

Religion in Politics

By John Nienstedt

Mixing Religion with Politics: Cream and Coffee or Oil and Water?

The current KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll finds a wide range of attitudes toward the role of religion in politics. While 22% feel religion plays too little of a role in politics, 36% argue that it takes center stage too often. Another 42% believe politics has about the right amount of religion in it. Residents tend to equivocate when it comes to the influence of religion in the world today. Forty percent say it produces both good and bad results and 32% say what results a religion produces depends on the religion itself. In the distinct minority are residents who see a positive (19%) or negative (6%) effect. Residents are again divided when it comes to the separation of church and state doctrine. Forty-three percent say it has been taken too far from its roots in the Constitution's first amendment. On the other side, 15% believe the doctrine has not been taken far enough. That leaves 41% in the middle who feel things are about right. There are also stark differences when it comes to presidential candidates and their religion. Overwhelming majorities would vote for a qualified Christian for President, but the numbers slide significantly when a "born again Christian" is contemplated. A Muslim candidate would have more trouble getting elected and an atheist, while garnering substantial support would be a polarizing figure as 24% say they "would definitely not" vote for such a candidate.

How Religiously Observant is San Diego County?

The survey finds that 32% here in the County go to religious services on a weekly basis. That falls precisely in line with current national surveys. On the other hand, 26% never attend church. That leaves 18% who attend once or twice a month, 14% who go once or twice a year and 10% who find themselves at religious services less than once or twice a year.

San Diego's weekly attenders are far more ideologically conservative and those who attend services more than once a week are even more conservative. From a political perspective, church-goers are more important than those who never attend church because they participate in the process more often. Eighty-seven percent of those who attend church more than once per week say they are voters and 82% of once-a-week attenders are registered. On the other hand, only 76% of those who never attend church are registered to vote.

Frequent church-goers are also likely to be married or widowed while just 29% are single or divorced. Among non-attenders that latter figure swells to 50%! Annual income is also a distinguishing characteristic, as regular attenders, especially those going more than once a week, tend to earn much less money.

The survey finds that those residing in the eastern suburbs (the area in and around La Mesa, El Cajon, Santee, Lakeside and Spring Valley) are much more religious than those in other areas. Forty-five percent there attend services every week and just 16% never attend. In contrast, the least religious regions are the north San Diego city and north coastal areas of the county.

Finally, the survey turned up an interesting finding related to the cycle of life. Frequent church attenders tend to be at the extremes in terms of age. That is, both the youngest adults and the oldest tend to attend church more often than those between the ages of 25 and 75. This leads to the hypothesis that church serves to connect elderly folks to the younger segment of the community while young people are able to absorb the wisdom of their elders.

Religion's Influence

With the sex abuse scandals surrounding Roman Catholic priests and in the post-9/11 world of Islamic suicide bombers one can ask, is religion helping or hurting society?

Perhaps it is a sign of the times, therefore, that almost three-quarters either say “it depends” on the religion or equivocate even further by saying religion produces both good and bad influences.

Naturally, those who are more religious tend to take a more positive view. Over one-third of weekly attenders say religion exerts a positive influence while 36% say its influence depends on the religion itself. These folks evidently tend to be discriminating and feel there is a kind of hierarchy of religions. On the other hand, those who never attend services are far more likely to say religion produces both good and bad results. Only 29% in this group believe it depends on the religion and just 3% say it has a largely positive effect on the world. These folks are clearly more likely to feel “all religions are the same” and lump them together.

Political ideology is also closely related to a person’s view of religion. Twenty-one percent of very liberal residents believe religion is a negative force in the world, while just 6% say it is largely positive. The bulk of liberals feel religion produces both good and bad results. However, among very conservative residents the dominant view is that whether religion has a positive or negative impact depends on the religion itself.

Another fascinating element is income. Those who earn more tend to see religion as producing both good and bad results. Middle-income residents tend to be split between that view and more positive views of religion. On the other hand, those earning less than \$20,000 more often see religion as a positive influence.

The survey finds subtle differences between men and women on this question. Men tend to focus more on the religion itself, while women are more likely to lump all religion together and say it exerts both positive and negative influences.

Finally, the survey shows that opinions about religion’s influence are significantly more positive in the northern I-15 corridor. It is interesting that residents in the area to its

west – the north coastal region – are much less likely to take a positive view of religion.

How Much of a Role Should Religion Play?

Opinions here are wide-ranging. Though the most common response is that about the right amount of religion finds its way into politics and elections, significant numbers can be found on either side of this issue.

Again, church attendance is at the center of debate. But what is most interesting is that even those attending church on a regular basis generally tend to believe there is enough religion in politics. While 31% say more religion should be injected, 55% say it is at the right amount and another 14% believe there is too much religion in politics. The main interaction here is between non-attenders and their view of the situation. Fifty-six percent of them believe there is too much religion in politics today. Even 48% of those who attend church infrequently say politics has too much religion in it.

As in the debate over religion's influence in society at large, ideology and income also bear on a person's view of its role in politics and elections. Very liberal residents are basically aghast at the role religion is playing in politics today with 72% saying it is too involved. Even moderate liberals tend to feel the same way. And, as evidence as to how far the pendulum has actually swung, conservatives are not necessarily arguing for more religion in politics. Rather most say things are currently about right.

