News



President Donald J. Trump speaks Jan. 24, 2020, during the annual March for Life rally in Washington. The latest Pew survey on religion and politics shows a big divide between white Christian and minority Christians, and non-Christian groups over their views of Trump. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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President Donald Trump may be as divisive to religionists as he seems to be to other groups in American society, as indicated by the latest Pew Research Center survey.

"We're seeing a big divide between white Christian and minority Christians and non-Christian groups," said Pew research associate Claire Gecewicz, who was the lead researcher on the 55-page Pew survey, released March 12.

Gecewicz also cited a lengthening "bridge between white and Hispanic Catholics, especially with the questions about Donald Trump."

White Catholics increasingly believe their side has been winning politically. This Pew poll, taken Feb. 4-15, showed 55% believing that, more than double the 26% recorded in May 2016, and up from 41% from just last May.

"White Catholics are fairly high on Donald Trump," Gecewicz told Catholic News Service in a March 10 phone interview to discuss the survey findings.

In the survey, taken online, 68% of white Catholics thought "intelligent" describes Trump "very well" or "fairly well," along with 66% who said Trump "fights for what I believe in."

Among white Catholics, 29% say they agree with Trump on "nearly all" issues, while another 29% said they agree with him on "many, but not all" issues. Another 41% said they agreed with the president on "few," "almost none" or "none."

Hispanic Catholics look at Trump differently. Majorities said he was "prejudiced" and "self-centered," while minorities of 21-24% described him as "honest," "morally upstanding" and "even-tempered." Only 31% said Trump "fights for what I believe in," and just 30% agree with Trump on all, nearly all or many issues.

"These results largely reflect partisanship," Gecewicz said. "Most white Catholics said they identified with the Republican Party, and that's certainly in line with their partisan views and partisan identification."

Many of the questions, Gecewicz said, were new to the survey, and were asked in such a way that, if Pew researchers deem it necessary, can be asked again in a future election cycle or about a future president.

When asked how important certain characteristics are in a president, 93% of Catholics said they either "very" or "somewhat" want a president who "personally lives a moral, ethical life"; 73% want a president who "stands up for people with your religious beliefs"; 62% want one with "strong religious beliefs, even if they are different for your own"; and 42% want a chief executive who "shares your religious beliefs."

Yet 63% said Trump is either "not too" or "not at all" religious, while 35% said he was either "very" or "somewhat" religious. Conversely, 72% found Vice President Mike Pence very or somewhat religious, with just 18% saying the opposite. The only subgroups with majorities believing Trump to be religious were Republicans and white evangelicals.

Pew found 25% of respondents who said he has helped Catholics, although larger percentages — yet not majorities — say he has helped evangelicals and Jews. Among Catholics, 40% say he has helped evangelicals, and 26% said he has helped Catholics.

At best, Trump elicits mixed feelings among people of faith in the way he conducts himself. No religious subset recorded a majority, or even a plurality, saying they like how he comports himself. Forty-nine percent of Catholics said they don't like how Trump conducts himself, led by 59% of Hispanic Catholics.

Majorities of evangelicals, Jews and atheists said there is conflict between their beliefs and mainstream American culture. But 62% of Catholics said they see little or

no conflict between their beliefs and the culture.

By a nearly 3-to-1 margin, survey respondents said Christianity's influence in society was decreasing. Catholics mirrored that mindset, with 49% agreeing, but 17% saying Christianity's influence was increasing. But 27% of Catholics said it was a temporary change that could reverse itself, while 22% said they saw the decline as permanent.

Majorities of those who found Christianity's influence declining cited growth in the number of Americans who are not religious, more permissive attitudes about sexuality and sexual behavior in popular culture, and "misconduct by Christian leaders." Fully 66% of Catholics saw misconduct as a reason for Christianity's waning influence — the largest percentage recorded by any religious group, or for any of seven possible reasons suggested.

According to Gecewicz, Pew has a pool of roughly 13,000 U.S. residents to participate in its ongoing "American Trends" series of surveys. From that group, 7,855 were selected to participate in this poll. Of the 7,855, 6,395 panelists did so, an 81% response rate. In that group, weighted to reflect their presence in the population, were 687 white Catholics and 421 Hispanic Catholics. The latter's presence in the U.S. population is larger than that of atheists and agnostics — of which just under 400 of each were surveyed — but less than black Protestants, of which 580 were polled.

The margin of error is plus or minus 1.6 percentage points overall, 3.7 percentage points for all Catholics, 4.3 percentage points for white Catholics and 7.1 percentage points for Hispanic Catholics.

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