

Americans give poor marks to the state of our moral union

by [Nicole Neroulis](#)

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(RNS) As President Obama prepares to assess the state of the union, three out of four Americans grade the country's moral climate at a "C" or below, according to a new poll released on Thursday (Jan. 20).

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll found that Americans cite partisan noise from cable, talk radio, blogs and the Tea Party as the main stumbling blocks to working across partisan lines.

At the same time, two-thirds of Americans say the nation's harsh political rhetoric bears little or no responsibility for the shooting spree in Tucson, Ariz., that killed six and left a Democratic congresswoman gravely injured.

And despite popular assumptions that faith can fuel bitter polarization between Americans, just one in seven respondents say religious leaders from the left or right are major obstacle to changing the tone in Washington.

"People are distinguishing between the political extremes and religious extremes, and they see the problem with politics, not necessarily with religion," said James Calvin Davis, religion professor at Middlebury College and author of "In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues that Divide Us."

The poll was conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service.

According to the poll, white evangelicals (who generally identify with the GOP) fault liberal bloggers and cable commentators, while minority Christians (who tend to favor Democrats) blame the Tea Party and conservative talk radio.

People tend to see themselves and others like them -- politically, religiously or otherwise -- as part of the solution, not part of the problem, Davis said.

In contrast, white mainline Protestants rate both liberal bloggers and the Tea Party as equally obstructive to bipartisanship and "changing the tone in Washington."

Other findings include:

-- Americans over 65 (46 percent) are more likely than adults under 35 (25 percent) to grade the country's moral climate with a "D" or an "F." A plurality of Americans (38 percent) give the nation's moral climate a "C."

-- Catholics (31 percent) and white evangelicals (27 percent) are most likely to say the moral climate in the U.S. is superior to other countries, compared to only 14 percent of the religiously unaffiliated.

-- Among all Americans, cable news commentators (17 percent) are considered the biggest obstacle to bipartisanship and civility, followed by the Tea Party (15 percent), liberal bloggers (13 percent),

conservative talk radio (12 percent), conservative religious leaders (8 percent) and progressive religious leaders (6 percent).

-- Tea Party members (34 percent) and Republicans (24 percent) are most likely to view liberal bloggers as the biggest obstacle, while Democrats blame the Tea Party (26 percent) and conservative talk radio (17 percent).

-- There's also a stark racial divide on bipartisanship: nearly a quarter of white evangelicals say liberal bloggers are the biggest obstacle, while one in five minority Christians fault the Tea Party.

-- Nearly two-thirds of Tea Party members dismiss the charge that violent and anti-government political rhetoric contributed to the shooting of Arizona Democrat Gabrielle Giffords; more than seven in 10 Democrats, and 55 percent of minority Christians, say it did play a role.

The poll found that half of Americans rate the country's moral climate as the same as other industrialized nations; 22 percent thought it was better, and 24 percent thought it was worse.

The perception that America is more religious than other nations -- particularly in Western Europe -- may explain why respondents view America's moral climate as superior to others, despite giving it generally poor grades.

"The same people who might consider the moral state of the nation to be not so great are also not necessarily going to be fans of the more secularized ethos of other industrialized nations," Davis said.

Davis said America's political rhetoric isn't necessarily worse than ever before -- just louder.

"We should be careful not to long for an earlier day when things were more civil," he concluded. "Incivility is a deep-seated American tradition. ... It's just that the incivility is arguably more rampant these days because we have ... these megaphones that allow the uncivil voices in our culture to be even louder."

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll was based on telephone interviews of 1,006 U.S. adults between Jan. 13 and 16. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.