



Americans Divided on Personal, Public Role of Religion

Washington, DC, February 5, 2004 - Americans are divided on the role of religion in making decisions in their everyday lives. About a quarter of the overall public are regular churchgoers who say most or all their decisions reflect their religion's teaching. As many attend services rarely or never and say religion has little or no bearing on their life decisions. The rest of the public (about half) lies in the middle, being regular or sporadic churchgoers who use religion when making some decisions.

Attitudes toward religion in one's own life appears to be a key factor behind views on the role of religion in public life, with moderates generally in favor of voluntary public expressions of faith but less comfortable when it involves spending tax dollars or tolerating less mainstream positions.

God and Public Life

Americans are at ease with various public expressions of religious belief. Seven in ten (72%) feel comfortable with starting public ceremonies such as government meetings or public school graduations with a prayer. More than eight in ten (84%) say the Pledge of Allegiance should include the phrase "under God" (14% say it should not). Six in ten (63%) would feel comfortable having children in a public school recite the words "one nation under God" in the Pledge, even if students who may not believe in God feel singled out (34% uncomfortable).

Six in ten (61%) would feel comfortable with having the Ten Commandments posted in places where government requires people to be, such as classrooms or courthouses (37% not comfortable). A somewhat wider majority (68%) say it should in fact be permissible to install a monument to the Ten Commandments in a courthouse (30% disagree).

Yet Americans voice more divided opinions when it comes to spending taxpayers' money to support religious activities. The public narrowly favors using public money to set up a Christmas manger or a Jewish menorah during the holidays (57% comfortable, 42% not). Americans are evenly divided on using Federal funds to provide social services through a religious organization (47% comfortable, 51% not), or using taxpayer funds to send children to a Catholic, Christian or Jewish school (45% comfortable; 53% not).

Americans appear ill at ease with less mainstream expressions of religion in public life, such as declaring that America is a chosen nation selected by God to fulfill a destiny known only by God (61% not comfortable). Nearly all (89%) would be unsettled by spending taxpayer funds to send children to schools run by sects such as radical Muslims or followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon.

Tolerance for Same-Sex Partnerships, But Not Marriage

Americans express a considerable degree of tolerance toward allowing partners in same-sex relationships to have some basic protections under the law, including:



- Recognizing partners as next-of-kin: Allowing same-sex partners to have the right to make medical decisions when the other partner is hospitalized (78%) and being presumed to inherit the other partner's estate at death unless otherwise specified in a will (64%);
- Financial partnership: Allowing partners to take out a mortgage or buy a house together (77%), and file a joint tax return (55%);
- Division of property: Having a court decide how to divide up a couple's assets in the event they break up (57%).

However, Americans are more reluctant to allow same-sex partners the right to adopt children (49% should, 47% should not). Married people are more opposed than unmarried Americans on this point.

While there is willingness to grant same-sex couples some protection and rights under the law, a narrow majority (53%) say these partnerships should not receive official government sanction. Four in ten (42%) believe there should be some official status for same-sex partnerships, although opinion is evenly divided on whether this should take the form of a marriage license or a civil union.

Six in ten (61%) believe same-sex marriage should not be legal (35% say it should be). But the public is split down the middle on a Constitutional Amendment that would define marriage as specifically involving a man and a woman, making same-sex marriages illegal and unconstitutional (49% favor; 46% oppose).

Religiosity plays a strong part in defining attitudes toward same-sex marriage. In addition, acceptance of same-sex marriage is more common among younger Americans (48% of those aged 18-34 approve), Democrats (47%), and residents of the Northeast and West. By contrast, seniors (76% of those over 55), Republicans (80%), and residents of the Midwest and South tend to reject same-sex marriage.

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