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Promising Revelations:

Undoing the False Impressions of America's Faithful



More in
Common

Promising Revelations: Undoing the False Impressions of America's Faithful

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faithperceptiongap.us



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Common**

ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

The report was conducted by More in Common U.S., part of a non-partisan, international initiative aimed at building societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. We work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government in order to connect people across lines of division.

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Contents

Foreword	6
Executive Summary	7
Methodology	10
Part I: Misperceptions and Common Ground	13
Misperception 1: Faith is all about politics	16
Americans seek faith for spirituality, not politics	19
Few Americans prioritize political identity	21
Are both Democrats and Republicans “good” Christians?	23
Perception gap: Americans’ over-politicization of Evangelicals and Catholics	24
The role of politics in religious settings	31
Featured insights: Evangelical Christians—Victims of Collateral Contempt?	38
Misperception 2: Faith is becoming irrelevant in Americans’ lives	42
Places of worship matter	43
Faith beyond places of worship	45
Young Americans and faith	47
Perception gap: American Jews under 30	51
Perception gap: American Muslims under 30	54
Misperception 3: Religious Americans are intolerant	57
Perception gap: Religious pluralism and belonging	57
Perception gap: Separation of church and state	66
Do Americans support separation of church and state in practice?	68
Beliefs about the role of Christianity in American society	71
Exclusionary ideologies and the erosion of pluralism	75

Why many faith groups feel under attack: The impact of perception gaps	77
Shared perception of threats	77
Jewish and Muslim experiences	82
Common ground	92
Common values	92
Superordinate American identity	95
What are the stories America’s faithful want to tell?	96
Part II: Faith in a Polarized America	98
Case studies: Experiences with polarization	100
Local versus national division	100
Evangelical and Mainline Protestant communities	101
Catholic communities	107
Jewish communities	113
Muslim communities	117
Latter-day Saint communities	122
The contour of division: Healthy conflict versus high conflict	125
The power of faith in a polarized world	127
Existing resources within faith to counter polarization	127
Opportunities: Trust in faith leaders and demand for spiritual guidance	129
Conclusion and Recommendations	133
Appendix	136

Foreword

The limits of our imagination are often determined by what we believe is real.

Right now, what we believe is real about America's polarization is making it harder for us to find ways out. Americans are feeling profoundly exhausted by polarization, struggling to see how we move ahead. And often the places that could energize and enable efforts to bring us back together—including faith, as the pages to follow highlight—are perceived more as accelerants to division than as off-ramps.

The focus of this report is on misperceptions, or perception gaps, about religion in America. We misunderstand each other when we uncritically accept narratives that Evangelicals are chiefly concerned with politics, that the relevance of religion is fading, that young generations feel distant from their faiths, and that religious Americans are mostly intolerant of others.

The findings in this study challenge some key parts of the story that we have been hearing about our polarized landscape. From conversations and surveys with a representative national sample of more than 6,000 Americans, the evidence shows something different to what we might expect: more shared values, more desire to keep faith distinct from partisan politics, more longing to transcend divisions, more respect for each other, more commitment to pluralism, and more desire for guidance and help from local faith leaders and institutions in navigating this difficult time in American life. We also find less intolerance towards other faiths, and less of a generation gap within faith communities.

What the findings add up to is this: to disrupt the dynamics of polarization, we do not need to look too far afield. If change is to happen, it is likely to begin in our local communities, and churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are important places where millions of people regularly gather in their local communities week after week—alongside, of course, more secular places such as workplaces, schools, social clubs, and sports activities. From the pews and prayer mats, it feels more possible to imagine an America less divided than it is today. And as this report finds, a majority of Americans who practice a faith say that they are looking to their religious leaders to better understand how to navigate our polarized landscape.

America's political divisions are likely to get worse—maybe, much worse—before they get better. But whether the future brings a slow calcification of our divisions or an escalation of political violence, we come back to the same question: how do we disrupt the dynamics of polarization, and find those off-ramps?

As trust in national institutions continues to be undermined and authorities of all kinds are questioned, local places of worship are likely becoming even more important for Americans of faith to find belonging, connection, and spiritual direction—in short, for making it through difficult and divided times.

This report suggests that America's faithful can and should be playing a greater role in depolarization efforts in the U.S., and several initiatives are already making progress.¹ America's polarization is not simple, but nor is it insoluble. We need to understand it, so we can fix it. And we need to cast a vision for how that can be done. This report highlights several areas that More in Common will prioritize. We hope it can also help inform and inspire others for this urgent work.

¹ Michelle Boorstein, "A New Movement Aims to Remake Evangelicals' Relationship to Politics," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/08/03/trump-evangelicals-movement/>

Executive Summary

One characteristic of a deeply polarized society is that opposing groups often hold distorted views of their opponents, vastly overestimating the extent to which the other side holds extreme views. We can better understand the root causes of conflict, and how we might change those dynamics, when we identify the misperceptions—or perception gaps—which lie behind the animosity and fears between different groups.

This study finds significant perception gaps relating to faith in America today. It draws on research involving a representative sample of over 6,000 Americans from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Latter-day Saint communities, as well as Americans of no faith in 2023 and 2024.

The project examines how Americans are navigating the country’s deep polarization from the perspective of their faith identities. It draws upon More in Common’s past work on the dynamics of polarization through the lens of ordinary Americans² and the concept of perception gaps.³ It examines not only how groups perceive—and often misperceive—one another, but also the consequences of those assumptions. As people of faith tell their own stories in surveys and focus group interviews, important truths emerge both about the role that politics is playing in religious communities, and the unifying potential of spiritual belief.

Misperception 1: Faith is all about politics

There are big gaps between most Americans’ perceptions and the reality of the role of politics in religious life, especially as it relates to Evangelical Christian communities. Our research found that **non-Evangelicals significantly overestimate the importance Evangelicals place on their political identity and partisan affiliation.** For example, non-Evangelicals overestimate by ten times how much Evangelicals say political party affiliation is their most important identity (41 percent estimate versus 4 percent reality).

Non-Evangelicals also often overestimate the percentage of Evangelicals who are Republican (63 percent estimate versus 46 percent in reality). These misperceptions carry significant consequences. Our research found that Democrats and Independents who overestimate the percentage of Republicans among Evangelicals tend to have more negative views towards all Evangelicals. We call this phenomenon “**collateral contempt**”—**the tendency for animosity towards political opponents to spill over to religious groups that are perceived to be aligned with one political team.** In our climate of heightened political polarization, political association can lead to generalized hostility towards entire faith communities based on their supposed political affiliation.

In reality, Evangelical Christians have a wide range of political views. For Evangelical Christians, religion, family role, and American identity are more important than

² Stephen Hawkins et al., *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’s Polarized Landscape* (More in Common, 2018), hiddentribes.us.

³ Daniel Yudkin et al., *The Perception Gap: How False Impressions Are Pulling Americans Apart* (More in Common, 2019), perceptiongap.us.

their partisan attachments. **The overwhelming norm among America’s religious populations, including among Evangelicals, is that spiritual life is not a political arena.** Americans of faith in general are mostly hesitant to discuss political issues in religious settings, although American Jews and Muslims are slightly more supportive of political discussions. This is especially the case for local politics or issues most pertinent to their communities, such as anti-Jewish/Muslim discrimination and Israel/Palestine. **How a person votes is not seen by most as a litmus test for whether or not they are a “good” Christian, Jew, or Muslim.** Instead, their moral values, relationship with God, and the spiritual edification they experience as part of a faith community are seen as much more important.

Misperception 2: Faith is becoming irrelevant in Americans’ lives

Americans also have significant perception gaps when it comes to understanding how important faith is to their fellow citizens, especially to younger generations. Reports about the increase in religious “nones”—the population who identify as having no religious affiliation—and declining membership of some Mainline Protestant churches do capture important trends in American society. **But the general public underestimates the value Americans, especially younger Americans, still place on personal faith and belonging to faith communities.** In fact, our research found that most Americans (73 percent) see their faith as an important part of who they are. Young generations of Jewish and Muslim Americans, in particular, value their Jewish and Muslim identity much more than commonly assumed.

While faith remains a crucial part of how many Americans see themselves, the decline in trust in institutions is impacting Americans’ relationship with religious institutions and houses of worship. Local faith communities or houses of worship face increased competition in their role of offering spiritual authority and guidance, yet they do offer a sense of belonging that is still prized by younger Americans.

Misperception 3: Religious Americans are intolerant

Americans also have sizable perception gaps on issues concerning the role of religion in public life, and often misperceive religious Americans to be broadly intolerant of other faiths. **The majority of Americans across religious groups value religious pluralism and want the United States to be a place where people of all religions feel that they belong.** For example, this ideal is shared by the majority of American Evangelicals (78 percent) and Muslims (75 percent), yet the general public imagines that only around half of Evangelicals and Muslims are supportive of religious pluralism.

At the same time, many Americans see the United States as a country founded on values inspired by Christian principles, often citing the religious beliefs of some Founding Fathers and some of the ideals embedded in the founding documents. However, **most do not see a conflict between recognizing the many ways in which Christianity shaped America through past centuries, and their personal commitment to building a pluralistic society.** Very few support exclusionary measures that prioritize the rights of one religious group over others, such as requiring religious qualifications for elected office. This duality in Americans’ beliefs underscores the need to draw a clear distinction between Americans who believe it is important to recognize the distinctive history of Christianity in America, and those who are supportive of exclusionary policies based on religious beliefs and ethnic origins.

Perceptions that faith is all about politics, decline, or intolerance, flatten the rich diversity of faith communities into simplistic caricatures. These distortions are felt. More than half of American Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints feel that their groups are judged more than others. Around two thirds of Muslims, Latter-day Saints, and Evangelicals feel misrepresented by political and media elites.

For Jewish and Muslim Americans, the feelings of being misunderstood and misrepresented are compounded by threats to their physical safety. Over four in ten Muslims and Jews in America feel or have felt unsafe in the past year due to their religious identity. Many have at times felt hesitant to share their Muslim or Jewish identity. The sense of insecurity, anxiety, and alienation has only intensified after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, the subsequent war in Gaza, and increased incidents of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate crimes in the U.S.

False perceptions not only make many faithful Americans feel misunderstood, they also obscure the common civic and moral values shared by Americans regardless of religious affiliation. And this common ground is abundant. Around nine in ten Americans, including the overwhelming majority across faith traditions, say that believing in freedom of speech, equal rights for all, freedom of religion, and accepting people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds is important to being American. Most Americans also value kindness to others and respect for human dignity, whether as part of their faith or personal convictions. This substantive commonality in what people think it means to be a moral person and lead a good life is often underappreciated.

When we steer away from misperceptions and stop seeing faith through a political lens, we open ourselves to hearing new stories that humanize fellow Americans. In a moment defined by polarization and fracture, many values and life goals that Americans cherish transcend religious boundaries, and could be used as a basis for more productive dialogue and relationship-building between different communities.

By illuminating these misperceptions, we also hope to provide a clearer understanding of how polarization is affecting faith communities. This report provides five case studies that examine the different ways communities are experiencing conflict and division. While most Americans of faith say that their congregations are not as politically polarized as the country generally, religious communities are far from being immune to division. Some have become combatants in America's culture wars and partisan politics. Others have experienced intense conflict over abortion, LGBTQ+ marriage, and women's ordination, and many are navigating deep disagreements and ruptured relationships due to the Israel-Hamas war and its ramifications in the U.S.

Despite these experiences of conflict, the larger picture emerging from this research is that faith leaders are well positioned to mitigate the toxic national polarization that faces the country. Despite the erosion of trust in institutions in recent years, faith leaders remain among the most trusted people in their local communities. Around half of Americans who regularly attend religious services want their religious leaders to provide guidance on navigating division, cultural changes, and talking to people with different political views. That special position of trust provides a platform for America's faith leaders to play a greater role in bridging divides. Faith leaders can counter polarization by drawing on rich resources rooted in their faith traditions. Highlighting shared values and practices such as self-reflection, humility, kindness, and dignity, faith leaders can build common ground, reduce fear, and foster unity. As one of the few institutions with the potential to counter deepening political self-segregation, faith leaders and their communities can help build a stronger sense of belonging and social cohesion together.

Methodology

Landscape mapping and partnerships

In conducting research for this report, we spoke with 60 faith and community leaders, faith-based institutions and research institutes, nonprofits, interfaith and multi-faith organizations to gather a wide range of perspectives on the experiences, challenges, and opportunities facing different communities of faith in America.

These conversations helped identify relevant literature, gaps in our knowledge, and refine the focus of our research. Engaging with faith leaders and organizations from a diversity of backgrounds rooted our work in the voices, perspectives, and experiences of everyday Americans. Insights from these conversations were integrated into both the quantitative (e.g., themes and wording of survey questions) and qualitative (e.g., themes and questions included in focus group discussions) phases of the research study.

Quantitative Research

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews for this study. For each survey, the data were weighted to be representative of American citizens using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 Presidential vote choice, as well as post-stratification related to gender, age, race, education, and religion.

Please see data appendix for subgroup breakdown (by demographics, religious traditions/sects, political affiliation).

Survey 1

Survey interviews were conducted from September 25 to October 30, 2023 with 4,200 U.S. adults and additional oversamples of 500 Jewish Americans, 500 Muslim Americans, 100 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and 500 San Francisco Bay Area residents.⁴

The data collection of Jewish American and Muslim American oversamples was paused between October 10 and October 19, 2023 in response to the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7 and the ensuing Israel-Hamas War.

The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.59 percent for the U.S. average and higher for subgroups.

Survey 2

Survey interviews were conducted from January 10 to January 22, 2024 with 2,000 U.S. adults, recontacted from the original Survey 1. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2.53 percent for the U.S. average and higher for subgroups.

⁴ San Francisco Bay Area residents were oversampled to inform partners and funders supporting faith communities in the Bay Area of California. For analysis of the Bay Area oversample data, please contact us at us@moreincommon.com.

