

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

September 29, 2014

PEW SURVEY SHOWS INTERESTING VIEWS ON RELIGION AND POLITICS

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Polls and surveys are not infallible. Nor do they define what is true. But they do have their uses. If they are conducted carefully and without bias, they can offer insights regarding public opinion or perceptions at a given moment in time. Among other things, polls can help us understand the mood of the moment and confirm or question trends of changing opinion.

Among the more respected polling organizations is the Pew Research Center. The Center has a particular interest in measuring the role of religion in public life and how those who identify as adherents of a particular religion feel about issues and events. In a survey conducted in the first week of September, the Pew pollsters examined how the public feels about the role of religion in politics. Their report on what they found makes for interesting reading.

Here is a small sample of the survey results:

Overall, the survey found that almost three in four Americans think that religion is losing its influence in American life. The survey also found that “a growing share of the American public wants religion to play a role in U.S. politics.” Those who express this view account for 49% as opposed to 48% who feel religion should stay out of politics. Still, 49% is six percentage points higher than four years ago.

But support for religious involvement in political debates does not extend to support for endorsement of candidates. By a nearly 2-1 margin (63% to 32%) respondents said that churches should not come out in favor of one candidate over another. On this question opinion among Catholics is virtually identical to that of the public at large, with 65% opposing church endorsement of candidates and 32% favoring endorsements.

The survey also asked respondents several questions to measure their degree of interest in the fall elections. One question asked if respondents will definitely vote in the upcoming elections. Fully 79% of Catholics said they would do so. That is well above the overall response of 71% and 11% higher than the response among Catholics in 2010.

As I said earlier, polls don't define truth, but the Pew Survey results do suggest that the stance of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference that the role of the Church is to help educate voters on the issue while refusing to endorse or oppose candidates is in the mainstream of public opinion at large and among Catholics. If the strong response among Catholics who say they will definitely vote in the fall is accurate, it also seems the bishops' message that Catholics should be involved citizens is also getting through.

The survey has a great deal of other information regarding how religious groups feel about a range of issues and the political parties. Those interested in digging deeper into these results can visit the Pew Research Center website at www.pewresearch.org for more information.

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