

Editorial: What we can do about declining Christian influence

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More and more U.S. Christians—particularly evangelicals—think they’re losing influence and feel embattled. They also say they want politicians to help rectify the situation. But maybe they should try to win their culture wars by lovingly influencing their neighbors and telling the politicians to butt out of religion.



Editor Marv KnoxTwo new polls document Americans’ attitudes about the place of religion in society. The results may be alarming, but they’re not shocking.

Seventy-two percent of the nation’s adults think “religion is losing influence in American life,” according to [a Pew Research Center survey](#). That’s an increase of 5 percentage points since 2010 and the highest level in more than a decade.

The degree to which Americans think religion’s loss of influence is bad varies by race/ethnicity and faith. Not surprisingly, white evangelicals bemoan it most, with 80 percent citing the declining influence as a negative development. White mainline Protestants followed, at 79 percent, with white Catholics next at 77 percent. Seventy-two percent of black Protestants see the trend negatively, as do 59 percent of Hispanic Catholics.

Interestingly, 70 percent of the religiously unaffiliated think the declining trend is detrimental.

The Pew Center survey also asked Americans which groups face “significant discrimination” in society. The national results ranked gays and lesbians at the top, with 65 percent agreeing homosexuals are discriminated against. Atheists came in second, at 59 percent, and white evangelicals trailed far behind, at 31 percent.

Evangelicals as ‘victims’

But that’s not how white evangelicals see it. Fifty percent of that group think of themselves as victims. That 19 percentage-point gap in social perception is “directly related to the current political climate, with all the voices of Republicans in the 2012 presidential campaign claiming there’s a ‘war on religion,’” Notre Dame political science professor David Campbell told Religion News Service.

And [a poll](#) conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute shows white evangelicals, above all Americans, worry about that so-called “war on religion.”

The PRRI survey asked which is most concerning: Government interfering with Americans’ ability to “freely practice their religion” or “religious groups trying to pass laws that force their beliefs on others.”

Among all Americans, the results tied. Forty-six percent of respondents said they agree with each viewpoint, according to an RNS report.

But when examined by groups, Americans are divided.

Two-thirds (66 percent) of white evangelicals said they are significantly more worried about government interference. But 61 percent of “nones”—who claim no faith group—and 51 percent of Catholics expressed

fear of religious domination.

Evangelicals feel they are on “the losing side of the culture wars, such as gay marriage, and they see that their share (of society) is shrinking and aging, adding to their sense of being embattled,” PRRI head Robert Jones told RNS. “They can no longer say confidently they speak for all people of faith.”

Greater involvement in politics

Now, increasing numbers of Americans desire greater involvement of religion in politics. The Pew Center study showed:

- Almost half (49 percent) of Americans want churches and other houses of worship to “express their views on day-to-day social and political issues.”
- Six in 10 (59 percent) want members of Congress who have strong religious beliefs.
- About one-third (32 percent) affirm clergy endorsing political candidates from the pulpit. That’s up from 24 percent just four years ago.

In the survey results, white evangelicals demonstrate the strongest support for mixing politics and religion. They showed the highest affirmation (42 percent) for church endorsement of political candidates and (83 percent) for more members of Congress with strong religious beliefs.

Here’s an irony: Of all society, the group who trust politicians the least—white evangelicals—want politicians to be more overtly religious. Has it occurred to them maybe the pols might mess up religion, too? Have they considered the possibility a majority of Americans might elect politicians whose sincere religious beliefs are worlds apart from their own?

What to do now

What we think about the trend line for religious influence on culture really is beside the point. The subsiding sway faith holds over society at large seems demonstrable. The important point is what to do now.

Religion would not have lost so much influence if religious leaders had not squandered their influence and so many religious people had not placed their faith in politicians instead of Jesus.

For decades, many of America's loudest religious leaders focused so passionately on fighting selected sins, they seemed to forget about telling people about God's transformative grace. It's no wonder people came to believe the church—and, by extension, God—is against them. Why would they ever consider loving our Lord if all they hear leads them to believe God hates them? I can't recall a Christian leader who said, "Hate the sin and love the sinner" who acted like he actually loved sinners.

Selective preaching also devalued religion in American life. The most prominent pulpits made sure to preach against sexual sins. But they remained silent about greed, corruption in high places, injustice, societal division, misogyny and the like. Sometimes, it seemed as if their Bibles contained extra pages of the Law and carefully selected passages of the epistles, but not much from Jesus, and certainly not Amos and Isaiah.

Then, to make matters worse, too many religious leaders panicked and cast their lot with politicians. They got played for their votes but received nothing in return. And then, when scandal and sanctimony coincided, Jesus got the black eyes.

Love and respect

So, what to do about the declining influence of religion in America?

Win it back, one loved soul at a time. If we want to gain greater influence in society, we need to be the kind of people others admire, respect and want to emulate. They won't come to that conclusion by being upbraided and chastised. They won't reach that decision by being doctrinally reprimanded.

They'll move closer to Jesus and begin to appreciate his church when they are heard. When their needs are met. When they sense respect. When they feel loved.

Only then. Not before.