Qualitative Research

More in Common conducted three rounds of qualitative research in partnership with ROI Rocket. Through 18 focus groups, we spoke with more than 120 Americans from a variety of backgrounds, faith traditions, and geographic locations. All focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to capture the attitudes, beliefs, and values of Americans across faith traditions in their own words. Quotes from focus groups and interviews are included throughout the report.

Where provided, names have been changed to protect the privacy of the respondent. Quote attributions are based on participants' own self-reported identification of their race/ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, political party affiliation, and political ideology. Grammar and punctuation have been lightly edited for clarity. Where language and phrases that may cause offense were used, they have been removed from the quotations while still retaining the meaning of participants' contributions.

Focus Group Round 1

Five focus groups were conducted from August 28 to September 1, 2023 with participants of the following religious affiliations: Evangelical Christians, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and religious “nones” (Americans whose religious affiliation is atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”).

Focus Group Round 2

Eleven focus groups were conducted from February 28 to March 19, 2024 with participants of the following religious affiliations and backgrounds: Democratic Evangelical Christians, Republican Evangelical Christians, Black Protestants, Democratic Catholics, Republican Catholics, Hispanic/Latino Catholics, Jews under age 30, Muslims under age 30, Black Muslims, Latter-day Saints, and Americans whose religious affiliation is “nothing in particular.”

Focus Group Round 3

One additional focus group was conducted on July 15, 2024 with Reform and Conservative Jews.

Americans in Conversation

More in Common also formed and hosted an online research community roughly representative of the American general population and engaged them in research activities from September 2023 to August 2024.

From December 7, 2023 to December 11, 2023 and from June 11, 2024 to June 14, 2024, we spoke to respondents about their views on different faith communities. A total of 130 American respondents completed the activity. Word clouds from those conversations with respondents are included in this report.

Social Listening

More in Common conducted social listening to better understand the dynamics of online conversations about different faith communities. Using the Brandwatch platform, we tracked and analyzed public mentions and conversations related to Evangelical Christians, American Jews, and American Muslims from June 12, 2022 to June 11, 2024 on social media platforms including X (Twitter) and Reddit, YouTube, and various news sites. Word clouds of the most frequently used words and themes are included in this report. Facebook and Instagram posts were not included in our social listening queries due to Meta's privacy policy.

Categories

Below we provide a brief definition of the key labels used to describe different faith communities throughout the report. While group labels are a helpful tool, we acknowledge that they cannot fully encompass the diversity of beliefs and preferred self-identification of all Americans within each faith tradition. Whenever possible, we try to speak with precision and highlight nuances or differences that are statistically significant across subgroups.

US average / Americans on average: Weighted representative sample of U.S. adults, including Americans with and without religious affiliation.

Americans of faith / Americans across faith traditions: Respondents who are categorized as Evangelical Christians, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, or Latter-day Saints.⁵

Americans who attend services a few times a year or more: For questions that probe on experiences within one’s own congregation or place of worship, we focus on data from Americans who attend religious services a few times a year or more. The data visualization charts for such questions have a note at the bottom that signifies the focus on Americans who attend religious services a few times a year or more.

Protestant: Respondents who described themselves as “Protestant” in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question, as well as respondents who answered “something else” in the religious affiliation question and specified that they are “Christian,” “just Christian,” or a member of a specific Christian denomination (e.g., Baptist, Methodist).

Evangelical Christian⁶: Respondents who are categorized as Protestants and answered “yes” to “do you identify as born-again or Evangelical.”

Mainline (or non-Evangelical) Protestant: Those who were categorized as Protestants and answered “no” or “don’t know” to “do you identify as born-again or Evangelical.”

Catholic: Respondents who described themselves as “Catholic” or “Roman Catholic” in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question.

Jewish: Respondents who described themselves as “Jewish (Judaism)” in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question.⁷

Muslim: Respondents who described themselves as “Muslim (Islam)” in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question.

Latter-day Saints: Respondents who described themselves as members of “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon)” in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question.

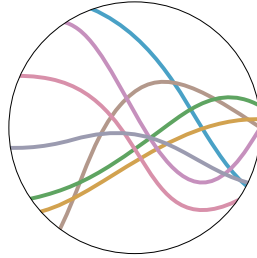
Religious “nones” (or the religiously unaffiliated): The combined umbrella group of respondents who described themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular” in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question. Some charts feature the specific data breakdown by those who describe themselves as “atheist.”

Please refer to the Appendix for more information on perception gap analyses and full explanation of the categories we use in this report.

⁵ Due to sampling constraints, our surveys did not obtain enough interviews with Americans whose faith traditions are not included in this list to be able to analyze them separately.

⁶ In this report, the word “Evangelical” is capitalized when it refers specifically to a group or movement within Christianity, particularly when denoting a group or individuals who identify as Evangelical. For example, “Evangelical” is capitalized when referring to “Evangelical Christians” as a specific religious group. When the word “evangelical” is used as an adjective, describing aspects related to evangelism, without referring to the specific Evangelical movement or group, “evangelical” is not capitalized. For instance, “evangelical mission” is not capitalized.

⁷ For more information on respondents who identify as Jewish only culturally or ethnically, please see the Appendix.



PART I

Misperceptions and Common Ground

One consequence of America’s deepening polarization is that politics is often the main lens through which Americans view each other. As politics has come to the forefront, political disagreements can often feel like an attack on one’s entire character and worth.⁸ Religious communities are not immune to this trend: what it means to be a person of faith in the United States today is often discussed and understood through the lens of partisan politics. From prevalent reporting on Evangelical churches as arenas for mobilizing votes, to headlines warning of the secularization of American youth, religious communities are often seen as either contributing to politicization or fading into irrelevance.

⁸ Ezra Klein. *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2020).

For years, scholars, pollsters, and reporters have been marking the decline of religious affiliation and offering potential explanations to the growth of the religious “nones.”⁹ A recent wave included headlines like “The Real Reason People Leave Religion,” “The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust,” and “Americans Under 30 Don’t Trust Religion—Or anything Else.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, throughout the 2024 primary season, headline after headline echoed a theme from 2016 and 2020: white conservative Evangelicals continue to baffle pundits with their fiercely loyal support of Donald Trump,¹¹ despite the distance between his conduct and the values they have traditionally espoused.

These stories reflect undeniable truths: religious participation *is* in decline,¹² prominent faith leaders *are* openly endorsing presidential candidates,¹³ and religious affiliation *is* now one of the key predictors of voting behavior.¹⁴

But that’s not the whole story. The narrow political lens, though eye-catching, cannot capture the role and meaning of faith for millions of Americans. Crucially, it too often situates faith and religion only on the contributing side of the polarization equation, missing the nation’s desire for faith communities to help us overcome our spiraling divisions.

Our research finds significant **perception gaps**—disparities between what Americans imagine people of faith to believe and what they actually believe. These perception gaps constrain our ability to envision a future where America’s faithful play a central role in helping us navigate division and foster social cohesion—not by focusing on politics, but by serving as an institution more dear to believers than their politics.

Part I of this report consists of three chapters, each dedicated to identifying Americans’ misperceptions about different faith communities, including that:

- We overestimate the significance of politics to people of faith.
- We underestimate the importance of faith to Americans in the context of declining religiosity.
- We underappreciate the extent to which faith communities support the ideal of religious pluralism.

By comparing the public’s perceptions with the actual views of Americans of faith on these three topics, we aim to provide a truer rendering of the values and identities of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the United States.

⁹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Church Attendance has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups,” *Gallup*, March 25, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>; Gregory A. Smith and Alan Cooperman, “Has the Rise of Religious ‘Nones’ Come to an End in the U.S.,” January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/24/has-the-rise-of-religious-nones-come-to-an-end-in-the-us/>.

¹⁰ Daniel A. Cox, “The Real Reason People Leave Religion,” *American Enterprise Institute*, August 10, 2023, <https://cosm.aei.org/the-real-reason-people-leave-religion/>; Derek Thompson, “The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust,” *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/america-religion-decline-non-affiliated/677951/>; Jessica Grose, “Americans Under 30 Don’t Trust Religion - or Anything Else,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/25/opinion/religion-nones-gen-z.html>.

¹¹ Sarah McCammon, “You Gotta Be Tough: White Evangelicals Remain Enthusiastic About Donald Trump,” *NPR*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/21/1225860255/evangelical-voters-trump-2024>.

¹² Jeffrey M. Jones, “Church Attendance Declined Among All Religious Groups.”

¹³ Sophia Cai, “Tectonic Shift in Power: How MAGA Pastors Are Boosting Trump’s 2024 Campaign,” *Axios*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/01/12/how-maga-pastors-boost-trump-campaign-2024>; Helen Coster, “Christian TV Evangelicals Fire Up Trump Support with Messianic Message,” *Reuters*, March 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/god-gave-us-trump-christian-media-evangelicals-preach-messianic-message-2024-03-22/>.

¹⁴ Gregory A. Smith, “5 Facts About Religion and Americans’ Views of Donald Trump,” *Pew Research Center*, March 15, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/15/5-facts-about-religion-and-americans-views-of-donald-trump/>.

We focus on Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are the three largest faith traditions in the United States.¹⁵ Throughout the report, we aim to speak about all of the communities surveyed—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Latter-day Saint. However, at certain points we focus on the specific communities where the data is most striking. No community is monolithic—each religious group we study encompasses a wide range of identities, viewpoints, and theological beliefs. While this report is not exhaustive, it provides a starting point for better understanding these communities. Despite the enormous diversity within and across faiths and denominations, we can still identify trends and patterns across different religious traditions.

¹⁵ “Religious Landscape Study: Database,” *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/>.

Misperception 1: Faith is all about politics

“ Evangelicals support Donald Trump and are against abortion and immigration and for the right to bear arms. **They are usually fanatical about issues they support.**

– Jamie, 63-year-old white woman, non-Evangelical Protestant, moderate Republican from Alabama¹⁶

“ I don't think God is aligned with a political party... **God is welcoming of all different people of all political beliefs.** He doesn't just love Republicans or doesn't just love Democrats or any other political party.

– Douglas, 56-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican from Georgia

It increasingly feels that politics is the lens through which Americans view and understand religious communities. Media and pollsters often analyze America's faithful through their policy preferences and voting behaviors, focusing on storylines such as white conservative Evangelical support for Donald Trump or what is driving “the Muslim vote” in pivotal swing states.

This tendency to politicize religious groups is visible on social media. We analyzed the words most commonly paired with “Evangelicals,” “Americans Jews,” and “American Muslims” across social media platforms between June 2022 and June 2024. The findings are striking: social media conversations and news articles about Evangelical Christians frequently reference national political figures and groups, such as President Trump, elections, conservatives and Republicans. Most discussions on social media about Jewish and Muslim Americans in the past two years primarily centered around the Israel-Hamas war that began in October 2023, student protests, and the 2024 elections. Far fewer posts and discussions referenced the daily lives of Americans of faith, matters of theology or religious observation, or mentioned major holidays across traditions, such as Ramadan, Easter, and the Jewish High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

¹⁶ Quote attributions are based on participants' own self-reported identification of their race/ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, political party affiliation, and political ideology.



I mainly have heard discussion about Evangelical Christians trying to ban abortions and contraceptives of many kinds. I think there is truth to this narrative. It's messed up that they want to pass these laws.

– DJ, 40-year-old white man, religious “none” (nothing in particular), liberal Democrat from Pennsylvania

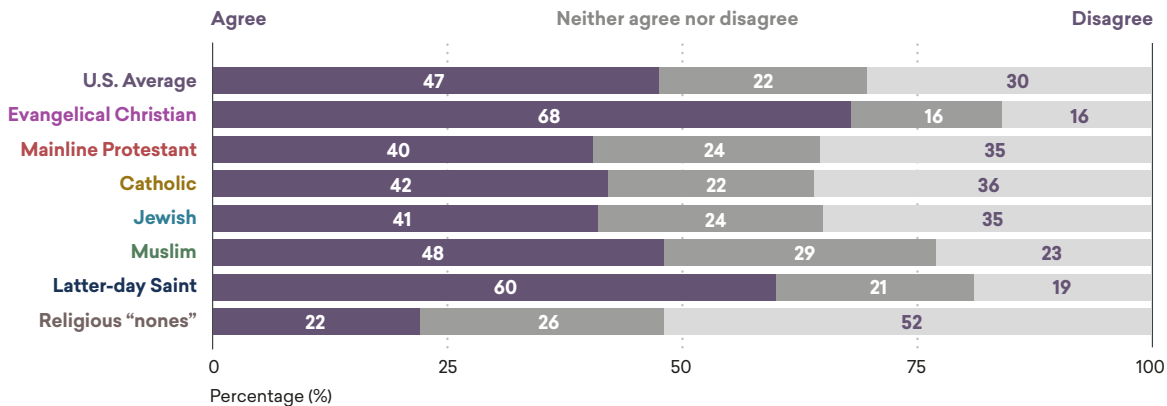
While this phenomenon has impacted public discourse about many faith communities, it has especially affected Americans’ perceptions of Evangelical Christians due to their association with political conservatism and Donald Trump. Our research finds that Americans’ most inaccurate perceptions about interactions between faith and politics have to do with the political identities of Evangelical Christians.

Associations between Evangelicals and political conservatism are not without merit, particularly when considering white Evangelicals. Polls show that a majority of white Evangelical Christians who voted in 2020 supported Donald Trump and the Republican Party.¹⁷ Our study found that almost half of Americans, including over two thirds of Evangelical Christians, say “my religious beliefs influence my political views.”

Figure 1.5

Around half of Americans feel that their religion influences their political views

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
“My religious beliefs influence my political views”



Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Religious beliefs, along with other core beliefs and moral values, constitute people’s worldviews, which in turn shape their political perspectives. However, Americans of faith are not seeking to extend their politics into their religious life, and rarely does the influence flow from politics to religion.

