

Trending left

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

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According to [a recent survey](#) by the Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute, Americans remain deeply divided on economic values.

Nearly identical numbers of Republicans and Democrats say unemployment is the biggest economic problem facing the U.S. today, making jobs the top priority of survey respondents overall. But the runner-up—the budget deficit—is the chief worry of 31 percent of Republicans but only 7 percent of Democrats. Likewise, concern over income inequality breaks down along partisan lines: 21 percent of Democrats, 6 percent of Republicans.

Americans think, 54-42, that capitalism is working well or very well. But when asked if capitalism squares with Christian values, they split almost down the middle: 41 percent agree, 44 percent don't.

Only the Silent Generation (ages 66-88) thinks of itself as better off than their parents were, and the Baby Boomers agree with them that they're better off than their children will be. A minority of Generation X and Millennials think their lot in life is better than their parents'—while all generations surveyed think their children will fare worse than they did.

Racial divides are starker. Almost two-thirds of Hispanics believe that the decline of the traditional two-parent family is the primary cause of American economic woes. Nearly equal numbers of blacks disagree, while whites are evenly divided.

But the most significant findings may be religious, not economic. The survey points to generational changes in religious outlook that may upend conventional wisdom on social and political situations.

Using a new three-part model to study respondents' theological, economic and social views, the authors describe the American religious makeup as 38 percent moderate, 28 percent conservative, 19 percent liberal and 15 percent nonreligious. The GOP includes 56 percent religious conservatives, 33 percent moderates, 5 percent

liberals and 6 percent nonreligious. Democrats, on the other hand, are made up of 42 percent moderates, 28 percent progressives, 17 percent nonreligious and 13 percent conservatives.

Demographic trends don't bode well for the Republican party. The fast-growing Hispanic population is significantly more likely (23 percent) to describe itself as theologically liberal than either whites (18 percent) or blacks (14 percent). Likewise, the nonreligious—another fast-growing segment—are almost three times more likely to affiliate themselves with the Democrats.

As if that weren't enough, generational change is significantly affecting the religious landscape. While 47 percent of the Silent Generation describe themselves as religious conservatives, only 17 percent of Millennials do. The corresponding figures for religious liberalism are 12 percent and 23 percent; for the nonreligious it's 10 percent and 22 percent.

In short, Americans are becoming less white and less religious, and those who are religious are growing more theologically liberal.

And about those theological liberals. A lot has been made of [mainline Protestant decline](#) over the years. Often these denominations are berated for being too liberal, or questioned for being shrinking platforms for a liberal Christianity. It's somewhat surprising, then, to see that younger people are moving toward the progressive end of the theological spectrum. It runs counter to the dominant narrative of conservative ascendancy.

Also interesting is the study's conclusion that theological liberals and the nonreligious share very similar social and economic outlooks. Religious conservatives may outnumber liberals, then, but they are far outweighed by religious progressives and the nonreligious together—and will only be more so in years to come.

But while this survey is hardly good news for religious or political conservatives, it shouldn't be a cause for triumphalism on the other end of the spectrum. Because liberals and conservatives are unequally distributed geographically, Republicans will continue to hold seats despite shrinking as a proportion of the entire pie. And while younger people may be moving toward progressive religious views, that doesn't mean that they're choosing to affiliate with any particular church.

It certainly looks like American society is headed in a particular direction, in other words, but despite the numbers, it's far from a done deal.