

# Study reveals changes in attitude toward religion, morality, politics and other social issues

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Americans are more respectful now than ever before when it comes to the religious traditions of their peers, according to findings from the longitudinal Rice University Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). Other findings: Americans are more divided on the legal definition of marriage, favor restrictions on abortion, support pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and are less politically engaged (with the exception of African-Americans).

PALS is a six-year national study tracking religion, morality, politics and other social issues in the U.S. The study included a scientifically gathered random sample of approximately 1,300 adult Americans in 2006 and 2012, interviewing the exact same people in both years.

Study author Michael Emerson, the Allyn and Gladys Cline Professor of Sociology and co-director of Rice's Kinder Institute for Urban Research, highlighted some of the findings.

## Religion

When asked about [mutual respect](#) for all religions, one-third of PALS participants in 2006 said they respected all religions equally. By 2012, 58 percent said they did.

"A major shift has occurred among Americans in just six years,"

Emerson said. "We have become far more respecting of the diversity of religions than we were in 2006. Very much unlike in 2006, the majority of Americans no longer single out a religion that they disrespect."

In both years of the study, participants said that the religion they most respected was Judaism, though the percentage naming it declined from 24 percent in 2006 to 15 percent in 2012. No other religion in either year was named by even 10 percent of respondents. Twenty percent of study participants in both 2006 and 2012 identified Islam as the religion they least respected.

Between 2006 and 2012, 15 percent of participants surveyed switched religious traditions, with nearly 40 percent of them identifying as unaffiliated, or no longer identifying with a religious tradition or congregation.

"For a sizable percentage, religious switching means dropping out of religion," Emerson said. "Interestingly, those who dropped out were largely replaced by a nearly equal number of the non-affiliated of 2006, who by 2012 had become part of a religious tradition."

Also of note, only 45 percent of adult Americans attended worship with the same frequency in 2012 as they did in 2006, with 31 percent attending less and 24 percent attending more. Black Protestants, Evangelical Protestants and Catholics were more likely to attend church more than individuals affiliated with other [religious traditions](#).

More than one-third of study participants switched congregations between 2006 and 2012. Two-thirds of these individuals said their switch was due to a residential move, where they were too far away from their former congregation and needed to find another. Seventeen percent said the primary reason they changed congregations was that they grew dissatisfied with their former congregation. Another 13 percent said they

became attracted to a new congregation. Twelve percent said they are in a new congregation because they were both equally dissatisfied with their former congregation and attracted to their new congregation.

Of the people who indicated they were "dissatisfied with their former congregation," 58 percent said that a source of their dissatisfaction was clergy, 53 percent said it was political and/or social views of the congregation, 45 percent said theology, 41 percent said poor relationships, 39 percent said liturgy/style, 38 percent said a poor future, 13 percent said location and seven percent said lack of programs.

Eighty-four percent of individuals surveyed indicated that clergy was a factor that drew them to a new congregation. Other factors that attracted individuals to a new congregation included liturgy/style (67 percent), theology (64 percent), programs and a bright future (62 percent), location (49 percent), relationships (42 percent), political/social views (35 percent) and return to childhood religion (15 percent).

Other changes included a declining confidence in clergy and an increased confidence in faith and God's care.

## **Moral reasoning**

Moral discourse is a regular part of political, economic, social and cultural debates. These values are often embedded in private and public discussions ranging from the development and uses of medical technology to the beneficial and responsible use of public funds to the deployment of military drones.

When asked about personal views of morality, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of African-American respondents said that they base their moral attitudes on "God's law," in contrast to one-third (36 percent) of Caucasian respondents and one-third (35 percent) of Hispanic

respondents.

"The racial difference in how moral decisions are made is dramatic," Emerson said. "It has wide-ranging implications for differences in a host of moral, political and social views."

The majority of PALS respondents favored some level of restrictions on abortion. Just 17 percent of PALS respondents said they believe abortion should be legal under "almost all circumstances." The largest number of respondents, 26 percent, said that abortion should be available in "some circumstances," closely followed by 25.5 percent who said that abortion should be available only "in extreme circumstances." Fourteen percent of respondents said that they believe abortion should be legal under "most circumstances," and fourteen percent believe that abortion should not be available under any circumstance. Hispanic women and African-Americans were the most likely to say that abortion should be legal under "only extreme circumstances."