As we discovered through months of research and interviews, most Americans across Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities 1) do not engage in religion as a form of political activity; 2) do not prioritize their partisan affiliation over their faith identity; and 3) generally reject politics as central to being a member of any major faith group. This reality is often overlooked by the general public—we found that Americans significantly overestimate the centrality of politics and

¹⁷ Gregory A. Smith. “5 facts about religion and Americans’ views of Donald Trump.” Pew Research Center, March 15, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/15/5-facts-about-religion-and-americans-views-of-donald-trump/>.

partisanship to America’s faithful, especially for Evangelicals and Catholics.¹⁸ First exploring the relationship between faith and political identities, this chapter then highlights Americans’ perception gaps concerning Evangelicals and Catholics, and concludes by examining the role of politics that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities wish to see in their places of worship.

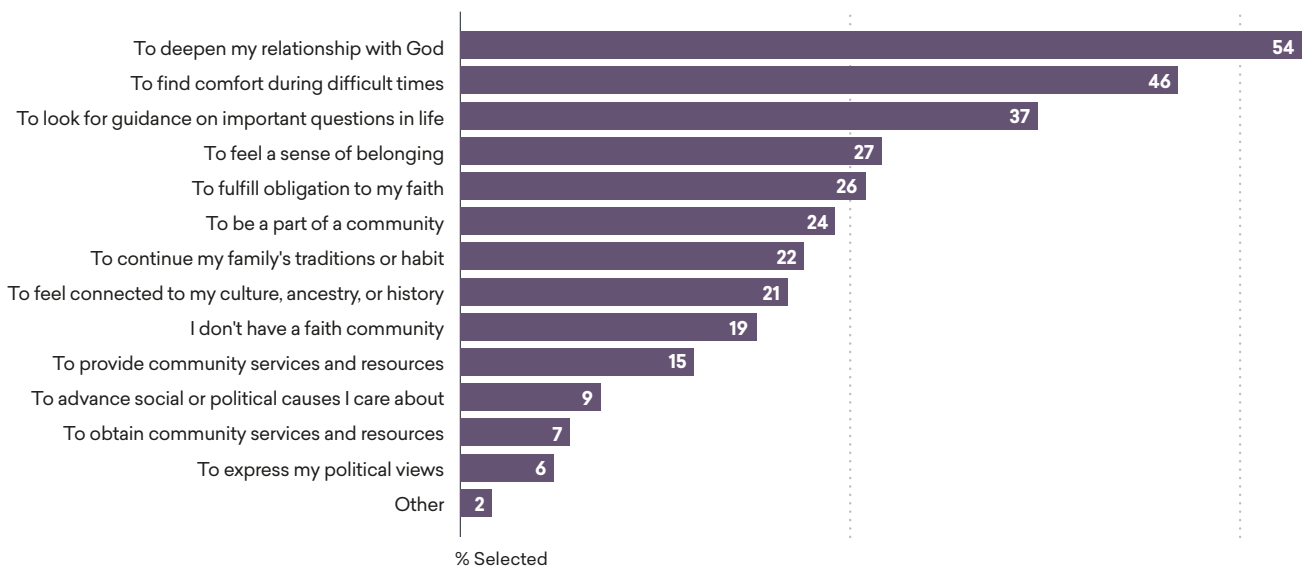
Americans seek faith for spirituality, not politics

For most Americans, religious life is defined by much more than partisan politics. The public’s perception gaps that often over-politicize faith communities risk overlooking the much more meaningful role that religion plays in shaping the values, identities, and daily lives of many Americans.

Political expression is among the *least* selected reasons why Americans turn to their faith. **Only six percent of Americans say they turn to their faith or faith community to express their political views. Fewer than one in ten Americans (nine percent) say they turn to their faith “to advance social or political causes.”** Instead, most Americans turn to their faith or faith communities for spiritual and emotional support, such as to deepen their relationship with God (54 percent), to find comfort during difficult times (46 percent), and to look for guidance in life (37 percent).

Figure 1.6 Most Americans turn to faith to deepen their relationship with God, rather than to advance political causes

Why do you turn to your faith or faith communities? Select all that apply.



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

This trend holds true across all major religious traditions, political parties, and demographics. No faith community, generation, or racial group has over one in six saying that they turn to their faith “to express their political views” or “to advance social or political causes.”

¹⁸ Perception gaps concerning American Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints and the role of partisan affiliation are also shown in this chapter, but they are either small in size or within margins of error.

Figure 1.7 **Few Americans across religious traditions turn to their faith for politics**

Why do you turn to your faith or faith communities? Select all that apply.

To express my political views To advance social or political causes I care about



% Selected

Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

For Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, and Latter-day Saints, deepening their relationship with God, finding comfort, and seeking guidance are the top three reasons why they turn to their faith or faith communities. Evangelicals especially emphasize the importance of deepening their relationship with God, with more than four in five (82 percent) making this a priority. For Catholics and Muslims, deepening their relationship with God is among the most cited reasons why they turn to their respective faith traditions, but so is continuing family traditions. Jewish Americans stand out as most likely to turn to faith to feel connected to their culture and ancestry (43 percent), continue family traditions (39 percent), and feel a sense of belonging (35 percent)—reflecting the fact that many Jewish Americans perceive Jewish identity as a blend of cultural heritage, ancestry, and/or religious affiliation.¹⁹

Figure 1.8 **Reasons for turning to faith**

Why do you turn to your faith or faith communities? Select all that apply.

% Selected	U.S. Average	Evangelical Christian	Mainline Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Muslim	Latter-day Saint
To deepen my relationship with God	54	82	58	49	28	50	73
To find comfort during difficult times	46	58	53	44	28	44	64
To look for guidance on important questions in life	37	50	35	33	22	34	61
To feel a sense of belonging	27	33	25	28	35	27	39
To fulfill obligation to my faith	26	36	22	28	21	39	45
To be a part of a community	24	29	22	21	34	26	40
To continue my family's traditions or habit	22	20	21	34	39	27	30
To feel connected to my culture, ancestry, or history	21	18	17	25	43	32	33
I don't have a faith community	19	6	16	17	23	7	6
To provide community services and resources	15	20	14	15	12	18	32
To advance social or political causes I care about	9	10	9	10	16	16	5
To obtain community services and resources	7	9	6	7	9	15	14
To express my political views	6	7	6	9	8	13	3
Other	2	2	2	1	1	0	1

Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

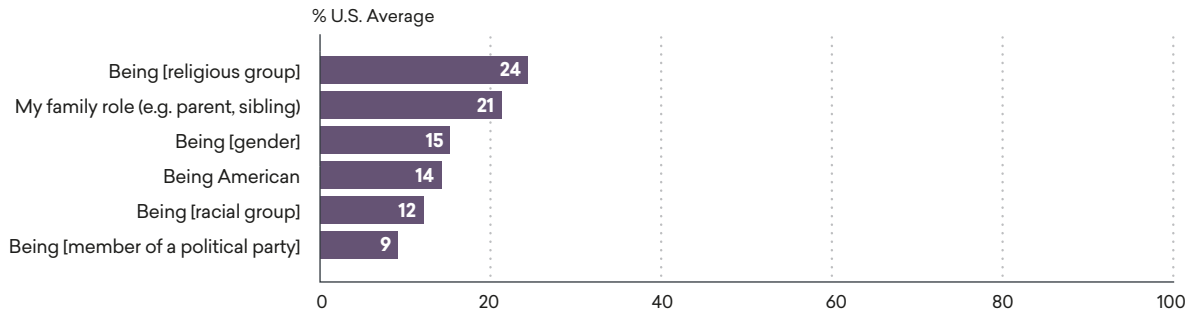
¹⁹ For more information on Jewish identity, see Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Religion or Ethnicity?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

Few Americans prioritize political identity

Political news headlines and public discourse can give the false impression that being a Democrat or a Republican is the most important part of how Americans see themselves. But **when asked which identity is most important to them, Americans are *least* likely to select political party affiliation.** Less than one in ten Americans (nine percent) put political identity first.

Figure 1.9 Few Americans say political identity is their most important identity

Which of the following identities is most important to you personally?



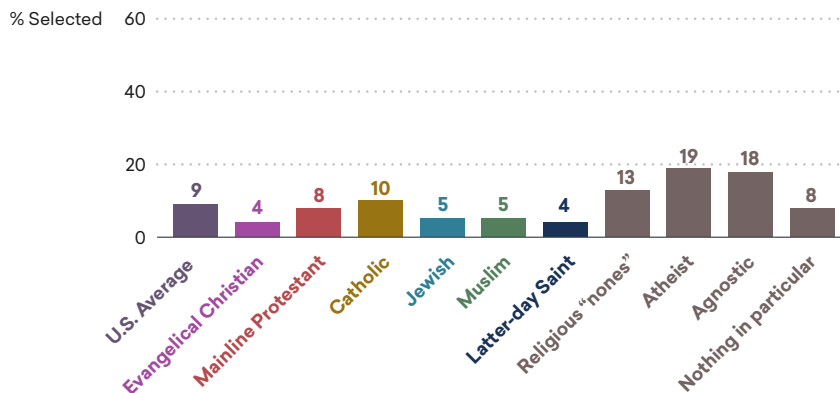
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Only about one in ten across Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Latter-day Saint communities say being a Democrat or Republican is their most important identity. Differences by political affiliation, race, and generation are also minimal. In comparison, religious “nones”, or those without a religious affiliation, are slightly more likely to prioritize political party affiliation. This is mostly driven by atheists and agnostics—almost one fifth of atheists (19 percent) and agnostics (18 percent) say being Democrat or Republican is their most important identity.

Figure 1.10 A larger share of Americans who identify as atheist or agnostic say political party affiliation is their most important identity

Which of the following identities is most important to you personally? - Being [political party member] (e.g. Being a Democrat/Independent/Republican)

Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024



Instead, **a large majority of Americans, across different religious traditions, put their family roles, faith, or being American at the center of their identity.** Around one in four Americans (24 percent) say that their faith identity is most important to them, followed by their family role (21 percent). For Americans of color, racial identity is also among their most important identities: 29 percent of Black Americans, 28 percent of Hispanic Americans, and 27 percent of Asian Americans say that their racial identity is most important to them.

“ For me, it's family. **I'm a husband, a brother, a son. I also belong to my church.** I actually commute an hour every Sunday for service. **It was a commitment that I decided to do because of the strong background and the support that I've received from my current pastor.**

– Cory, 34-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

“ I have a lot of different things that I'm passionate about. I do love my family. I love my friends. I am very focused on my faith. **Everything that I do in life, I know that I'm only doing it by the will of God.** I try to instill that in everybody that I talk to, especially my kids.

– Martha, 57-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Republican from Alabama

“ **My most important identity is definitely being a Muslim first and foremost, and I would say the second would be being a grandfather.** I have six kids and six grandchildren. There's nothing that's ever filled [me] with as much joy as a little child saying, “Grandpa, I love you.” It makes me the happiest I've ever been.

– Bradley, 44-year-old mixed-race man, Muslim, slightly liberal Independent from California

Are both Democrats and Republicans “good” Christians?

Few Americans across faith groups see supporting either political party as a criterion for being a good or faithful member of their religion. This includes Evangelicals, a faith group frequently associated with the Republican Party.

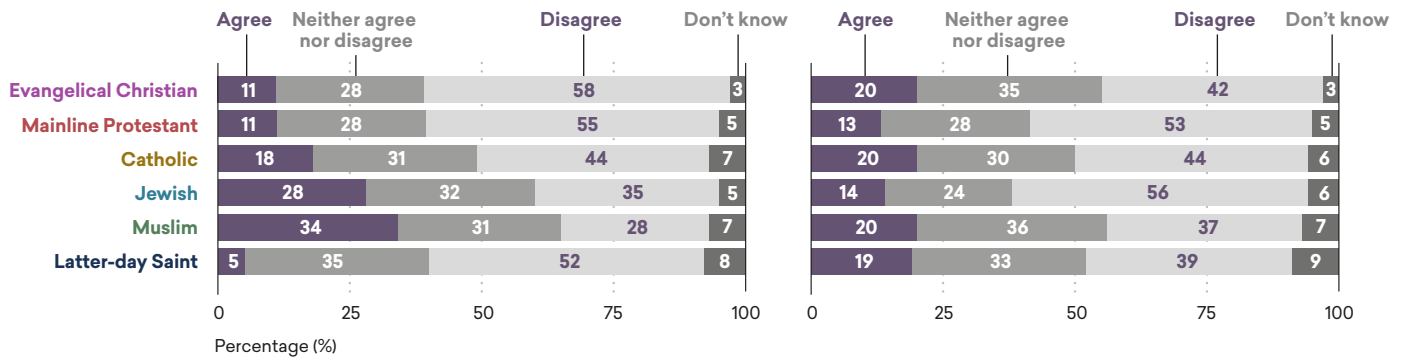
Figure 1.11

Only a small minority of Americans view partisan affiliation as key to religious devotion

"Being a good Christian/Catholic/Jew/Muslim/Latter-day Saint means ..."

supporting the **Democratic Party**

supporting the **Republican Party**



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024.

However, it is important to note that partisan affiliation has a strong effect on predicting who endorses the claim that to be a “good” Christian one must be a member of a specific political party. Three in ten Republican Evangelicals (30 percent) and three in ten Democratic Evangelicals (31 percent) say that “being a good Christian” means supporting their party.

