



Written by on October 5, 2010

Poll Shows Overlap Between Tea Party and Religious Right

A poll released on October 5 by the nonprofit Public Religion Research Institute indicated that nearly half (47 percent) of Americans who consider themselves members of the Tea Party movement also consider themselves part of the “Christian conservative movement.”

The [Washington Post](#) quoted Institute chief executive Robert Jones, who said that the object of the American Values Survey, which was funded by the Ford Foundation, was to clarify the relationship between the two groups.



“The way the data looks, if this is a marriage of convenience, it’s one that would be against the law. The relatives are too close,” said Jones, who describes himself as a progressive.

The *Post* summarized the polls finding as follows:

- The percentage of Americans who say they’re part of the tea party movement is 11 percent about half the size of the group who say they are “part of the religious right or conservative Christian movement.”
- Fifty-five percent of people who say they are part of the tea party agree that “America has always been and is currently a Christian nation” 6 points more than the percentage of self-described Christian conservatives who would say that.
- Among the differences between Christian conservatives and tea partiers is their source of news, with 39 percent of the former group saying Fox News is their most trusted source for “accurate information about politics and current events” and 57 percent of the latter group saying that.

A Reuters news report on the survey quoted its authors conclusions: “On nearly all basic demographic characteristics, there are no significant differences between Americans who identify with the Tea Party movement and those who identify with the Christian conservative movement.”

The religion reporter at [Politics Daily](#) seemed to believe that the poll revealed somewhat surprising results that flew in the face of public opinion about the Tea Party, noting:

The common view that the Tea Party movement is a rebellious, libertarian threat not only to the Republican establishment but also to traditional Christian conservatives is upended by a new survey that shows a broad overlap between the religious right and voters who identify with the Tea Party....

Besides puncturing some myths, the research also confirms some assumptions about Tea Party followers: Notably, they tend to be white and male, Republicans and Southerners, and they watch Fox News and love Sarah Palin.

Another analysis of the American Values Survey posted on the CNN [Belief Blog](#) (or religion blog) presented four myths that the writers believe are commonly believed, then indicated where the survey results disproved those myths:



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Myth #1: The Tea Party movement is distinct from previous conservative movements like the Christian Right.

The writers note that among Americans who consider themselves a part of the Tea Party movement, nearly half (47 percent) say they consider themselves to be part of the religious right or conservative Christian movement.

Myth #2: The Tea Party movement represents a large portion of the U.S. population, rivaling the size of previous conservative movements like the Christian right.

The writers counter that assertion with survey results indicating that Americans who identify with the Tea Party movement make up just 11 percent of the adult population half the size of the current conservative Christian movement (22 percent).

Myth #3: The Tea Party movement is largely a political libertarian group that believes in maximum freedom for individuals.

Perhaps failing to appreciate the wide variations in belief among those who label themselves libertarians, the writers dispute the idea that most Tea Partiers are libertarians by stating that Americans who identify with the Tea Party movement are mostly social conservatives, not libertarians on social issues. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, and less than 1-in-5 (18 percent) support allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry.

Myth #4: The Tea Party movement is an independent political force, whose members do not have close ties to either political party.

The writers dispute the above statement by noting that Americans who identify with the Tea Party movement are largely Republican partisans. More than 3-in-4 (76 percent) identify with or lean toward the Republican Party. More than 8-in-10 (82 percent) say they are voting for or leaning toward Republican candidates in their districts. And nearly three-quarters of this group report usually supporting Republican candidates.

The final conclusion made by CNNs religion blog writers is:

This much is now clear: a majority of Americans who identify with the Tea Party are old-style Christian conservatives in new clothing: they now quote the Declaration of Independence more than the Bible (although some do both), and attend rallies led by Glenn Beck instead of Pat Robertson.

A key challenge in making such political comparisons, obviously, is the widespread and often confusing terminology, most notably in this case: *libertarian*. A major barrier to defining this segment of the population is that by definition libertarians are individualists who defy categorization as much as they defy regimentation. They range from those in favor of eliminating almost all laws except for those prohibiting murder and property theft to those whose distrust of government is aimed primarily at Washington, D.C., and who accept a role for state and local governments in helping to maintain our traditional Judeo-Christian culture as a natural one.

One area of the survey results that might be subject to misinterpretation is that nearly two-thirds said that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, and 45 percent said there should be no legal recognition for same-sex couples. The implication is that those holding such traditional moral views are automatically excluded from the libertarian camp. However, the survey made no distinction between *federal* and *state* regulation of these activities, an extremely important consideration to many



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Americans. Those who favor strict adherence to the Constitution (as defined by the 10th Amendment which has become a key rallying cry among Tea Party followers) have increasingly abandoned the imprecise label conservative in favor of the more specific constitutionalist.

A constitutionalist may be either libertarian or conservative on social issues, but all constitutionalists agree that social issues like murder, theft, abortion, and marriage should be decided at the state or local level. Therefore both a *liberal*-libertarian constitutionalist who believes that abortion should not be restricted and a *conservative*-libertarian constitutionalist (like Texas Congressman Ron Paul) who believes local government should protect life at all stages can agree on the fact that the matter rightfully belongs to the states and that the Supreme Court exceeded its constitutional mandate in handing down *Roe v. Wade*.

Though the Tea Party is not a formal party like the Republican Party, to assert that because most Tea Partiers have Republican leanings means that there is little difference between the Tea Party and the GOP is also an overgeneralization. Most Americans hold multiple social, political, and religious affiliations and seldom fit into a pigeonhole.

While polls such as the American Values Survey tell us much about *what* a certain percentage of Tea Party followers believe, they tell us little about *why*. The answer to that question would be much easier to determine if more Americans paid less attention to outmoded labels like liberal and conservative and focused primarily on the one yardstick that has true meaning: the Constitution.

Photo: Christine O'Donnell, a candidate for the U.S. Senate, addresses supporters during a Tea Party Express news conference on Sept. 7, 2010, in Wilmington, Del: AP Images



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