

Study: Generational changes cause drop in US support for school prayer

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There's a saying that goes, "as long as there are tests, there will be prayer in public schools." At one time, that likely reflected a fairly uniform view about school prayer: that despite what federal law said about the practice, religious Americans by and large approved of it.

A new study, however, paints a more complicated picture of attitudes toward school prayer over the last four decades, finding sharp differences in school-prayer support between different generations and their religious denominations.

Forthcoming in the journal *Sociological Forum*, the study maps a general decline in advocacy for school prayer starting in the mid-1970s and accelerating as skeptical [Baby Boomers](#) became ascendant through the 1980s. According to the study's findings, school-prayer support remains markedly lower today among Catholics and mainline Protestants yet unwaveringly high among their evangelical counterparts.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologist Philip Schwadel modeled data from the [General Social Survey](#) from 1974-2010 and created a measure for Americans' support for prayer and reading of religious scripture in public schools over the decades. The results tracked the impact of religious affiliation and generational differences on the role of religion in public education, he said.

"Social and cultural changes have led to greater opposition to state-sanctioned prayer and reading religious materials in public schools

among some segments of the population," Schwadel said. "Specifically, there's growing opposition among non-evangelicals but not evangelicals, and these changes manifest across generations."

While these generational shifts have spurred changes among some denominations, evangelical Protestants have remained staunchly pro-school-prayer over the years, Schwadel said. As other religious denominations faced generationally influenced fluctuations on the topic, evangelicals persisted – more than 70 percent of evangelicals expressed support for school prayer, regardless of what generation they came from.

"What we see in these results is that there's a very clear, unwavering perspective in the evangelical community on the role of prayer in public life," he said. "While younger evangelicals seem to be more open to some issues, such as environmentalism, when it comes to key issues, they simply do not change across generations. There seem to be some bedrock issues they won't budge on."

There once was very little difference between Catholics and evangelical Protestants on the topic, particularly among those born in the early 1930s, Schwadel said. The findings also showed a relatively small difference in opinion between evangelicals and mainline Protestants for those born during that same time period.

But differences grew tremendously across generations – so that by the time those born in the 1960s and 1970s came of age, a large gap had emerged between evangelical Protestants and both mainline Protestants and Catholics.

Why? According to Schwadel's findings, the drop was related to both "period effects" and "cohort effects" – the events of the times, highlighted by several high-profile court cases on the subject, likely began to affect opinions among people of a certain age; at the same time,

the general disposition of the generation going through those times was playing a major factor.

The start of the time frame in the study – the mid-1970s –were a time of high levels of support for prayer in schools compared with the following three decades, Schwadel said; at the same time, Baby Boomers began to make up more of the population. Known for their skepticism for organized religion, the Boomers likely contributed to a consistent, decade-long drop in support of school prayer to a lower overall level that remains today.

Schwadel said he had anticipated the decline among mainline Protestants; however, he was surprised to see a parallel slide in support for school prayer among Catholics, who began the 1970s virtually tied in their level of approval with evangelicals.

One possible explanation, Schwadel said, is that over time, Catholics have become more "mainstreamed" than they were in the first half of the 20th century, when they either attended parochial schools or public schools that were predominantly Catholic. Their integration into public schools may have cut into their support for school prayer because that prayer was not exclusively Catholic, Schwadel said.

The study also found:

- Highly educated and younger respondents in the study were relatively unlikely to support prayer and reading scripture in [public schools](#).
- African Americans and Southerners registered the highest levels of approval.
- Jewish respondents indicated the lowest levels of [support](#), at 24 percent. Those who said they are unaffiliated with an organized

religion were at 37 percent.

"These results are relevant to debates regarding the social impact of [religious affiliation](#), generational differences and Americans' views of the role of religion in the public sphere," he said.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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