The results relating to income are again intriguing. Affluent residents are generally more likely to believe that religion is too much a part of politics while low income residents are satisfied with the amount religion in politics. Could it be that upper income residents tend to see religion as a distraction? Is it their view that politics, and by extension, government gets away from executing a core responsibility when religion is injected into the process?

Finally, another element to the debate over the amount of religion in politics is sexual. Specifically, non-heterosexuals are almost united in their belief that politics is being overrun by religion. Considering the recent influx of so-called moral issues, especially same-sex marriage, on the political consciousness, this is not surprising.

Separation of Church and State: Too Far from its Constitutional Beginnings?

Forty-four percent say that the doctrine of the separation of church and state, when compared to the US Constitution's first amendment, has gone too far (28% feel strongly that things have gone too far), while 42% believe the judicial system has positioned it properly. With only 15% saying the doctrine has not gone far enough, and more barriers between church and state need to be erected, the weight of opinion is certainly on the side of the strict Constitutional constructionists.

Though it plays a big role, church attendance is not the preeminent factor driving opinions in this case; ideology is. This belies the more political and less religious nature of the debate. After all, this is an argument over the interpretation of laws, not religion per se. The far right strongly side with those who think things have gone too far. Moderate conservatives are, naturally, more moderate in their views, though they generally feel the level of church/state separation has gotten out of hand. But what's particularly interesting is that liberals, instead of arguing for more separation, are split on the issue. About 45% fall in the middle while about 25% to 30% place themselves on either side of the debate.

Similarly, those who never or rarely attend religious services tend not to be suggesting that further separation of church and state is appropriate. More than anything, they appear content with the status quo. On the other hand, it is the frequent attenders who usually believe things have gone to far.

The survey also finds that a person's marital status is important when considering the amount of separation between church and state. Whether it is because they are more likely to have children who have had to endure secular public schools where formerly religious holidays have been stripped of their Christian connotations, or whether it is due to the debate over the saying of the pledge of allegiance, married folks are far more likely to believe that things have gone too far. Half believe this to be the case and 34% strongly so.

Religion: the Third Rail of Presidential Politics

Though social security is often called the third rail of American politics (candidates who touch it are liable to be burned to a crisp), this survey suggests that a candidate's religion produces very sharp reactions. To accurately assess the impact of a candidate's religion, we randomly assigned one of four questions to each respondent:

“Regardless of who you may support or oppose in the upcoming Presidential election, let's say someone was running for President who you thought was qualified on the issues and was a [Christian/born-again Christian/Muslim/atheist]. Do you think you would definitely, probably, probably not or definitely not vote for that candidate?”

The responses clearly show that a Christian presidential candidate is the standard and creates few ripples. Just 9% say they would not vote for such a candidate and only 3% say they definitely would not. The results were notably less favorable among unmarried individuals. Note that those who never attend church are not significantly less likely to vote for a Christian candidate.

Born-again Christian candidates would encounter significant resistance and 30% would not vote for such a candidate (10% definitely). Those who attend church more

frequently, conservatives and those who live in the north suburban area are much more inclined to vote for a born-again Christian. In contrast, non-attenders and liberals get much more skittish, as do those, surprisingly, in the east county.

A Muslim presidential candidate would do more poorly than a born-again Christian. However, the survey results provide a sense that County residents do not know what to make of such a candidate. Unlike the other types of candidates we tested, few residents put themselves in the definitely yes or definitely no categories. It is almost like a Muslim candidate is such a foreign concept that residents do not have the proper bearings to guide them. That said, those on the south side of the County and right wing conservatives would tend to vote against a Muslim presidential candidate.

Finally, the most interesting type of candidate is one that has no religion at all. An atheist would spark strong feelings on both sides. Fifty-three percent would vote for an atheist (28% definitely) but 36% would not vote for such a candidate and 24% say definitely no; the highest by far of the four we tested. Talk about a divisive candidate, an atheist would be it. Surprisingly, a person's income tends to play a large role in whether they will support or oppose an atheist. Upper income residents tend to be more open to an atheist – even supportive – while lower income residents take the extreme opposite view. Liberals would tend also to support an atheist, while hard core conservatives would strongly oppose one. Married and widowed residents tend to oppose an atheist. Finally, while church attendance takes a back seat to the aforementioned factors, it certainly figures in as expected. Regular church-goers would oppose an atheist vying for the White House, while those who never attend church or who do so infrequently would tend to support one.

Conclusion

It is clear from the survey that religion and politics are, in fact, interwoven in a complex tapestry. By and large, the data show that a balance has been struck on many issues.

While many want religion to play a bigger or a smaller role in politics and many believe the doctrine of separation of church and state has gone too far, nowhere do these folks constitute a majority. And on the basic question of whether religion plays a positive role in society, residents are split; not so much between extremes, but between important distinctions in the middle of the spectrum.

It is clear that a wide majority of people are comfortable with a Christian candidate. Even non-Christians would not oppose such a candidate. This should not be surprising since the nation has had nothing but Christian presidents. On the other hand, a more overt Christianity that is assumed from the born-again label, while not completely debilitating, is, off-putting to many residents.

It is perhaps heartening to know that County residents would not necessarily reject a Muslim candidate outright. To be sure, support ebbs substantially, but the level of animosity towards such a candidate is liable to be the same as for a born-again Christian. However, an atheist would completely roil the waters.