Most Americans support church-state separation

November 1, 2021

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Americans do not want to see the United States declared a Christian country, and they do not want to forsake the separation of church and state, a [new Pew Research study](#) finds.

The study, a first-of-its-kind, conducted online in March among 12,055 Americans, finds even among highly religious Christians, only a third said the United States should abandon its adherence to the separation of church and state or declare the country a Christian nation.

Pew never before asked specific questions about American views on the separation of church and state or attempted to gauge what other researchers have termed Christian nationalism. So, it's impossible to gauge whether support for these issues has risen or fallen.

But as a baseline, it shows 67 percent of Americans believe the U.S. Constitution was written by human beings and is not God-inspired. Most Americans also reject the idea the federal government should advocate for Christian values; 63 percent said it should advocate for values shared by many faiths.

"It is clear in the data that there is a lot more support for the idea that church and state should be kept separate than for the idea that church and state should intermingle," said Gregory Smith, the lead researcher for the Pew study.

Pew intends to continue tracking public opinion on the issue in coming years.

Division on specific church-state issues

But the survey also found Americans were divided on some church-state issues.

Three in 10 said public school teachers should be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers, a practice that the Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional. And nearly 4 in 10 said it's OK to put up Christian symbols in the public square.

Nearly a quarter of Americans refused to answer the questions or said they had no opinion—suggesting some ambivalence on the subject.

Trump supporters—some holding Bibles and religious banners—gather outside the Capitol, Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

Andrew Whitehead, a sociologist who has studied Christian nationalism, along with fellow sociologist Samuel Perry, said the timing of the survey, less than two months after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, may be partly responsible for why so many declined to answer Pew's questions on the subject.

"It could be that in that moment there was a lot of talk about the role of Christianity in the insurrection, and people may have been hesitant to share or maybe they're reevaluating," Whitehead said.

As expected, the survey found more Republicans than Democrats said they want a prominent place for Christianity in U.S. national identity. Still, 58 percent of Republicans said the federal government never should declare any religion as the official religion. Democrats were near unanimous in their support for a separation of church and state.

Perhaps more important, the survey corroborates data collected by other researchers showing those who say Christianity should be accorded an official status in the nation's identity share many of the same views on race and immigration.

"Among white people, Christian nationalism is linked with support for the Republican Party, enthusiasm for Trump, hostility toward immigrants and denial that racism is pervasive or systemic in America," the study found.

The only white Americans who differ are Democrats.

Whitehead, whom Pew consulted with on the study, said it further substantiated what he and his team have found.

"What this Pew report shows, and what we're finding in our work, is that for white Americans a desire to see Christianity privileged in the public sphere really has to do with privileged access to political and cultural power and that's over and above the effects of political party and ideology," Whitehead said.

"There's something unique about wanting to see this brand of Christianity central to the culture that aligns them very similarly toward race, immigration and politics."