

Poll finds evangelicals stand apart on evolution, climate change

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WASHINGTON (RNS) White evangelicals and Tea Party members are less likely to believe in evolution and climate change than most Americans, a finding that could pose a particular problem for Republican presidential hopefuls.

A new poll released Thursday (Sept. 22) also showed that a majority of Americans (57 percent) believes in evolution, and an even larger majority (69 percent) believes in climate change -- though many still disagree that the phenomenon is based on human activity.

But most Americans do not insist that their presidential candidates share their views on these issues, nor do they believe scientists have come to a consensus on them, according to the poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service.

The views of white evangelicals and Tea Party members stand apart.

Even though these issues aren't deal-breakers for most voters, they are "symbolically important for two groups that play an outsized role in Republican primary politics: white evangelical Protestants and members of the Tea Party," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI.

"Because evangelicals and Tea Party members hold views that are significantly different than the general population, the challenge for Republican candidates is to talk about these issues now in a way that will not hurt them later in the general election," Jones said.

On evolution, a third (32 percent) of white evangelicals affirm a belief in evolution, compared to two-thirds of white mainline Protestants, six in 10 Catholics and three-quarters of the unaffiliated.

On climate change, though strong majorities in every religious group say they believe the earth is getting warmer, white evangelicals (31 percent) are significantly less likely to believe the change is caused by human activity. That compares to 43 percent of white mainline Protestants, 50 percent of Catholics and 52 percent of the unaffiliated.

The poll reveals an unusual political schism on climate change. Typically, Republicans come down on one side of a question, Democrats on the other, and independents in the middle, said Dan Cox, PRRI's research director.

On climate change, Republicans (49 percent) cluster with Tea Party members (41 percent) on whether there is solid evidence that the earth is warming. That compares to 81 percent of Democrats and seven in 10 independents.

"There is no reason for climate change to be a partisan issue," said Cox. "But the political leadership on the issue has led to a polarization of opinion, with Democrats and independents on one side and Republicans on the other."

Many Americans say they do not care much about a candidate's stance

on either evolution or climate change: more than half (53 percent) say a belief or disbelief in evolution wouldn't affect their vote, and about as many say the same about a candidate who doesn't believe climate change is caused by human activity.

White evangelicals, however, care.

Only four in 10 evangelicals say a candidate's views on evolution would make no difference in their vote, and those who say they cared about a candidate's position say they would be less likely to vote for someone who believes in evolution. By contrast, Americans overall who cared about evolution say they'd be more likely to vote for a politician who believes in it.

Tea Party members (33 percent), more than any other group, are more likely to support a candidate who does not believe in climate change. That compares to 16 percent of Republicans and 5 percent of Democrats.

Americans also doubt a strong consensus exists among scientists on climate change, a phenomenon that has frustrated the vast majority of climatologists who consider it a problem caused by human activity. Only four in 10 Americans believe a consensus exists.

A slight majority (51 percent) says a consensus of scientists believes in evolution, though evolution is overwhelmingly endorsed throughout the scientific community.

In other findings:

-- On stewardship of the earth, 57 percent say God wants humans to

live responsibly with animals and plants. A sizable minority (36 percent), however, prefers the idea that "God gave human beings the right to use animals, plants and all the resources of the planet for human benefit."

-- Black Protestants are evenly divided on evolution, with 47 percent affirming it and 46 percent affirming creationism.

-- Though most Americans believe in evolution, they disagree on its driving force. Of those who believe in evolution, 30 percent say it's driven by natural selection or another natural process, compared to 22 percent who say a divine being guides it.

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,013 adults between Sept. 14 and 18. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.