

Mainline called uncounted force for change: Clergy support administration on social spending

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

The White House has an oft-overlooked religious ally for solving the country's social problems through greatly expanded government programs, if a new survey of senior pastors in mainline Protestant churches is a good indication.

Republican politicians and commentators have opposed President Obama's economic stimulus initiatives and proposals to improve health care, education and the budgets of middle-class Americans as an overly expensive shift to "big government" bordering on socialism. But three-quarters of pastors in seven mainline denominations agreed in the mid-2008 survey that the federal government "should do more to solve social problems such as unemployment, poverty and poor housing."

Most of the queried clergy accepted the likely price of such reforms. Some 67 percent favored government-guaranteed health insurance "for all citizens, even if it means raising taxes." Moreover, 69 percent said that more environmental protection is needed, even if it raises prices and costs jobs.

A majority (56 percent) of mainline clergy identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared to about one-third (34 percent) who claim a Republican affiliation, according to the study, released March 6 by Public Religion Research.

The Washington-based group's "Main line Protestant Clergy Voices Survey," the largest canvass of mainline pastors in seven years, mailed a 250-question survey and generated 2,658 replies—a 44 percent response rate. The group's president, Robert P. Jones, was the principal investigator in the study, and John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, was an adviser to the project and supervised its data collection.

Though mainline Protestants, declining in numbers, no longer enjoy the political and cultural prominence they had in the 1950s and early 1960s, they should not be counted out, Jones said.

Mainline Protestants make up 18 percent of all Americans and nearly a quarter of all voters, he said, adding that main line clergy are “an important swing constituency that has been moving slowly but steadily away from the GOP since the early 1990s.” At the same time, the clergy reflect the American diversity of opinion on several controversial issues.

On support for same-sex marriage, mainline pastors are nearly evenly divided—one-third would allow gay couples to marry, one-third would prefer civil unions for such couples, and one-third would favor no legal recognition.

In the seven denominations, legal recognition of gay marriage and civil unions were opposed by 49 percent of pastors in the largest mainline body, the United Methodist church, and by 52 percent in the much smaller, generally more conservative American Baptist Churches. At the liberal end of the spectrum, only 9 percent in the United Church of Christ and 13 percent in the Episcopal Church were against civil unions or marriages. The percentage of that opposition ranged from 19 to 22 percent in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the second largest mainline church), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Do the pastors surveyed (80 percent male, 20 percent female) reflect the views of their congregations? A plurality of clergy thought their views were similar to those held by congregants (42 percent on social issues, 47 percent on economic issues). Pastors who reported differences were significantly more likely to say their own views were more conservative than those of the laity.

Conservative Protestants and think tanks on the right “like to portray [mainline clergy] as ideological leftists, [but] ‘Clergy Voices’ does not find them so,” said religion historian Martin E. Marty in his online “Sightings” commentary March 9. “They have voices in public affairs, but rarely and mildly try to project or enforce social justice ‘dogma.’”

“Politicians who would organize and exploit them, as they do some other religious groups, would have difficulty doing so,” said Marty, a Century contributing editor, because of regional and denominational differences. “Yes, half call themselves

‘liberal,’ because they are not afraid of the label, but a third are ‘conservative.’”

Public Religion Research’s Jones, a visiting fellow at The Third Way, a progressive think tank, said mainline churches value unity in diversity, which amounts to “a real strength” in an increasingly polarized society. Their ecumenical cooperation is enhanced through their involvement in the even broader National Council of Churches.

Coincidentally, the NCC’s Eco-Justice Program released a letter on March 11 to President Obama signed by 10,000 people pledging their commitment to limiting human-caused climate change and declaring it a moral issue demanding immediate government action. A similar NCC message to Congress also urged financial assistance for low-income and working families to protect them from higher energy costs that would occur under new national climate policies.