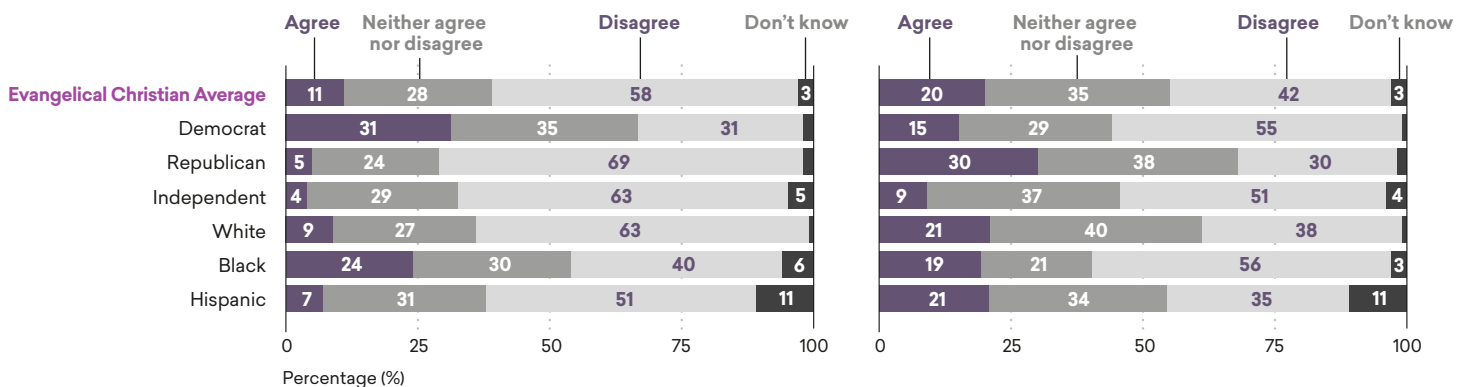
Figure 1.12

Around three in ten Democratic and Republican Evangelicals say being a good Christian means supporting their preferred party

"Being a good Christian means ..."

supporting the **Democratic Party**

supporting the **Republican Party**



Based on U.S. adults who identify as evangelical or born-again.
 Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024.

By contrast, most still emphasize that morality and values, rather than political party affiliation, define what it means to be a “good” Christian.

“ It’s ridiculous to say that [to be a good Christian you have to be a liberal]. I think [being a good Christian] has to do with your moral compass, not a political party.

– Brenda, 49-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Pennsylvania

“ I think a good Christian is much more complicated than just being liberal, conservative, Republican, or Democrat. Good Christians are concerned with the wellbeing of all people, regardless of sexual orientation, race, views towards abortion, etc. I think loving your enemy is what Jesus wants us to do. We don’t have to agree with them, but we treat them as human beings. We recognize their humanity. Maybe one day they’ll believe what we believe. Maybe they never will. But it’s our purpose to be disciples for Jesus to do that.

– Leroy, 73-year-old Black man, non-Evangelical Protestant, moderate Democrat from Georgia

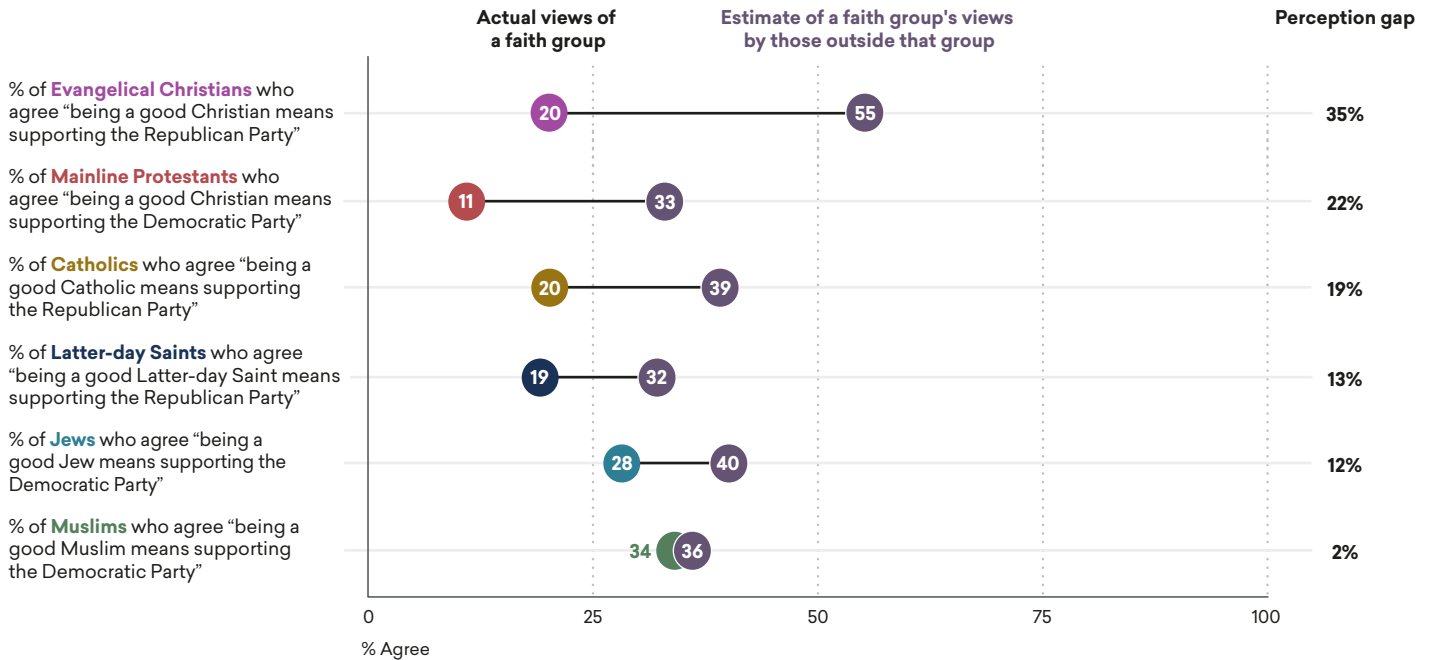
Perception gap: Americans’ over-politicization of Evangelicals and Catholics

Most Americans across faith groups turn to their faith for spiritual solace and prioritize their faith identity over their political party affiliation. However, our research found that the public’s perceptions significantly diverge from this reality, especially when it comes to Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics. Non-Evangelicals and non-Catholics overestimate the significance of political identities and partisan affiliation to Evangelicals and Catholics. Perception gaps concerning Latter-day Saints, Jews, and Muslims are smaller in comparison.²⁰

²⁰ Our study found that Americans overestimate the percentage of Mainline Protestants who agree that “being a good Christian means supporting the Democratic Party.” However, we did not find strong predictors of these misperceptions.

Figure 1.13

The general public overestimates the role of partisan identity in faith communities²¹



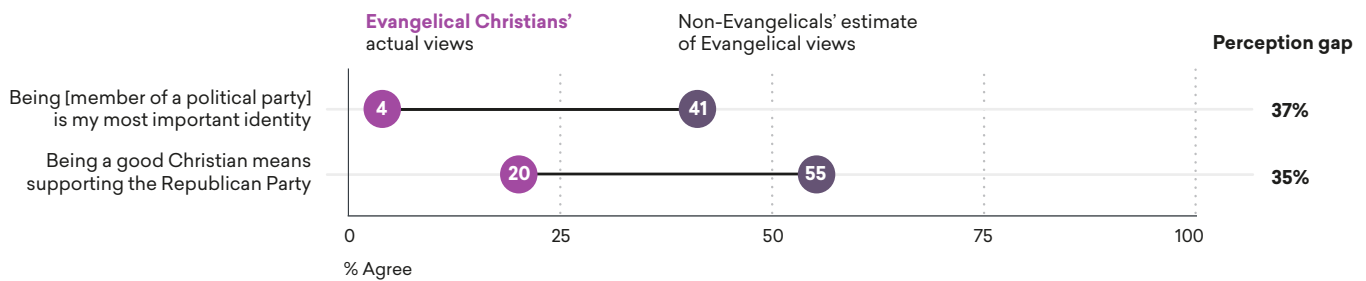
Note: Each "estimate" dot represents the estimate of a faith group's views by those outside that group. For instance, the first "estimate" dot shows the percentage of Evangelical Christians that non-Evangelicals think agree with the statement "being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party." The corresponding perception gap shows the disparity between what non-Evangelicals imagine Evangelicals to believe and what Evangelicals actually believe.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Perception gaps regarding Evangelicals

Americans overestimate by ten times how much Evangelicals prioritize being a member of their political party. Non-Evangelicals estimate that 41 percent of Evangelicals say their political identity is their most important identity. Surprisingly, even Evangelicals are inaccurate in their estimates: Evangelicals think that 37 percent of their group would say that political identity is their most important identity. In reality, only four percent of Evangelicals say so. The majority of Evangelicals in fact view being Christian as their most important identity (58 percent).

Figure 1.14

Non-Evangelicals overestimate the importance of political identity and Republican party affiliation to Evangelicals



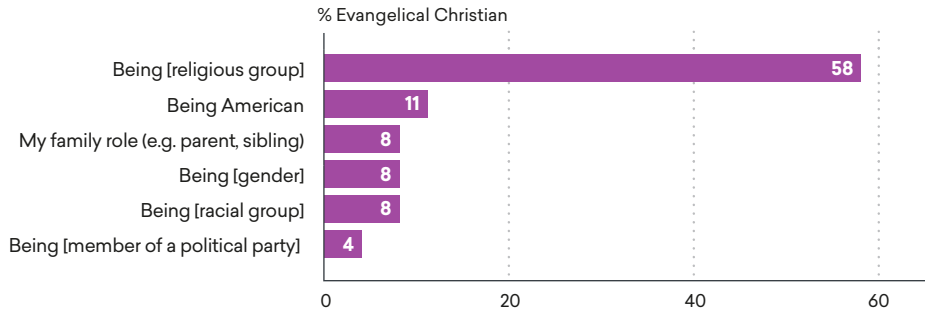
Note: Each perception gap shows the disparity between what non-Evangelicals imagine Evangelicals to believe and what Evangelicals actually believe.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

²¹ Due to limited survey time, we focused on perception gap questions related to party affiliations typically associated with each community. For instance, since Evangelical Christians are often associated with political conservatives, we asked respondents to estimate the percentage of Evangelicals who believe that "being a good Christian means supporting the Republican party." This approach helps understand how stereotypes about political affiliations may influence perceptions of religious groups.

The general public also **overestimates** how much Evangelicals consider supporting the Republican Party to be a necessary part of “being a good Christian.” Non-Evangelicals think that the majority of American Evangelicals (55 percent) believe “being a good Christian” means supporting the Republican Party. Only 20 percent of Evangelicals actually hold that view.

Figure 1.15 Most Evangelicals say being Christian is their most important identity

Which of the following identities is most important to you personally?



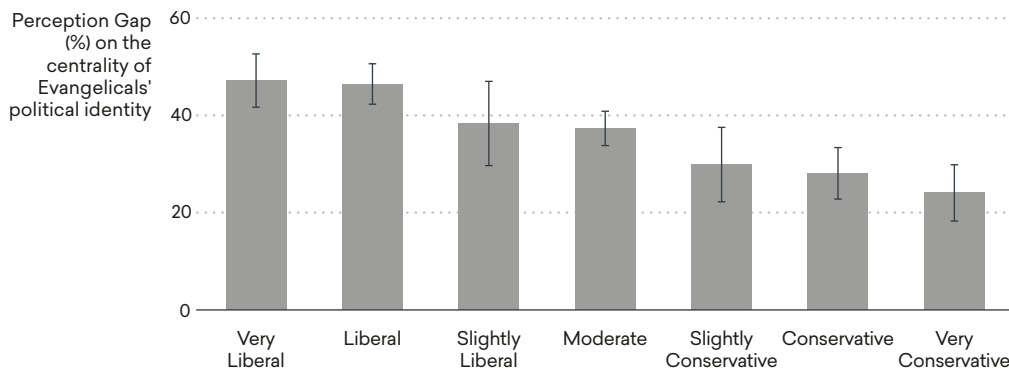
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Among non-Evangelicals, two factors appear to influence the misunderstandings and exaggerations about the strength of Evangelicals’ political identities. First, **political leaning** significantly impacts Americans’ perception of Evangelical communities. Second, the more frequently a person **uses social media**, the larger the perception gap regarding the strength of Evangelicals’ political identity. Rather than exposing individuals to different perspectives, using social media appears to *further distort* people’s understanding of Evangelical Christians.

Political ideology: Among non-Evangelicals, the more *liberal* they are, the *larger* their misperceptions of Evangelicals (the more they overestimate the strength of Evangelicals’ political identities).

Figure 1.16 Liberal political ideology correlates with misperceptions of Evangelical Christians

The more liberal non-Evangelicals are, the greater their misperceptions about Evangelicals’ political identity importance



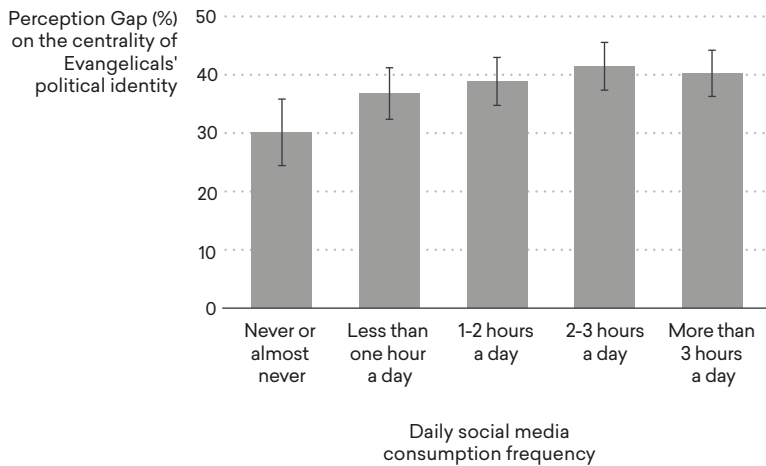
Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Frequency of social media usage: Among non-Evangelicals, the more *frequently* they use *social media*, the *larger* their misperceptions of Evangelicals (the more they overestimate the strength of Evangelicals' political identities).

