survey said that “evangelical” was the one way they would identify themselves. Top choices overall were “Bible-believing” (20.5 percent) and “born-again” (18.6 percent).

Denominational affiliation also was not a clear concept to many.

“Any politician who really wants to connect with Christians should be looking at those terms, not vague abstractions like *evangelical*,” he said.

Another research team member, Paul Froese, said the political stereotype that conservatives are religious and liberals are secular “is just not true.” “Political liberals and conservatives are both religious—they just have different religious views.”

Scholars found a reversal of opinion about the Iraq war compared to views of war in general. Those who attended church weekly, interpreted the Bible literally and were evangelical Protestants were more likely than others to say “war is always wrong.”

However, people with those same characteristics were also more likely to say the Iraq war was justified, demonstrating a high level of trust in President Bush. “You have a population who is really against war in the abstract, much more so than everyone else, but is more willing to justify the Iraq war because of this trust in a certain leader,” said Froese. “There could potentially be a religious backlash against a war under a different circumstance.”

Other sociologists, not connected to the research, said that the distinction between 14 percent religious “nones” and the lower figure found by Baylor resulted from the extended questions asked by the latter. “In a sense, both figures are accurate,” said John C. Green of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “but the 10.8 percent figure is a measure of the truly nonreligious, or fully secular, population.”

A lengthy news release on the research, posted on the Baylor Web site, said the response rate was “more than 46 percent,” a ratio some sociologists consider poor. Baylor analysts said the survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

Among other findings: The three largest religious affiliations were evangelical Protestant, 33.6 percent; mainline Protestant, 22.1 percent; and Catholic, 21.2 percent. About 28 percent of Americans have read Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, compared to 19 percent who have read a book in the Left Behind series of apocalyptic novels.