

Mississippi, Vermont score at opposite ends of religious spectrum

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WASHINGTON (RNS) If you're searching for the most religious Americans, head to Mississippi. And if you want the opposite, visit the least religious state, Vermont.

According to a new Gallup Poll, 59 percent of residents in the Magnolia State were considered "very religious," with almost 90 percent of the state affirming that religion was an important part of their daily life.

Vermont came in as the least religious state, reporting that only 23 percent of the residents were listed as "very religious" and more than half -- 58 percent -- were considered nonreligious.

The more than 350,000 adults in the U.S. and the District of Columbia interviewed in 2011 by the Gallup Daily tracking survey were asked if religion was an important part of their daily life and how often they attended religious services.

Based on those responses, residents were categorized as very religious, moderately religious or nonreligious, said Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll.

Many of the "most religious" states are in the Bible Belt, including Alabama (56 percent), Louisiana (54 percent), Arkansas (54 percent) and South Carolina (54 percent), but heavily Mormon Utah ranked second overall, at 57 percent.

In general, New England and the West tended to be the least religious, with all six New England states scoring in the bottom 10. Following Vermont, those states included: New Hampshire (23 percent), Maine (25 percent),

Massachusetts (28 percent), Alaska (28 percent) Oregon, Nevada and Washington (all 30 percent), Connecticut (31 percent), and Washington, D.C., New York and Rhode Island (all tied at 32 percent).

While New Hampshire and Vermont tied at 23 percent in the "very religious category," Vermont (58 percent) had a higher share of nonreligious than New Hampshire (52 percent).

The findings for 2011 were unchanged from recent years. "Nothing surprised me too much," Newport said.

Gallup researchers found that overall, more than two-thirds (68.4 percent) of Americans were classified as very or moderately religious, with eight out of the 10 most religious states located in the South. But the differences in religiosity varied across the nation.

Newport said he believed the findings reflect the "culture in the states."

For example, Mississippi has the country's highest percentage of African-Americans, who are known for being the most religious group.

"Most people say that's the reason why the state is the highest," he said, "but even people in Mississippi with no religious identity are more religious than people in Vermont who are religious."

The total sample of 353,492 citizens selected at random for the poll, conducted through landlines and cell phones, had a margin of error of plus or minus 1 percentage point, with some states having a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.