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Religious caricatures undermined by data

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American believers are often pictured as red-neck conservatives who support Republican causes. There are other religious caricatures as well:

- Millennials are more likely to be religiously conservative than baby boomers.
- Most religious progressives are mainline Protestants not Catholics.
- Catholics are a significant part of the conservative religious coalition.
- Hispanics are more theologically conservative than white Americans.
- On economic issues, white Catholics are closer to white evangelicals than mainline Protestants.
- Hispanics are more socially conservative than white Catholics.

Every one of these statements is false, according to a study released this week by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution. They developed a new religious orientation scale that combines theological, economic and social outlooks to classify respondents.

It is true that there are more religious conservatives (28%) in the United States than religious progressives (19%), but the largest group is still religious moderates (38%).

The good news for religious progressives is that they are significantly younger than conservatives. The average age of religious progressives is 44, while it is 53 for religious conservatives. Only 17% of Millennials are religious conservatives. The idea that there are large numbers of young religious conservatives is a myth.

Catholic progressives will also be happy to know that they make up the largest block (29%) of religious progressives, followed by white mainline Protestants (19%). Not surprisingly, white evangelical

Protestants constitute the biggest group (43%) among religious conservatives, followed by Catholics (17%). It is the leadership of the Catholic bishops that makes people believe that Catholics are a significant portion of the conservative religious coalition. The data say otherwise.

The bad news for Catholic progressives is that although they make up the biggest bloc of religious progressives, they are still a small minority in their own church. But this is also a fact of life for most progressive Protestants.

For example, when we separate out the PRRI theological scale from the economic and social scales, we find that 38% of the country is theologically conservative, 28% are moderates and only 19% are liberal. An additional 15% are nonreligious. Contrary to stereotype, Hispanic Americans are more likely to be theologically liberal (23%) than whites (18%) or blacks (14%).

Catholics are more evenly split on theological grounds than the country at large with 29% conservative and 28% liberal. (Numbers for Hispanic Catholics were not given in the report.)

When PRRI and Brookings looked at economic issues, they found that 25% of Americans are economic conservatives, 42% moderates and 34% liberals. Not surprisingly, whites were more likely to be economic conservatives (34%) than were blacks (4%) or Hispanics (7%).

Catholics do not stray much from the national numbers with 24% economic conservatives, compared to 32% who are economic liberals. Hispanic Catholics, who are 40% economic liberals, help push up the liberal tally since only 26% of white Catholics are economic liberals, almost the same as for white mainline Protestants (28%). White evangelicals are more likely to be economic conservatives (44%).

The third scale in the study deals with social issues (same sex marriage and abortion). The country as a whole is 29% social conservative, 46% moderate and 24% liberal. Catholics, as other studies have shown, are less conservative than the population at large with 55% moderates and 21% liberal. Again, it is the Hispanics who help make the Catholic population less conservative. Hispanic Catholics (67%) are more likely than white Catholics (51%) to be social moderates.

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There are lessons in this data for different people.

- The lesson for politicians is, "White Catholics are not like white evangelicals. White Catholics are susceptible to economic arguments from the Democratic Party."
- The lesson for the bishops is, "Don't expect Hispanics and Millennials to support a conservative agenda either in the church or in politics."
- The lesson for progressive Catholics is, "You are still a minority in the church and society at large."

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