

# Poll: Americans see religion's role declining

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(RNS) Seven in 10 Americans say religion's influence on the country is waning, and 61 percent say they belong to a church or synagogue, equaling the lowest number since Gallup began asking the question in the 1930s.

Opinions about religion's influence have fluctuated in the last 50 years, according to Gallup, loosely following partisan politics: When a Republican occupies the Oval Office, Americans generally believe religion's influence is increasing; during a Democratic presidency, the opposite is true.

However, Gallup cautioned against drawing firm conclusions from politics in the latest survey.

"Although views that religion was increasing its influence were highest during the Republican administrations of Eisenhower, Reagan and George W. Bush, this political connection does not appear to be the primary explanatory factor," writes Gallup's Frank Newport, in a study released Dec. 29.

A wide variety of social, political, and economic trends are likely factors in Americans' view of religion's clout, according to Newport. In 2009, 70 percent also said religion is losing its influence in American life, the highest number since 1970.

Self-reported church and synagogue membership, meanwhile, continued its downward drift. Slightly more than six in 10 Americans say they belong to a church or synagogue, tied with 2007 and 2008 for the lowest percentage since the 1930s, according to Gallup.