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Survey: Alaskans less religious than most Americans

by Tim Murphy by Religion News Service

While Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's staunch evangelical conservatism may appeal to her party's Christian base, the Alaska governor's home state ranks among the nation's least religious.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Alaskans are less likely to believe in God, pray, or attend religious services than the national average, and most residents share a libertarian view that the government should be less involved in issues of morality.

Just 37 percent of Alaskans say religion is "very important" in their lives, compared to 56 percent of Americans nationwide. Only 22 percent of the state's respondents attend religious services at least once a week -- 17 points lower than the national average. Nearly half, 47 percent, of Alaskans say they "seldom" or "never" attend religious services.

Only residents of New Hampshire and Vermont (36 percent each) said religion was less important.

Pew's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, which was released last spring, surveyed 200 Alaskans and more than 35,000 Americans nationwide. Alaska's results did have a relatively high margin of error of plus or minus 7.5 percentage points, however, due to the small sample size.

The study's findings place Alaska in line with other states in the Pacific Northwest, including Washington and Oregon, which both boast high numbers of unaffiliated residents.

Mark Silk, a professor of religion in public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., said the high numbers of unaffiliated Alaskans reflect the region's "frontier" mentality.

"All of these areas are places with lots of wilderness, and essentially people headed into them not only leaving behind, but wanting to leave behind, prior associations," said Silk, who co-authored a book about

religion and public life in the Northwest.

Evangelical Protestantism is the state's most popular affiliation, with 26 percent of the population identifying themselves as such. Just 14 percent of Alaskans are Catholic.

Alaskans do agree with the rest of the country when it comes to issues such as abortion and homosexuality, but are less inclined to view them as political causes. Sixty-two percent of Alaskans "worry the government is too involved" in issues of morality, compared to 52 percent of Americans nationwide.

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