

Dip in U.S. support for LGBTQ rights across religious groups

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(RNS)—While most Americans continue to broadly support LGBTQ rights, that support may be waning, including among religious Americans, according to a new poll from PRRI.

The report, based on interviews with more than 22,000 U.S. adults in 2023, found Americans are slightly less likely to support same-sex marriage and LGBTQ nondiscrimination protections and less likely to oppose allowing business owners to refuse to serve LGBTQ people for faith reasons, compared with the year before.

“I think the big story is that most Americans of faith are broadly supportive of LGBTQ rights,” said Melissa Deckman, CEO of PRRI. “However, we do see slight declines in three of the questions we tracked when it comes to Americans’ attitudes on LGBTQ rights. ...That was somewhat surprising to us.”

Deckman said for groups who advocate for LGBTQ rights, this data is akin to “a canary in the coal mine.”

Percentage declines

Seventy-six percent of American adults reported supporting LGBTQ nondiscrimination policies in public accommodations, housing and employment, the survey found, down from 80 percent the year before.

The majority of respondents from most faith groups also embrace LGBTQ nondiscrimination laws, though many religious groups saw slight drops in

support from 2022. Among Muslims, for example, PRRI reports a drop from 70 percent support in 2022 to 56 percent in 2023. White evangelical Protestants saw a drop from 62 percent to 56 percent, and Hispanic Catholics from 86 percent to 78 percent.

A majority of Americans (67 percent) also continue to support same-sex marriage, though that number was down 2 percentage points from the previous year.

While majorities of all but a handful of religious groups favor legal recognition of same-sex marriage (most Jehovah's Witnesses, white evangelical Protestants, Muslims, Hispanic Protestants and Latter-day Saints are in opposition), many groups also saw dips in support. The biggest drops in support were among Hispanic Catholics, with a decline of 7 percentage points from 2022, and Muslims, which dropped 13 percentage points.

Since PRRI began tracking the issue in 2015, a majority of Americans have opposed allowing a small-business owner to refuse services to LGBTQ people for religious reasons. As in the other categories, that majority still stands, but fell from last year. In 2023, 60 percent of Americans said they were opposed, compared with 65 percent in 2022. Dips also were seen in nearly every religious group.

Across all three policy categories, Unitarian Universalists, the religiously unaffiliated, Jewish Americans and non-Hispanic Catholics of color consistently showed the highest support for LGBTQ rights, while Jehovah's Witnesses, white evangelical Protestants and Hispanic Protestants showed the least support.

Reasons for decline

Deckman partially attributed the declines in support to political polarization, and specifically to the divisiveness around LGBTQ policies, including bathroom policies and laws impacting gender affirming care.

“Republicans have very strategically, I think, used that as a wedge issue,” said Deckman. “What might be happening, though it’s hard really to tell from this one cross section, ... is that continuing to talk about LGBTQ identity and emphasizing the division among Americans in terms of transgender issues is having a larger impact on Americans’ attitudes about LGBT rights more broadly.”

These observations are reflected in the findings, which showed that while Democrats’ support for LGBTQ rights remained steady across all three measures, there was a drop in support among Republicans compared with last year.

Political ideology also seems to be a factor. PRRI found support for Christian nationalism—which Deckman defined as the idea America was founded as a Christian nation, and should remain so—is negatively correlated with support for LGBTQ rights across all 50 states. As states scored higher on PRRI’s Christian nationalism scale, support for same-sex marriage, support for LGBTQ anti-discrimination laws and support for opposing religious refusals to LGBTQ customers decline.

“We often assume in public opinion, when it comes to LGBTQ issues, that Americans are destined to become far more embracing of the rights to LGBTQ Americans,” said Deckman. “But this data shows you that that assumption of more progressive and accepting attitudes toward LGBT Americans shouldn’t necessarily be taken for granted.”