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Poll: Catholics side with bishops on religious liberty

by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- A new poll shows that American Catholics tend to agree with their bishops' concerns that religious liberties are at risk in the United States.

Nevertheless, Catholics seem to be warming to President Barack Obama, even as the bishops lambaste his administration in their fight to roll back a federal mandate that requires employers -- with some exceptions -- to cover birth control in their health plans.

The poll, released Aug. 1 by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life as the contraception mandate took effect, found that 56 percent of Catholics aware of the bishops' protests agree with their concerns, as opposed to 36 percent who disagree.

That's stronger than among Americans at large who have heard of the bishops' concerns, where 41 percent agree with the bishops and 47 percent disagree.

A March Public Religion Research Institute survey showed that most Catholic Americans rejected -- by a 57 to 38 percent margin -- the idea that religious liberties are under siege.

The latest Pew poll came on the tails of the bishops' "Fortnight for Freedom" campaign to highlight what they perceive as threats to Americans' religious freedom.

"The positive response of Catholics who have just learned about the religious liberty campaign launched with the Fortnight is very encouraging," said Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, chief spokeswoman for the U.S. bishops' conference.

Among presidential candidates, Catholic voters in the poll supported Obama over Romney, 51 percent to 42 percent, similar to Americans in general, who prefer Obama to Romney 50 to 43. In an April Pew poll,

Obama trailed Romney among Catholic voters, 45 to 50 percent.

The poll also found that more than eight in 10 American Catholics report they are very or somewhat satisfied with the leadership provided by Catholic nuns (83 percent), and about the same proportion say the same about their parish priests (82 percent).

Seven in 10 Catholics say they are very (24 percent) or somewhat satisfied (46 percent) with the leadership of the American bishops in general, up from the 51 percent a decade ago who said they were either very or somewhat satisfied with their leadership.

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