

US-born Latinos more likely to be ‘nones’ than Catholic


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WASHINGTON (RNS)—While Catholicism continues to lose more Latinos than any other religious group, it still remains the largest faith of U.S. Hispanic adults, even as an increasing number identify as religiously unaffiliated, a new Pew Research Center survey found.

Former Catholics have cited the clergy sexual abuse scandal, a lack of LGBTQ inclusivity and the rule that women can't be priests as reasons for leaving the church, with Pew finding the share of Latinos identifying as Catholic dropping from 67 percent in 2010 to 43 percent in 2022.

The Pew survey, which released its report April 13, surveyed 3,029 U.S. Latino adults in August last year and asked respondents about their religious upbringing to learn “how that compares with their current religious identity.”


Among the 65 percent who said they were raised Catholic, 23 percent said they no longer identified as such.

“They’ve left the Catholic church, but they now identify with some other faith or no faith at all. That’s a pretty steep decline,” Pew researcher Besheer Mohamed told Religion News Service. 

Still, Latinos remain about twice as likely as U.S. adults overall to identify as Catholic, and considerably less likely to be Protestant. Meanwhile, the share of Latinos who say they are atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” stands at 30 percent, up from 10 percent in 2010 and from 18 percent a decade ago in 2013, according to Pew.

Additionally, U.S.-born Latinos are less likely to be Catholic (36 percent) and more likely to be unaffiliated (39 percent) than older Hispanics and those born outside America.

The number of religiously unaffiliated Latinos is on the rise, but as Mohamed noted, overall “it’s still a minority,” considering the 70 percent who continue to identify with a religion. Beyond that, even the unaffiliated are not “completely secular,” Mohamed said.

The Pew study found a substantial minority (29 percent) of Latinos who don’t have a religion continue to pray at least weekly. 

Protestants are the second-largest faith group after Catholics, accounting for 21 percent of Hispanic adults, a share Pew reports has been relatively stable since 2010. During this time, Latino Protestants have been more likely to identify as evangelical or born-again (15 percent) than to say they are not (6 percent), according to Pew.

Religion has been referred to as the “largest demographic divider among Hispanic Americans,” according to a 2020 analysis from the Public Religion Research Institute, which found Latino Protestants are more conservative, Republican and supportive of former President Donald Trump than Latinos who are Catholic or religiously unaffiliated.

With U.S. Latinos regarded as the fastest-growing racial and ethnic group, Republicans, conservative pastors and right-wing organizations have centered faith in their outreach to Latino voters, particularly those who identify as evangelical.

Pew found 28 percent of Latino Republicans say they’re evangelical Protestants, compared with the 10 percent of Latino Democrats who say the same. Latino immigrants also are more likely than U.S.-born Latinos to be evangelical (19 percent vs. 12 percent). Evangelicalism was found to be

particularly widespread among Latinos with Central American origins.

In the survey, about 31 percent of Central Americans identified as evangelical Protestants, a higher share than among Puerto Ricans (15 percent) and Mexicans (12 percent).

When looking at Latino evangelical Protestants, half identified with the Republican Party or said they were independents who lean toward the GOP, with 44 percent identifying as Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents.

Among Latino Catholics, in contrast, 21 percent said they were Republicans, while 72 percent identified as Democrats. Religiously unaffiliated Latinos are also heavily Democratic (66 percent Democratic vs. 24 percent Republican), according to Pew.

Jonathan Calvillo, an assistant professor of Latinx studies at Emory's Candler School of Theology, previously told RNS that "religious nones will likely support more progressive political positions, while evangelicals will lean more conservatively."

Calvillo noted even as Latino Protestants don't always lean Republican, the voices that speak for them are often more conservative, leaving him to wonder: "To what extent are Latino Protestants being pushed in this direction?"