

Survey finds strength in religious left

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

A divide is developing in America about what it means to be a religious person, with a majority believing that it's about acting morally but a strong minority equating it with faith and the right beliefs.

Nearly six out of ten Americans (59 percent) say that being a religious person "is primarily about living a good life and doing the right thing," as opposed to a little over one-third (36 percent) who hold that being religious "is primarily about having faith and the right beliefs."

The findings are part of a report, released July 18, by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution that aims to paint a more nuanced picture of the American religious landscape, with the religious left particularly in mind.

"Our new research shows a complex religious landscape, with religious conservatives holding an advantage over religious progressives in terms of size and homogeneity," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI.

"However, the percentage of religious conservatives shrinks in each successive generation, with religious progressives outnumbering religious conservatives in the millennial generation (ages 18-33)."

The Economic Values Survey investigated theological, economic and social outlooks. Religious progressives are more diverse than religious conservatives, including Catholic progressives (29 percent), white mainline Protestants (19 percent), the moderate-but-unaffiliated religious (18 percent) and Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim progressives (13 percent). By contrast, 43 percent of religious conservatives are white evangelical Protestants.

"The Christian right since the 1970s has been much more of a political force in American life," Jones said. It's also easier to study because it is far more homogenous: seven out of ten religious conservatives are white Christians, compared to four out of ten on the religious left, "where a big swath of them are not Christian," Jones added.

The survey authors say this new study, which asks about a wide range of beliefs, religious and otherwise, helps clarify the broad nature of the religious left, which has been studied far less than the religious right.

“Religious conservatives are a known quantity and they play an important role in our politics,” said E. J. Dionne, Brookings senior fellow. “But this survey also shows that religious progressives are a more significant group than is usually assumed, and that there is a strong social justice constituency among religious Americans that cuts across labels.”

The gap between rich and poor, an issue raised in recent years most vocally by progressive religious groups, is considered the nation’s most pressing economic issue by only 15 percent of those surveyed, coming in fourth behind the lack of jobs, the deficit and the rising cost of health care.

However, religiously unaffiliated Americans are more likely to call economic inequality the most serious economic problem than any religiously affiliated group: 27 percent give it top billing, compared to 15 percent of mainline Protestants, 9 percent of white evangelical Protestants and 7 percent of Catholics.

While the study, consistent with previous reports, shows that religious conservatives outnumber religious progressives, it seeks to dispel what it calls the common misconception that the “right” side of the religious scale is far heavier than the “left.”

What is often not taken into account is the nonreligious, say researchers.

The “9 percent advantage religious conservatives have in outnumbering religious progressives is muted by the additional 15 percent of Americans who are nonreligious and hold similar views to religious progressives across a range of issues,” they write.

One factor shaping religious conservatives is that they are older. The survey shows that they are heavily represented among the oldest Americans (47 percent) but “make up a smaller proportion of each successive generation.” [See graph on p. 9.]

The report used respondents’ views on issues ranging from God to the Bible to the role of government in the economy to create a new scale of religiosity that divides Americans into four groups: religious conservatives (28 percent), religious moderates (38 percent), religious progressives (19 percent) and the nonreligious (15 percent).

Where do various religious groups fall on the scale?

- White evangelical Christians fall overwhelmingly (70 percent) into the conservative category.
- About four in ten white mainline Protestants (44 percent) and white Catholics (43 percent) are moderates, as are seven in ten Hispanic Catholics and more than half of black Protestants (54 percent).

- The largest group of non-Christian religious people (42 percent) is classified as progressive.
- A strong majority of the unaffiliated (59 percent) are in the nonreligious sector.

The survey of 2,002 adults was conducted between May 30 and June 16 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percentage points. —RNS/added sources

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