Figure 1.17

Social media consumption correlates with misperceptions of Evangelical Christians

The more frequently non-Evangelicals use social media, the greater their misperceptions about Evangelicals' political identity importance



Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

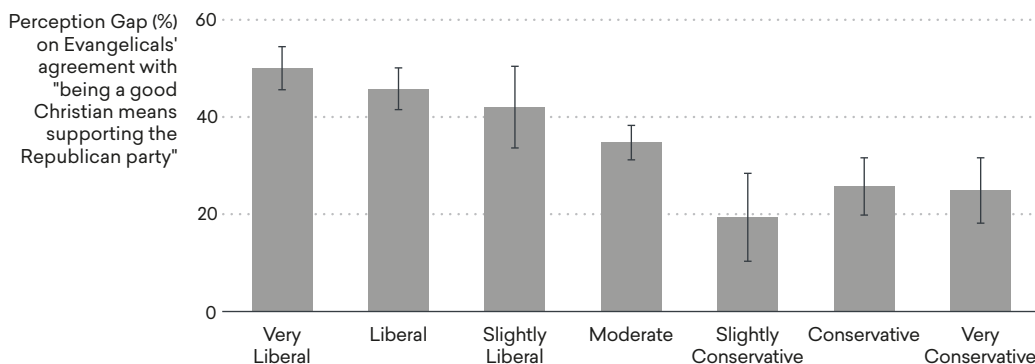
Political ideology and negative feelings towards Evangelicals appear to influence the misperceptions that Evangelicals believe being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party.

Political ideology: Among non-Evangelicals, the more *liberal* they are, the *larger* their misperceptions of Evangelicals (the more they overestimate how many Evangelicals believe “being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party”).

Figure 1.18

Liberal political ideology correlates with misperceptions of Evangelical Christians

The more liberal non-Evangelicals are, the greater their misperceptions about Evangelicals



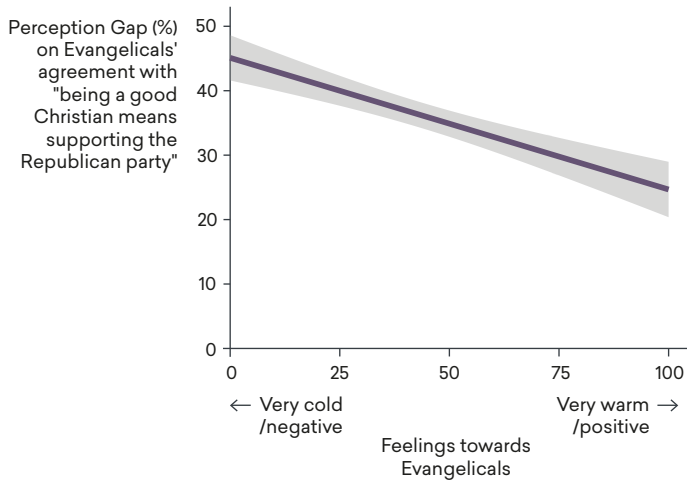
Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Feelings towards Evangelicals: Among non-Evangelicals, the *colder* they feel towards Evangelicals, the *larger* their misperceptions of Evangelicals (the more they overestimate how many Evangelicals believe “being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party”).

Figure 1.19

Negative feelings towards Evangelicals correlate with misperceptions

The more negatively non-Evangelicals feel towards Evangelicals, the greater their misperceptions about Evangelicals



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Evangelicals and belief inaccuracy. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Given the relationship between misperceptions of Evangelicals and negative attitudes towards the group, Evangelicals may see their reputation suffer further in a context of increased party division and ideological polarization. Elevating a diverse range of evangelical voices to greater prominence, perhaps especially on social media, may allow Evangelicals to correct the misperception that Evangelism is all about politics and supporting the Republican Party. Talking about the Evangelical faith beyond voting behaviors may also help uphold an image that is distinct from politics.

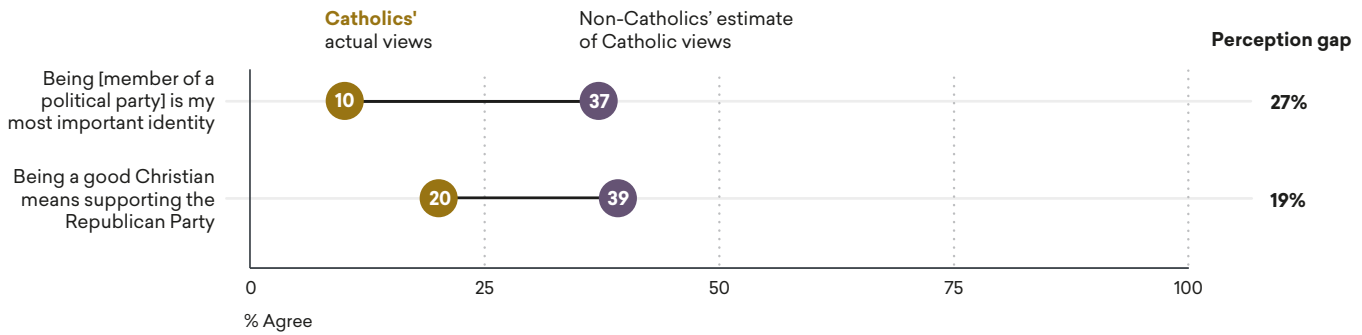
Perception gaps regarding Catholics

When it comes to the importance of political identity, Americans have the largest perception gaps regarding Evangelicals, but misperceptions of Catholics are not far behind.

Americans overestimate by almost fourfold how much Catholics prioritize being a member of their political party. Non-Catholics think that 37 percent of Catholics say their political identity is the most important part of their identity. Instead, a plurality of Catholics (27 percent) choose their family role, such as being a parent or a sibling, as their most important identity.

Figure 1.20

Non-Catholics overestimate the importance of political identity and Republican party affiliation to Catholics



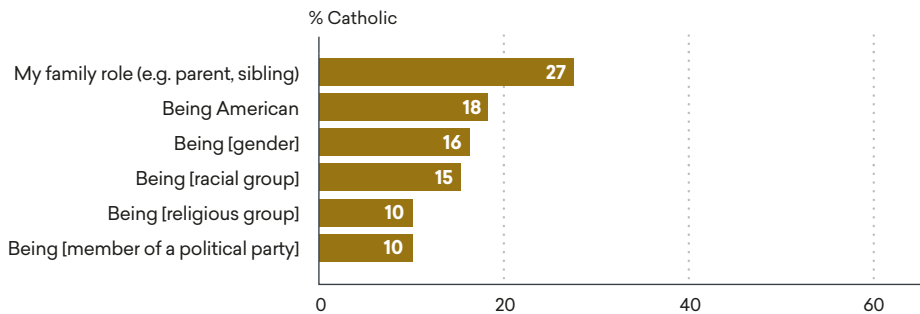
Note: Each perception gap shows the disparity between what non-Catholics imagine Catholics to believe and what Catholics actually believe.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

The general public also assigns an outsized role to partisan affiliation in Catholic communities. **Non-Catholics estimate that 39 percent of Catholics agree that “being a good Catholic means supporting the Republican Party,” whereas only 20 percent of Catholics agree.**

Figure 1.21

Most Catholics prioritize their family role and American identity over their political identity

Which of the following identities is most important to you personally?



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

“**An important identity to me is being a mother.** My children are older now, but I still am part of their lives. It is very important to me also because my mother raised me as a single mother, and she worked really hard to take care of me.
– Cecilia, 47-year-old mixed-race woman, Catholic, moderate Democrat from New York

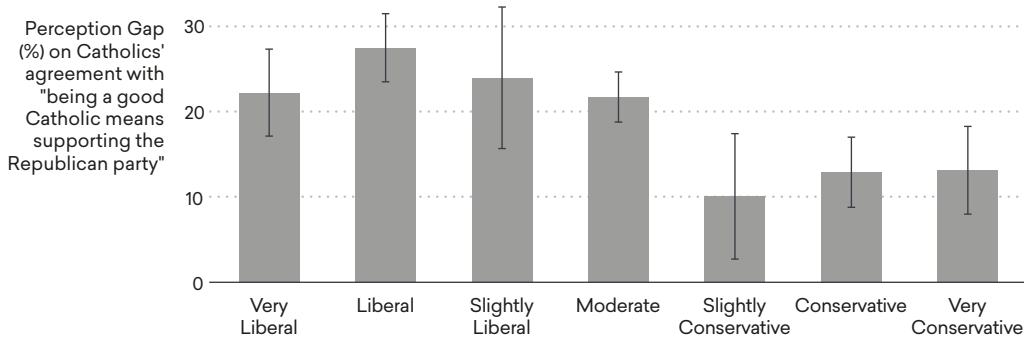
Our analysis found no strong predictors of misperceptions about how much Catholics prioritize political identities. **Political ideology** and **negative feelings** towards Catholics appear to influence the misperception that Catholics think being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party.

Political ideology: Among non-Catholics, the more *liberal* they are, the *larger* their misperceptions of Catholics (the more they overestimate how many Catholics believe “being a good Catholic means supporting the Republican Party”).

Figure 1.22

Liberal political ideology correlates with misperceptions of Catholics

The more liberal non-Catholics are, the greater their misperceptions about Catholics’ political identity importance



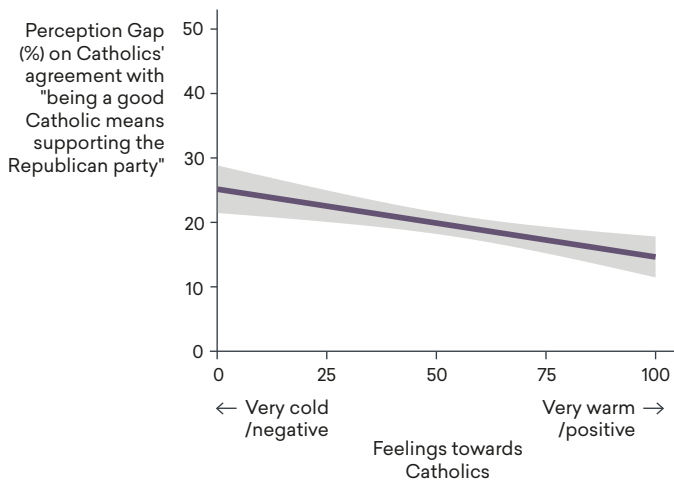
Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Feelings towards Catholics: Among non-Catholics, the *colder* they feel towards Catholics, the *larger* their misperceptions of Catholics (the more they overestimate how many Catholics believe “being a good Christian means supporting the Republican Party”).

Figure 1.23

Negative feelings towards Catholics correlate with misperceptions

The more negatively one feels towards Catholics, the bigger their perception gap on Catholics



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Catholics and belief inaccuracy. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Similar to Evangelicals, Catholics risk damaging relations with outside groups if misperceptions about them run unchecked. Highlighting the ideological diversity of Catholics and the communities' commitment to rejecting partisanship in religious settings may help correct perception gaps and foster a more nuanced understanding of their faith. By emphasizing their focus on faith over politics, Catholic communities can mitigate negative assumptions and cultivate a more inclusive image.

Americans' misperceptions about political identity reveal that in our polarized age, people too often allow politics to shape the way they view their neighbors, when for about nine in ten Americans, their political identity is simply not the most important part of who they are.

Misperceptions are harmful as they gloss over the rich diversity of viewpoints and identities among Americans of faith. They position people from those faith communities at the center of the dynamics of polarization in today's America. This causes many of America's faithful to feel misunderstood, misrepresented, and under attack, worsening intergroup relations and further fueling negative polarization. (In the chapter "Why many faith groups feel under attack: the impact of perception gaps," we explore in greater detail the consequences of misperceptions and psychological threat across faith communities). The exaggerated influence of political identity and partisanship also clouds the public's understanding of the real attitudes that Americans of faith have towards political discussions in religious settings.

The role of politics in religious settings

Although politics plays a smaller role in Americans' religious life than commonly assumed, faith still shapes many Americans' views on social and political issues and can inspire active political engagement. From the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s, to the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the right to life movement in the 1980s, faith leaders and communities have often been at the forefront of shaping political discourse.

Americans of faith express a much lower willingness to engage in religious settings with issues they perceive as political or partisan, as opposed to social.

It is important to acknowledge that the distinction between social and political issues is subjective—some see social issues as inherently political, whereas others define political issues as issues specifically related to electoral politics.

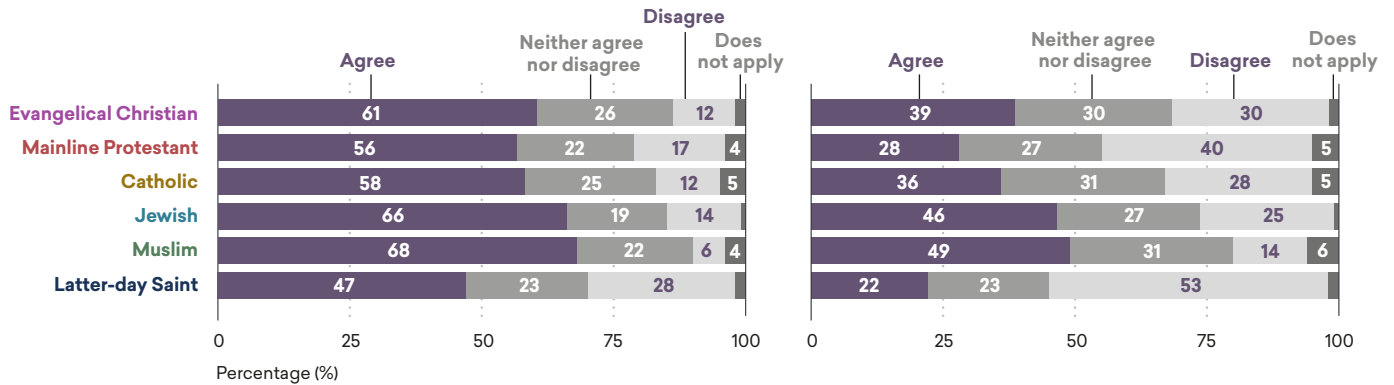
Figure 1.24

Most Americans of faith favor discussions on social issues in religious settings, but split on political discussions

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

"Discussing **social issues** should be an important part of congregational life"

"Discussing **political issues** should be an important part of congregational life"



Based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Due to the subjective nature of such interpretations, our surveys did not give specific definitions for social and political issues. Our findings indicate that the *framing* matters: there is generally a stronger appetite for religious engagement with issues presented as social rather than political.