Americans also were asked their opinions about the use of genetic engineering. A clear majority (82 percent) of PALS respondents said they believe it is "always," "usually" or "sometimes" wrong to use "genetic engineering to make a smarter baby." Just 16 percent of PALS respondents said that the prenatal use of genetic technology is "never wrong" or that it is "not a moral issue." Ten percent more women than men said that the elective use of genetic engineering is "always wrong."

"When it comes to the issue of genetic engineering of babies, Americans are in remarkable agreement: They are saying 'It is wrong' loudly and clearly," Emerson said.

## **Marriage**

As states and the federal government debate the legal definition of

marriage, Americans surveyed for PALS were also divided on the topic. In both 2006 and 2012, a slight majority of respondents (57 percent in 2006, 53 percent in 2012) agreed with the statement "The only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman." Approximately one-third (31 percent in 2006, 33 percent in 2012) of respondents disagreed with the statement, and a small number of respondents (12 percent in 2006, 13 percent in 2012) were undecided about the statement.

Many survey respondents changed their minds on the topic between 2006 and 2012. Sixteen percent of respondents who agreed with the statement in the 2006 study disagreed in 2012. Twenty-eight percent of respondents who disagreed with the statement in 2006 agreed with it in 2012. Among those who in 2006 neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement, almost two-thirds took a different position in 2012 – 43 percent disagreed and 23 percent agreed.

Between 2006 and 2012, respondents became even more divided on the topic of marriage across various demographics, especially education, religion and age. Respondents without a high school diploma were most likely to agree with the marriage statement (66 percent in 2006, 75 percent in 2012), and respondents with postcollege education were least likely to agree with the statement (44 percent in 2006, 37 percent in 2012). Evangelical Protestants were most likely to agree (72 percent in 2006, 75 percent in 2012), while Jews were least likely to agree (21 percent in 2006, 12 percent in 2012). Respondents older than 50 were most likely to agree with the statement (62 percent in 2006, 63 percent in 2012), and respondents 30 and younger were least likely to agree (47 percent in 2006, 40 percent in 2012).

"The real story on the statement 'The only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman' was despite little overall change, so many individual people changed their minds—some to agree, others to

disagree," Emerson said. "The end result is important: Americans are now more divided on this issue along educational, religious and age lines than they were in 2006."

## **Political engagement**

The average rate of political activity (across nine measures of political participation, such as voting, signing petitions and working for a candidate or party) of PALS respondents decreased from 22 percent in 2006 to 18 percent in 2012. The study saw a decrease in activity among all ethnic groups except African-American respondents. Individual average political activity for African-Americans in the sample increased from 20 percent in 2006 to 22 percent in 2012, while Caucasian activity fell from 24 to 18 percent, Hispanic activity fell from 15 to 12 percent and Asian activity fell from 14 to 11 percent.

Emerson said the shift in political behavior among African-Americans can be attributed to the "Obama effect"—members of the ethnic group showed enthusiastic support for the first African-American presidential candidate belonging to a major contemporary political party.

"It seems likely that President Obama's ascendancy as the first African-American president of the United States is responsible for the boost in black political participation," Emerson said. "And this does not just mean voting. African-Americans, unlike other Americans, have become more active across a range of political activities."

## **Immigration**

A clear majority – 71 percent – of Americans favored offering undocumented immigrants a pathway to legal status rather than having them returned to their nation of origin or letting them remain in the U.S.

illegally.

These results hold across political and ideological lines (64 percent of Republicans, 78 percent of Democrats and 70 percent of independents), gender (67 percent of men, 76 percent of women) and race (68 percent of Caucasians, 76 percent of African-Americans, 75 percent of Asians and 81 percent of Hispanics).

"It is stunning, given the divided political rhetoric and media debates, that Americans of all stripes so strongly favor finding a path to legalization over other options," Emerson said. "The overwhelming percentage of Americans preferring the legalization of undocumented immigrants speaks volumes."

## **About the Portraits of American Life Study**

The Portraits of American Life Study is an unprecedented panel study focused on religion and other issues in the U.S., with a particular focus on capturing ethnic and racial diversity. The study included a statistically random sample of approximately 1,300 adult Americans, with more than 600 questions asked in each survey in 2006 and 2012.

"We live in a world of accelerated change with serious implications for our lives," Emerson said. "PALS is designed to understand the impact of change on our lives in real time."

Provided by Rice University

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