

Pew survey: Americans significantly favor separation of church, state

WASHINGTON (CNS) – Nearly three times as many Americans favor the federal government enforcing the separation of church and state than want to see the government stop doing so.

Fifty-four percent of those polled by the Pew Research Center on the issue favor the continued separation of church and state, while 19% would rather the government stop enforcing it. The percentage of those opposed finished behind the 27% who said they didn't know or refused to answer.

By an even larger margin, 67% said the Constitution reflects the vision of those who wrote it, "not necessarily God's vision" – nearly four times as great as the 18% who said the document was "inspired by God" and "reflects God's vision for America."

These are two key findings of online polling of more than 12,000 Americans in a study released Oct. 28.

In the poll, sizable majorities also said the federal government should never declare any religion as the United States' official religion, and that it should advocate moral values "held by people of many faiths." The percentages of those who feel that the United States should be declared a Christian nation, or that the government should advocate Christian values, were in the teens.

"Perhaps not surprisingly, the survey finds that Christians are much more likely than Jewish or religiously unaffiliated Americans to express support for the integration of church and state, with white evangelical Protestants foremost among Christian subgroups in this area," the survey said.

Where do Catholics fit in? According to Pew, 43% favor allowing government to put religious symbols on public property, in keeping with the overall study's 39% plurality on this question. But after that, support dwindles for many of the ideas Pew asked about.

"While the above-average level of support for an overtly Christian government among Republicans and white evangelical Protestants may come as no surprise to close observers of American politics, some of the other patterns in the survey are perhaps more unexpected," the report said.

"For example, many Black and Hispanic Americans – groups that are heavily Democratic – are highly religious Christians, and on several of the questions in the survey, they are just as likely as white Americans, if not more likely, to say they see a special link between Christianity and America."

Twenty-nine percent of Catholics said public school teachers should be allowed to lead Christian prayers; only 21% said the government should stop enforcing the separation of church and state; 17% said the Constitution was inspired by God; 12% said the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation; and 11% said the government should advocate Christian values.

Breaking down the church-state separation question further, Pew found that 20% of Catholics have "strong" support for this separation, while 35% hold "moderate" views, 21% said they have "mixed views" on the question, while 12% favor greater integration of church and state, with 11% saying either they have no opinion, don't know, or refused to answer.

And asked if God favors the United States over other nations, only 5% said yes, and just 14% of those who favor taking down the wall between church and state agreed.

"Most people who support separation of church and state are Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party, think Donald

Trump was a 'poor' or 'terrible' president, say immigrants strengthen American society, and reject the notion that society is better off if people prioritize getting married and having children," the Pew report said."

"More than half of people with a church-state separationist perspective say it is 'a lot' more difficult to be a Black person than a white person in the U.S., and that while the U.S. is one of the greatest countries in the world, there are other countries that are also great," it added.

"By comparison, people who favor church-state integration are mostly Republicans and Republican leaners, think Trump was a 'good' or 'great' president, say the growing numbers of immigrants in the U.S. threaten traditional American values, and feel that society would be better off if more people prioritized getting married and having children."

Pew added, "Church-state integrationists are far more inclined than church-state separationists to say that it is 'no more difficult' to be Black than white in American society – 42% vs. 13% – and that the U.S. 'stands above' all other countries – 40% vs. 15%."

The survey was part of Pew's ongoing "American Trends" panel, with 12,055 adults replying online to these and other survey questions. The margin of error was plus or minus 1.5 percentage points; for the 2,492 Catholics surveyed, 3.4 percentage points; for the 1,457 white Catholics, 3.8 percentage points; and for the 889 Hispanic Catholics, 6.9 percentage points.

By Mark Pattison, Catholic News Service