Among Americans who attend religious services at least a few times a year, the majority across most faith communities say that discussing *social* issues should be an important part of congregational life. However, agreement scores drop when asked if discussing *political* issues should be an important part of congregational life. When it comes to political discussions, worshippers are divided: a sizable minority believes that it is an essential part of congregational life, whereas others disagree, or have no opinion.

The appetite for political conversations in places of worship is lowest among Christian groups. For example, over half of Mainline Protestants (56 percent) support discussions on *social* issues in their congregations, but fewer than three in ten (28 percent) support *political* conversations in religious settings. Latter-day Saints are least likely to support political conversations in religious settings. Only around one in five (22 percent) agree that discussing political issues should be an important part of congregational life.

Many Christians feel that religious settings should remain non-political, focus on scripture and values, and be welcoming to people of different beliefs.

“ I don't think I would like it if they started talking about politics during church, because I'd rather hear about the Word. So I think that would turn me off if a church was real political.

– James, 32-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, moderate Republican from Missouri

“ My pastor, I couldn't tell you if he was Democrat or Republican, but his messages, he preaches the Word. **He'll say, I don't care if you're Republican or if you're Democrat, you help your fellow man. And that's what you're supposed to be saying, not vote for this person or vote for that person.**

– Ines, 67-year-old Hispanic woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from New York

Some Americans of faith also worry that political conversations may cause conflicts or tension, or even disrupt communal bonds.

“ I prefer not to talk about politics because **it always leads to conflict and tension.** I'm just nervous to mention politics because it's just a very iffy subject, and **people always somehow get offended** for issues that don't even pertain to them.

– Shayna, 23-year-old mixed-race woman, Orthodox Jewish, moderate Independent from New York

“ **I just don't want to rock the boat.** I see a lot of the same faces every week. I don't want to get into some sort of argument with someone, and then there's bad blood between us, and we see each other every week.

– Ryan, 48-year-old white man, Catholic, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

In Muslim and Jewish congregations, people are more likely to see value in discussing politics in their places of worship. This willingness may be borne out of a desire to advance relations with those outside of their communities,²² or may reflect the fact that Jewish and Muslim communities in America are often directly affected by political decisions. For example, the travel bans and immigration policy of the Trump administration, and the United States' current policies with regards to Israel and Palestine, have a direct impact on the lives of some community members' loved ones and influence how faithful Americans are perceived by their neighbors.

A similar trend plays out when it comes to political discussions from the pulpit. Among those who attend religious services a few times a year or more, around half (50 percent) want to hear their religious leaders discuss *social* issues. In comparison, only one in four (26 percent) want *political* discussions during a worship service. Most also draw a firm line at *partisanship* in religious settings—only around one in five (22 percent) want to hear a specific candidate endorsed from the pulpit.²³ Latter-day Saints are least in favor of politics in the pulpit, with only one in ten supporting political discussions (11 percent) and candidate endorsements (nine percent) from faith leaders—a reflection of the Church's stance of neutrality in matters of politics.²⁴

²² Joseph Hammond, “Study Finds the American Mosque Increasingly a Melting Pot of Islamic Traditions,” *Interfaith America*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/study-finds-the-american-mosque-increasingly-a-melting-pot-of-islamic-traditions/>.

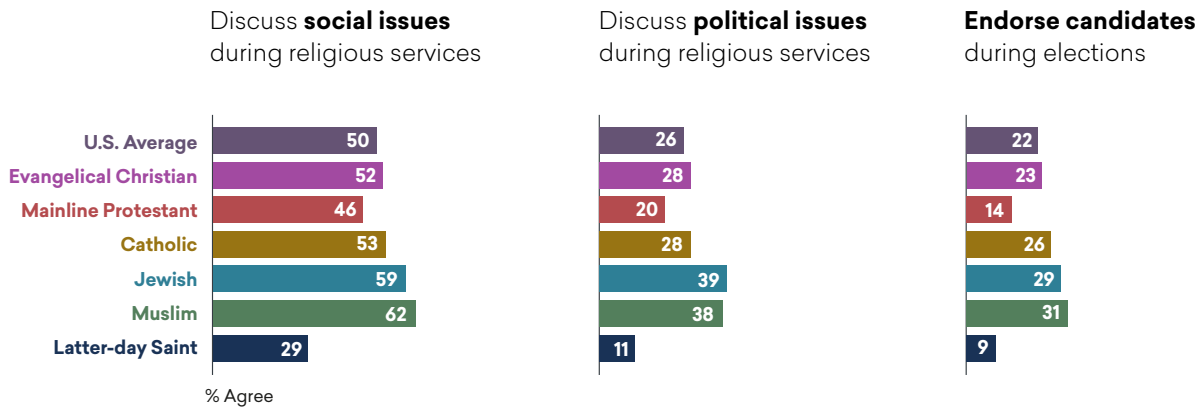
²³ The variations by partisan affiliation are small. Democrats and Republicans who attend services a few times a year or more have similar levels of support for conversations on social issues (51 percent strongly or somewhat agree), political discussions (28 percent strongly or somewhat agree), and candidate endorsement (26 percent strongly or somewhat agree) from the pulpit, while Independents are less likely to support political discussions (20 percent) and candidate endorsement (12 percent).

²⁴ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Political Neutrality and Participation,” *Newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, June 1, 2023, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/official-statement/political-neutrality>.

Figure 1.25

Most Americans across faith traditions support their religious leaders discussing social issues during services, but oppose official endorsement of candidates

"The religious leaders at my church/synagogue/mosque/ward should..."



Based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
 Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Around four in ten in Jewish and Muslim congregations support faith leaders at their places of worship discussing political issues during services—considerably more than Christian congregations or parishes. While many are reluctant to have public discussions about national elections, some feel that rabbis and imams should talk about local political issues. Many believe that their faith leaders are trusted community leaders who have a responsibility to keep people informed on politics, or advocate for Jewish and Muslim communities in wider American society.

“ I never would have thought that a faith leader would talk about, necessarily a presidential election, but **maybe bring in local elected officials to come talk about what they’re doing to fight antisemitism** in your community or providing security for your synagogues. In that sense, **locally, I think it’s really helpful to get the perspective of our faith leaders and people we look up to.**

– Tamar, 25-year-old white woman, Orthodox Jewish, conservative Republican from New Jersey

“ I think one of the issues that comes up when having a political debate or discussion is that, especially within Judaism, the texts and opinions, especially once you get to the Mishnah and the Talmud, opinions are so unbelievably vast. **It’s probably better to frame those discussions from a perspective of what can we do as a community to help people in need, or what can we do as a community to advocate for things that are important to us as Jews.**

– Eli, 21-year-old white man, Orthodox Jewish, liberal Democrat from Maryland

“ I just feel like we live in the real world, and **to sugarcoat anything in today’s time is almost keeping people in the dark.** I really think that the imam should be as honest as possible. **A lot of people are not informed about politics. So to hear it from your imam, it’s a good thing.** You should know what’s going on. So I don’t think anything is off limits. I’ve never been to a mosque that talks about anything that’s truly inappropriate.

– Monica, 45-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Democrat from South Carolina

“ I’m going to use the situation in Gaza happening right now as an example, and I’m sure imams are talking about it because it’s so closely related to Islam. But **I think [leaders of other faiths] like priests should be talking about [Gaza] too, because it is their duty in every religion to protect civilians. They have a platform, people are listening to them, people respect them, and therefore will take into consideration what they’re saying.**

– Kiara, 24-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from Minnesota

Many Jewish and Muslim Americans look to faith leaders for advice and guidance on how to deal with the profound tensions, fear, and pain within their communities in the context of the Israel-Hamas war, as well as the rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred in the U.S. Some emphasize that while elections and policy outcomes are crucial to protecting their communities and causes, they are most in need of spiritual care and comfort.

“ I don’t know if synagogue is the right place for political discussion. I’m not necessarily going to my rabbis for their political views. I think that with certain events, like with October 7, [I would prefer] more [discussions] on the religious level, not so much on the political level. **More of how we can grow from this, what to pray for, as opposed to “what’s the president doing”, because ultimately, that’s the rabbi’s role. His role is to guide us in Judaism and to be the source of strength.**

– Rebecca, 27-year-old white woman, Orthodox Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois

“ My masjid is predominantly Middle Easterners, so of course they’re affected by what’s going on. There is a lot of pain, agony, confusion, and frustration in that community. **Some of us see pictures online or hear [about the war] on the news, but for these people, that’s family and friends to them. It’s heartbreaking. My imam is definitely preaching about that.**

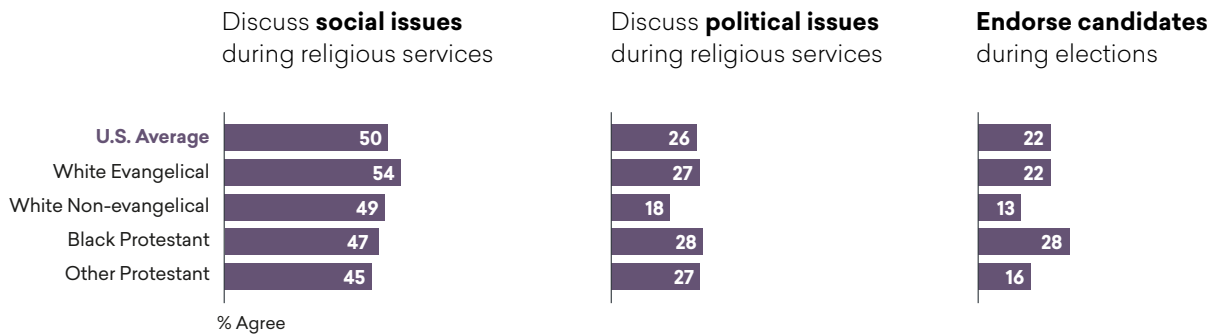
– Sara, 41-year-old Black woman, Muslim, slightly liberal Independent from California

Historically, Black churches have been at the forefront of political and racial progress. Nearly half of Black Protestants support discussions on social issues in religious settings. However, like other groups, support for more politically oriented conversations from the pulpit is lower. Approximately three in ten Black Protestants (28 percent) agree that leaders at their church should discuss political issues, a level similar to White Evangelical Protestants (27 percent) and other (Hispanic, Asian American, multiracial, or Native American) Protestants (27 percent).

Figure 1.26

Most Protestants value discussions on social issues in the pulpit, but less supportive of political conversations

"The religious leaders at my church should ..."



Based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Some Black Protestants express support for conversations on the issues of police brutality and racism, but many make a clear distinction between social justice topics and politics.

“**Politics, no. Social issues, yes. If there’s an injustice, for instance, that would definitely be brought up [in my church], and we fundraise for it...**


It’s up to the leaders of our church to make everyone feel welcome because we don’t want anyone who is looking for Christ, anyone who’s looking to be a part of a church or a community, to feel like they’re being discriminated against, or they’re being treated differently. **No matter what their beliefs are, if they’re there in the house of the Lord, we want to make sure that they’re at least able to feel the sermon, feel the presence, and not feel like they are unsafe while they’re in that environment.**

– Cory, 34-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

Other Black Protestants, however, hope that Black churches in general can have more political conversations. Some view political discussions in churches as a continuation of the Black Church’s legacy from the civil rights movement and an expression of faith rooted in scripture.

“**It seems as though the Black Church has gotten behind the curve as far as being on the forefront of political issues. The church was where all the political issues used to be discussed back during the times of Dr. King.** That’s where people got together to learn about the social issues that were going on. **And today, we don’t have that.** I just feel like the Black churches went to sleep for a little while.

– Evelyn, 56-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Independent from Texas

 I've always believed that our religious leaders should speak up and have a voice because everybody in society is going to speak, and we certainly need to hear from what the Lord is saying. If you look in the Bible, John the Baptist spoke to politics. Jesus spoke to politics. Moses spoke to politics. Daniel spoke to politics. **All throughout the Bible, religious leaders have always spoken truth to power.**

– Preston, 52-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican

Americans' appetite for political discussions clearly depends on the specific faith tradition to which they belong, the issues that affect their communities, the historical norms around political discussions, as well as their personal convictions. Perceptions that Americans of faith embrace political campaigning and partisan mobilization as a normal activity within religious settings are inaccurate.

Many Americans perceive politics to be a driving force in the faith communities they do not belong to, especially when describing Evangelical Christians. That misperception flattens religion into just another expression of political viewpoints, or portrays religious and political identity as equivalent in value to the believer.

For many Americans of faith, their values are deeply rooted in their religious beliefs, which *do* influence their political perspectives. However, political party affiliation and candidate endorsement are not what most people of faith associate with their religious identity, nor do they expect their leaders to opine on such things. Americans of faith mostly see politics and spiritual life as distinctive. They clearly differentiate between their own religious and political identities, and do not consider voting habits or party affiliation to be a litmus test for what makes a devout believer. What *does* matter—the reasons people of faith choose to practice their religion—has far more to do with spiritual, personal edification and social belonging than it does with political expression.

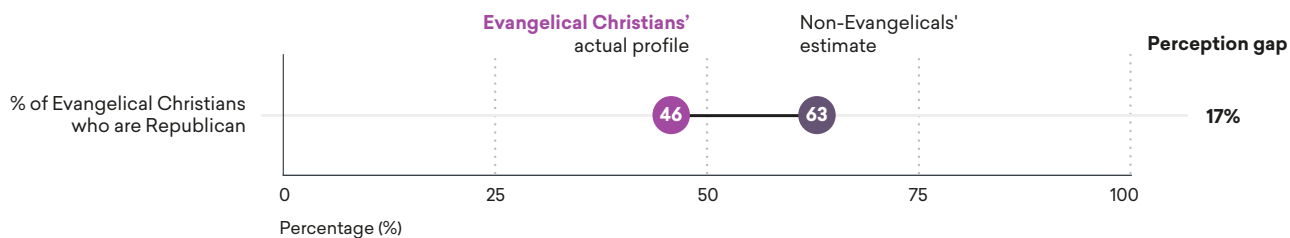
Featured insights: Evangelical Christians—Victims of “Collateral Contempt”?

