

Written by Dave Bohon

Monday, 10 January 2011 12:33

0

Like

0



In its ongoing study of the religious habits and practices of Americans, [Gallup](#) has found that seven in ten Americans think faith is losing its influence on the nation, one of the highest findings in Gallup's history of measuring the religious pulse of the American people, "and significantly higher than in the first half of the past decade," the pollster reports.

The good news, however, is that a slight majority of Americans say that faith continues to be a major factor to them personally, with 54 percent of respondents saying that religion is "very important" in their lives, "down slightly from the past two decades, but roughly equal with levels measured in the 1980s."

The impact of faith in the lives of Americans, however, is coming increasingly from sources other than church. According to Gallup, only 61 percent of Americans now claim membership in a church or synagogue, the lowest percentage since Gallup has asked the question, compared to a high in 1947, when 74 percent of Americans said they were church members.

While religious influence in America peaked in 1957, when 69 percent of the population said faith was an important factor in society, Gallup noted that the numbers began changing more dramatically in the turbulent 1960s, and have fluctuated since. "By 1970, in the midst of the protests over the Vietnam War and general social upheaval, a record 75 percent of Americans said religion was losing influence in American society," noted the pollster.

But during the Reagan years, when moral values and faith were in vogue and public servants displayed them prominently, "a plurality of Americans returned to the view that religion was increasing its influence." With the Clinton years Americans returned to an overall attitude of pessimism, and it wasn't until after the momentous tragedy of September 11, 2001 that there was another shift that demonstrated the positive impact of faith on the nation's spiritual landscape.

However, as the decade rolled on, the nation's solidarity behind religious faith once more began to wane, so that by 2009 some 70 percent of Americans felt that the influence of religious faith was decreasing overall.

Traditionally the assumption has been that the influence of faith in America increases when Republicans hold sway in public office. But Gallup's research shows that history does not bear this out. "Although views that religion was increasing its influence were highest during the Republican administrations of Eisenhower, Reagan, and George W. Bush," noted the pollster, "this political connection does not appear to be the primary explanatory factor. Views on the increasing influence of religion were quite low during the Republican administrations of Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush."

Rather, explained Gallup, Americans tend to "take into account a wide variety of social, political, and economic factors" in gauging how religious they think their nation is as a whole, with the political landscape being just one element in their consideration.

As for the personal impact of religion, Gallup said the trends over the years have not shown the same fluctuation as those for religion's public influence. "While almost all measures show that Americans were more religious in the 1940s and 1950s than in recent decades," the survey summarizes, "Americans appear to be as personally religious now as they were in the late 1970s and 1980s."