One prominent example of the politicization of religious groups is the perceived alignment between Evangelical Christians and the Republican Party. Our research found that social media conversations and news articles about Evangelicals frequently reference conservative political figures and groups, especially President Trump. When asked what comes to mind when they see the term “Evangelical Christians,” many Americans use terms such as “conservative,” “Republican,” or “right-wing.”

It may be unsurprising then, that non-Evangelicals often overestimate the percentage of Evangelicals who are Republican. Non-Evangelicals estimate that close to two thirds of Evangelicals are Republican (63 percent estimate) when less than half are (46 percent in reality).

Figure 1.A

American overestimate the percentage of Evangelicals who are Republican



Note: The perception gap shows the disparity between the actual percentage of Evangelicals who are Republicans and the percentage that non-Evangelicals believe are Republicans.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

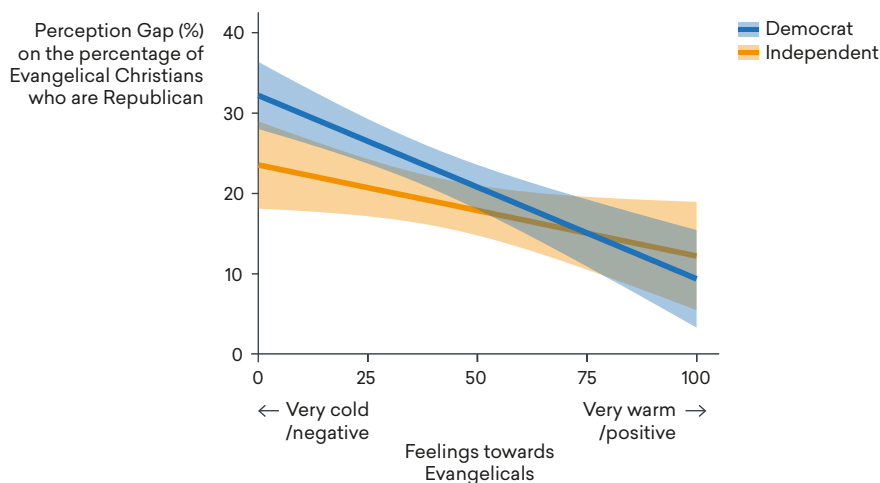
The truth is that Evangelicals do not overwhelmingly belong to any single political party. Republicans make up 46 percent of Evangelical Christians, while around 22 percent of Evangelicals are Democrats. About 26 percent consider themselves Independents. The assumption that most Evangelicals are Republican does not hold true particularly among younger generations. Young Evangelicals show a notable partisan diversity—Gen Z Evangelicals (those born after 1996) are evenly distributed among Democrats (32 percent), Independents (31 percent), and Republicans (28 percent).

The misperception that most Evangelicals are Republican has significant consequences. Our research indicates that Democrats and Independents who overestimate the percentage of Republicans among Evangelicals tend to have more negative views towards all Evangelicals. For instance, a Democrat who believes that 80 percent of Evangelicals are Republican, is more likely to feel very coldly towards all Evangelical Christians. Conversely, a Democrat with more accurate estimates of the partisan composition of Evangelicals, or a smaller perception gap, is more likely to have warmer feelings towards Evangelical Christians.

Figure 1.B

Effects of collateral contempt on Evangelical Christians

The more Democrats and Independents overestimate percentage of Evangelicals who are Republican, the more negatively they feel towards all Evangelicals



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Evangelicals and belief inaccuracy about the political affiliation of Evangelicals. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

We call this phenomenon **“collateral contempt”**—the tendency for animosity towards political opponents to spill over to religious groups that are perceived to be aligned with one political team. In our climate of heightened political polarization, political association can lead to generalized hostility towards entire faith communities based on their supposed political affiliation.

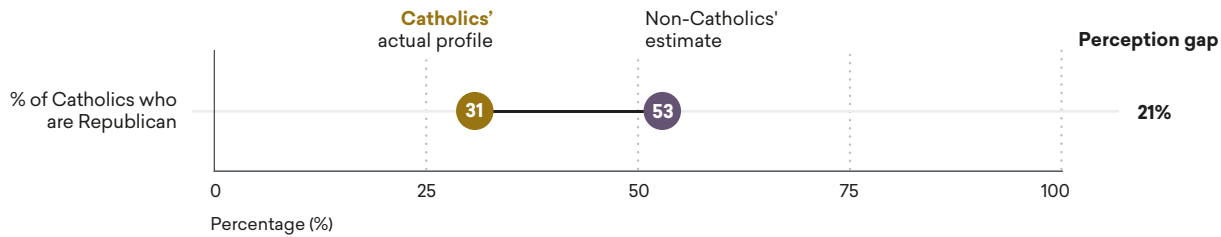
In this instance, Evangelicals are viewed negatively or disliked by some due to their perceived proximity with the Republican Party in our hyper-polarized and partisan environment. Animosity from Democrats and Independents towards Republicans is also directed towards all who identify as Evangelical, overlooking the ideological diversity within Evangelicals in America.

In reality, non-Republican Evangelicals hold their faith just as dearly. Democratic and Independent Evangelicals are just as likely as their Republican counterparts to say being Christian is an important part of their identity (92 percent versus 97 percent versus 96 percent), to say that religion is a very important part of their lives (79 percent versus 79 percent versus 88 percent), and to attend religious services at least a few times a month (63 percent versus 62 percent versus 63 percent). Recognizing the diversity within Evangelical communities and promoting a wide array of Evangelical voices are crucial steps towards addressing misperceptions and correcting the polarizing stereotypes that affect Evangelicals.

In addition, our research found that Catholics are also subject to what we describe as collateral contempt. Non-Catholics believe that over half of Catholics are Republican (53 percent), while in reality, Republicans constitute less than one third (31 percent). Democrats who overestimate the percentage of Republicans among Catholics tend to have more negative views towards all Catholics—misdirecting their partisan hostility and contempt towards an entire faith group due to their perceived political affiliation. Collateral contempt overlooks the fact that the American Catholic community is heterogeneous, with no single political party holding a majority.

Figure 1.C

Americans overestimate the percentage of Catholics who are Republican

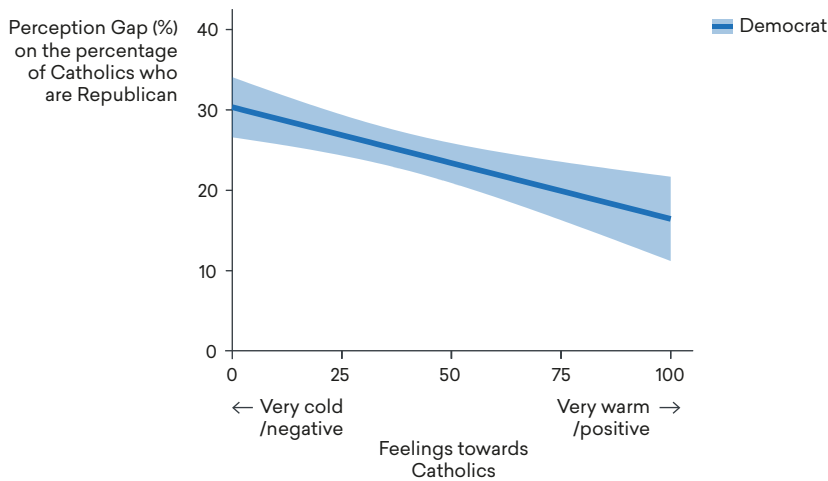


Note: The perception gap shows the disparity between the actual percentage of Catholics who are Republicans and the percentage that non-Catholics believe are Republicans.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Figure 1.D

Effects of collateral contempt on Catholics

The more Democrats overestimate percentage of Catholics who are Republican, the more negatively they feel towards all Catholics



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Catholics and belief inaccuracy about the political affiliation of Catholics. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

In the 2020s, the emergence of young conservative Catholic public figures, such as Ohio Senator JD Vance, the 2024 Republican vice presidential nominee, has garnered significant media attention.²⁵ This focus on conservative Catholic politicians might lead to more people broadly associating Catholics with the Republican Party. Such associations can mirror the perceived alignment between Evangelicals and political conservatism, often emphasized in news and public discussions. These associations might increase the risk of collateral contempt, where hostility arises due to perceived political affiliations, not actual beliefs or practices.

²⁵ Matthew Schmitz, "Catholic Converts Like JD Vance Are Reshaping Republican Politics," New York Times, August 14, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/14/opinion/jd-vance-catholic-convert-republican.html>; Michelle Boorstein, "JD Vance's Catholic Conversion is Part of Young Conservative Movement," Washington Post, July 29, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/07/29/jd-vance-religion-catholic-republican-vp/>; Michael Sean Winters, "What to Make of Conservative Catholics in the New York Times," National Catholic Reporter, August 14, 2024, <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/what-make-conservative-catholics-new-york-times>

To counteract collateral contempt, it is important to emphasize the diversity within Catholic communities and challenge the narratives that paint Catholics as a monolithic bloc. Highlighting Catholic perspectives and stories outside of politics can also help mitigate misunderstandings and foster a more nuanced view of Catholic communities.

Moreover, further research is essential to understand how the “collateral contempt” framework applies to other faith communities and their perceived positions on controversial topics. For example, how perceptions of Christians’, Jews’, and Muslims’ stances on topics such as abortion and Israel/Palestine influence hostility towards these groups. Understanding how misperceptions contribute to broader patterns of animosity and polarization can help mitigate conflicts and build relationships across different faith communities.

Misperception 2: Faith is becoming irrelevant in Americans' lives

“ You see what a lot of our young people are doing. It's like they don't have any restraint...Christianity needs to be able to step in and try to give guidance to these young people, because it's concerning our grandchildren growing up in this world. And if Christianity don't have a voice, if they're not listening to us, who are they listening to? **It concerns me as a pastor to see the young people that pass by the church and don't come anymore.**

– Preston, 52-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican

“ We're not as active as far as going [to church] physically, but we do stream [Mass] most Sundays. And I still incorporate [religion] heavily in my life now... **I involve God in every aspect of my day.** I start the day off in prayer and meditation. **When I'm making decisions, I try to reference what is morally correct based on my religious standpoint.**

– Tina, 36-year-old Black woman, Catholic, very liberal Democrat from Texas

A common perception of religious communities that grips the public imagination is that faith is on the decline—that younger, more secularized Americans are leaving religious communities and finding their identity and belonging elsewhere. Reporters cover the struggles of Conservative Jewish synagogues,²⁶ and op-eds muse over mainline churches with grim images of “death” and “emptying.”²⁷

The media's emphasis on the “dechurching” phenomenon is undeniably justified. The population of religious “nones”—Americans with no religious affiliation—has increased from approximately 16 percent in 2007 to approximately 28 percent in 2023 and is projected to become between one third to one half of the U.S. adult population by 2070.²⁸ Many religious groups in America, especially Christian groups, have also seen a significant decline in religious service attendance over the past decades. Gallup found that around 30 percent of Americans attended services once or nearly once a week in 2021-2023, down from 42 percent in the early 2000s.²⁹ Notably, among Christian groups, the decline in religious service attendance has been uneven: according to the same study, Catholics had the largest drop in attendance, from 45 percent in the early 2000s to 33 percent in the early 2020s.

²⁶ Cathryn J. Prince, “NY Synagogue's Looming Demise Highlights Conservative Judaism's Struggles to Survive,” *Times of Israel*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ny-synagogues-looming-demise-highlights-conservative-judaisms-struggles-to-survive/>

²⁷ Lyman Stone, “Mainline' Churches Are Emptying. The Political Effects Could Be Huge,” *Vox*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/7/14/15959682/evangelical-mainline-voting-patterns-trump>.

²⁸ Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023); “2022 PRRI Census of American Religion: Religious Affiliation Updates and Trends,” PRRI, February 24, 2023, <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/prri-2022-american-values-atlas-religious-affiliation-updates-and-trends/>; “Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” *Pew Research Center*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>; “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” *Pew Research Center*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

²⁹ Jones, “Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups.”

Yet, the narrative of empty pews is not the full story. While around three in ten American adults are religiously unaffiliated, faith remains a crucial part of the lives and identities of the majority of Americans, including new and rising generations. The United States, in fact, has a higher number of active believers across all age groups than in most other Western democracies.³⁰

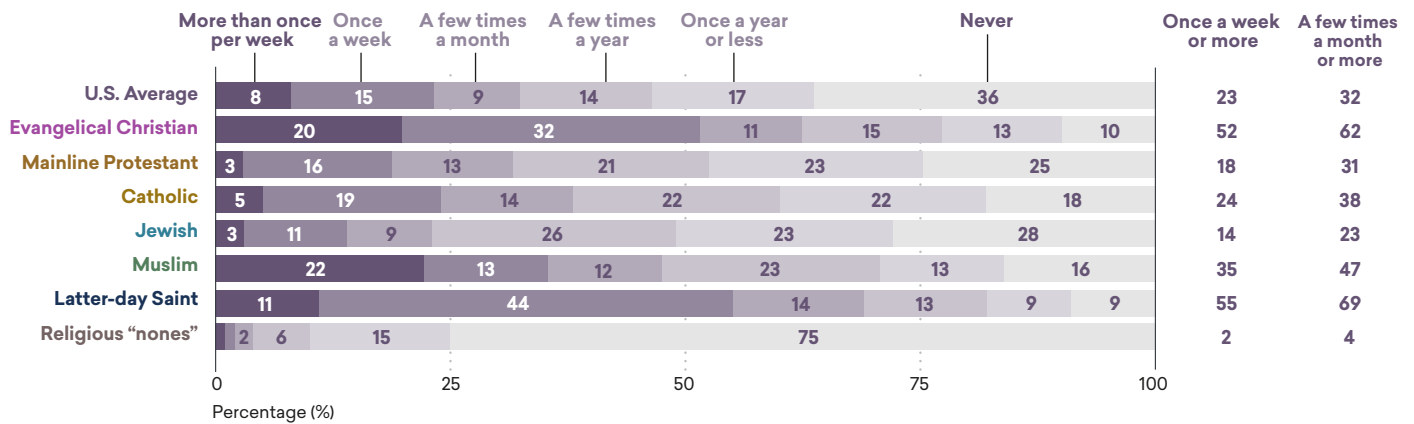
This chapter first examines Americans’ relationship with faith, their religious participation and identity. Then, it explores the views and experiences of young Americans, with a particular focus on misperceptions concerning young Jewish and Muslim Americans and their respective faith identities.

Places of worship matter

Our research finds that around one third of Americans go to their places of worship more than a few times a month. Those who identify as Latter-day Saint or Evangelical are more likely to attend services frequently, with over six in ten reporting that they attend a few times a month or more, compared to around half of Muslims (47 percent), followed by a minority of Catholics (38 percent), Mainline Protestants (32 percent), and Jews (23 percent).

Figure 2.1 Religious service attendance frequency by tradition

How often do you attend services at a house of worship or other religious meetings?



Note: Figure may not add up to 100% or subtotals indicated due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

As the previous chapter suggests, many Americans turn to their faith to deepen their relationship with God and to find comfort during difficult times. For many, places of worship allow them to build new connections and be part of a community.

³⁰ Stephen Bullivant, "Religion Is Still More Vibrant in the U.S. Than in Europe, but There Are Striking Exceptions to the Cliché," *America Magazine*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/07/13/religion-still-more-vibrant-us-europe-there-are-striking-exceptions-cliche>.

“ As for me, we try to go to the mosque as a family most of the time, any day of the week when we can. That allows us to **meet with the people in our community and learn from each other. It's not only a place for religion, it's a place to also socialize.** You get to meet your friends, family, or somebody new, along with just hearing the sermons and practicing your religion.

– Aasim, 36-year-old Asian American man, Muslim, liberal Democrat from Texas

“ The church that we go to, there's a **big sense of community.** Like this lent season, we're doing fish fries every Friday, and there's a lot of ways to get together besides during service on Sunday.

– Danielle, 32-year-old white woman, Catholic, conservative Republican from Pennsylvania

“ In our most recent move, which was about two years ago now, we moved into the ward, and the day that we moved in, a bunch of gentlemen from church came to help us move in. Afterward they said, “we've been praying for you to move into our ward.” And then they gave us callings right away, which are like responsibilities within the church, ways to serve. **They were proactive in making us feel valued and accepted.**

– Brittany, 30-year-old white woman, Latter-day Saint, very conservative Republican from Utah

For religious minorities as well as racial or ethnic minorities, places of worship also provide communal spaces where they feel accepted and not marginalized.

“ A lot of the people I surround myself with are religious Jews. I really love it – **having a great community that's small and when you see them and you're like, oh, you're Jewish, too.** That's family.

– Shayna, 23-year-old mixed-race woman, Orthodox Jewish, moderate Independent from New York

“ In America here, you don't have Muslims everywhere, so **going to the mosque gives you a sense of community. You feel that “oh, I am not alone here.”** There are a lot of us that came from different places, and then you can attend Friday prayers, talk to and meet new people. It's just nice to have a community of Muslims.

– Haseena, 30-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from New Jersey

“ **You have your entire community where they have the Mass at twelve** and everybody gathers together in the neighborhood on the streets. Right away, they start speaking Spanish to you.

– Dolores, 58-year-old Hispanic woman, Catholic, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

Black Christians emphasize the crucial role that churches have played in strengthening their communities through a rich congregational life, reflecting the historic role of Black churches as a vital center of life and identity for many Black communities.

“ I have belonged to Black churches most of my life. And **in all the Black churches, more things are focused on people that look like us, and not just [for people who] look like us, but doing something in the community** for the homeless, the elderly during the summers or winters, and for schools.

– Evelyn, 56-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Independent from Texas

“ The church that I attended for the last 20 years was a predominantly Black church. The reason why I liked it was because it was kind of old school. I feel like I just received the message better in that kind of a format. But, the church in particular, **I like a lot of the things that they did in the community, especially with the youth. Like college fairs or Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, just positive activities** for the youth and then also in the community providing on-site healthcare. Things like that, really, I felt like it was just a good environment for me.

– Jonathan, 43-year-old Black man, non-Evangelical Protestant, liberal Democrat from North Carolina

The decline in religious participation in the past few decades is leading to significant shifts in American society and culture³¹—yet a sole focus on the “dechurching” phenomenon can lead to the false impression that religious spaces and services have stopped mattering. As our research shows, for many Americans, places of worship are still key social institutions that foster a sense of belonging and connectedness. From small gatherings to multi-site megachurches, many religious spaces are continuing to adapt to the needs of new generations and changing communities. From within, many faith communities are vibrant, energetic, and life-giving.

Faith beyond places of worship

While attending religious services is fundamental to many people’s weekly rituals and relationship with faith, for others, faith remains personally important whether they show up at a place of worship or not.

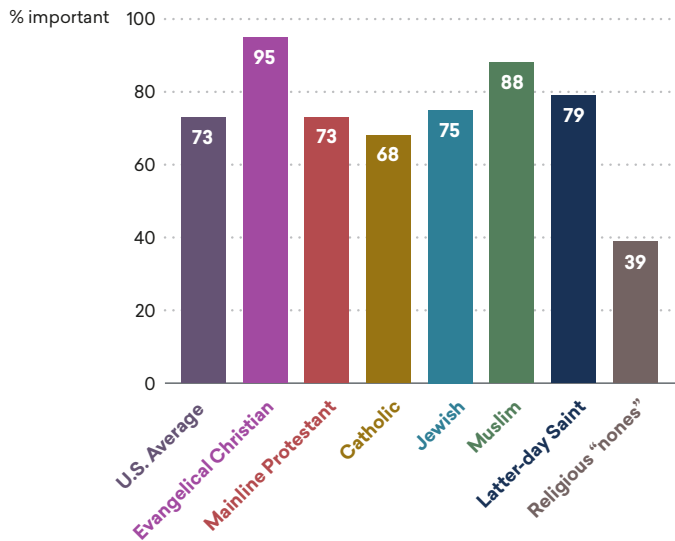
Almost three quarters of Americans overall say that their faith is an important part of their identity. Around nine in ten Evangelical Christians and Muslims say that being Christian or Muslim is an important part of who they are, followed by an overwhelming majority across other traditions.

³¹ For research on how the decline in religious participation has impacted American society, see Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon and Schuster, 2012).

Figure 2.2

Most Americans say their faith identity is important to who they are

How important is being Christian/Catholic/Jewish/Muslim/Latter-day Saint/Atheist/Agnostic/None in Particular to you?



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Many Americans feel that infrequent attendance at a place of worship does not indicate a decline in their religiosity. Some point to barriers like childcare needs, disability, and work schedules that limit their participation. Others find spiritual fulfillment by maintaining a personal relationship to God and incorporating practices and values into their daily routine and interactions with others.

“ I don't particularly go to a church per se. **I have a cathedral of my mind,** meaning I could practice my religion anywhere, any time of the day. Basically, **I carry my religion with how I treat my fellow man, how I carry myself.** I really don't see myself going physically to a church.

– Earl, 71-year-old Black man, Catholic, liberal Democrat from New York

“ I used to go to Sunday school and church and all that. And then there was an event that happened when I was a teenager that made me just **take my faith into my own hands and keep God in my home.** I didn't go to church anymore and kept praying privately. I feel like it's made me a better person where I see everybody as equal.

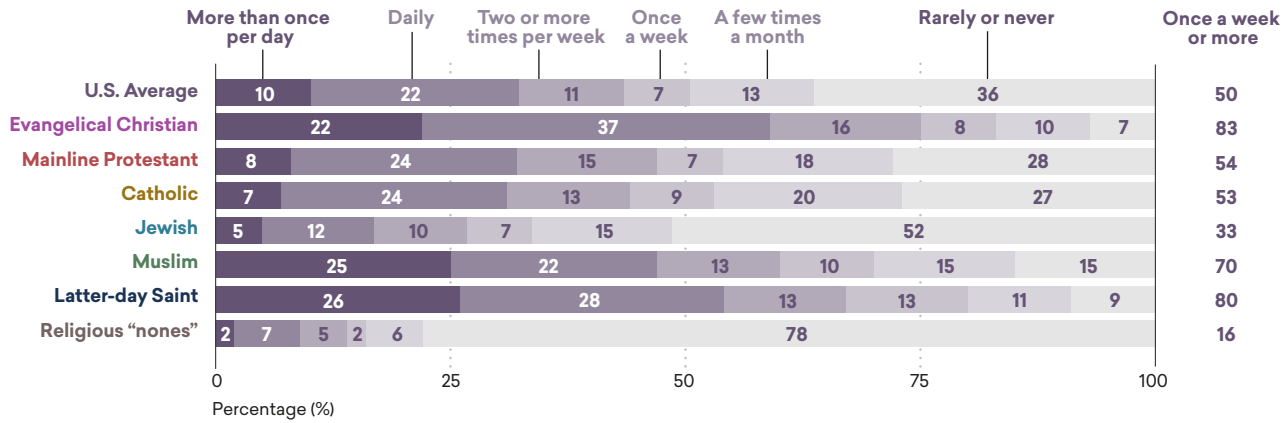
– Tara, 28-year-old Hispanic woman, non-Evangelical Protestant, liberal Independent from Indiana

Prayers and private religious study at home, for example, are a common practice for Americans of faith. While only around one fifth of Americans (23 percent) attend religious services once a week or more, half of Americans (50 percent), including the majority across most faith groups, engage in prayers, meditations, or other private religious studies once a week or more. Evangelicals and Muslims engage in these private religious activities most frequently; Jewish Americans participate in private prayer or meditation slightly less than the national average.

Figure 2.3

The majority across most faith groups engage in prayers and other private religious activities once a week or more

How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation, or religious study?



Note: Figure may not add up to 100% or subtotals indicated due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

The decoupling of religious service attendance from personal faith has made it more difficult to observe the spiritual lives of the people around us. This contributes to mischaracterizations about the role religion plays in the lives of Americans, especially in the lives of younger generations, as detailed in the next section.

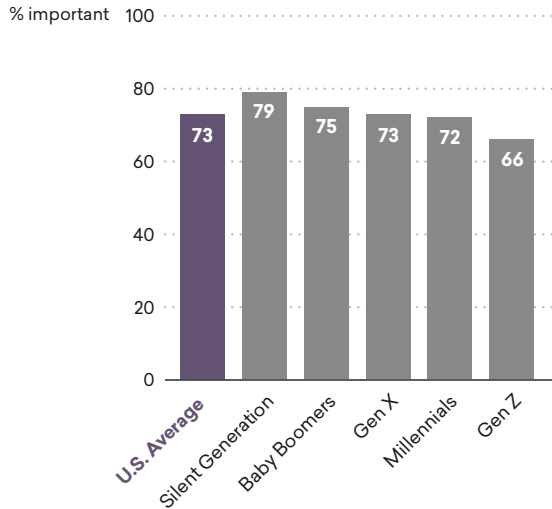
Young Americans and faith

Gen Z (the generation born after 1996) is often thought of or seen as secularized and detached from the faith traditions of their parents. This characterization inflates the extent of secularization among young Americans. Around two thirds of Gen Z—a significant majority—still say that being Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or another religion is an important part of their identity. In fact, the number of Gen Z Americans who say that their faith identity is important to them is only 9 percent below that of Baby Boomers (66 percent compared to 75 percent).

Figure 2.4

Most Americans across generations say their faith identity is important

How important is being Christian/Catholic/Jewish/Muslim/Latter-day Saint/Atheist/Agnostic/None in Particular to you?



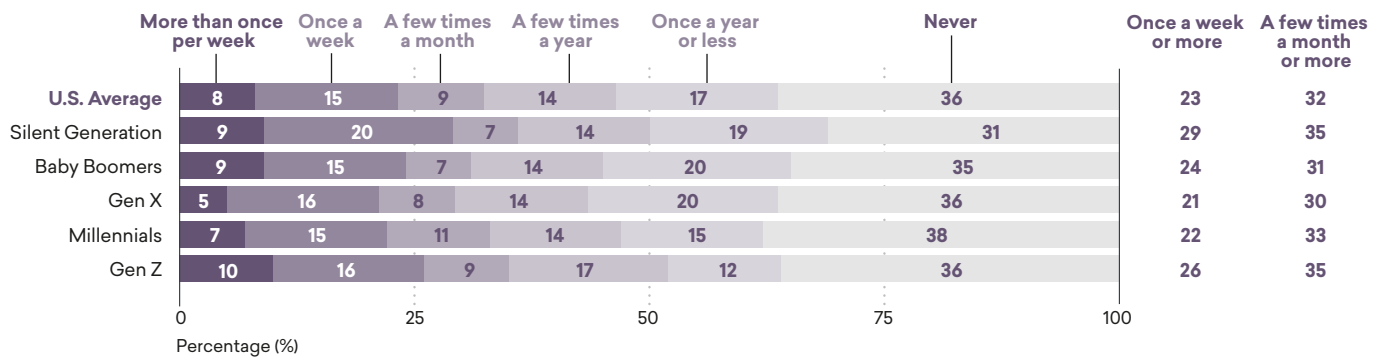
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Gen Z Americans also attend religious services at a rate similar to older generations. Slightly over one third of Gen Z attend services at a place of worship a few times a month or more (35 percent vs 32 percent national average). Around one fourth of Gen Z report attending services once a week or more (26 percent versus 23 percent). The lowest reported attendance rates are among Gen X and Millennials.

Figure 2.5

Religious service attendance frequency by generation

How often do you attend services at a house of worship or other religious meetings?



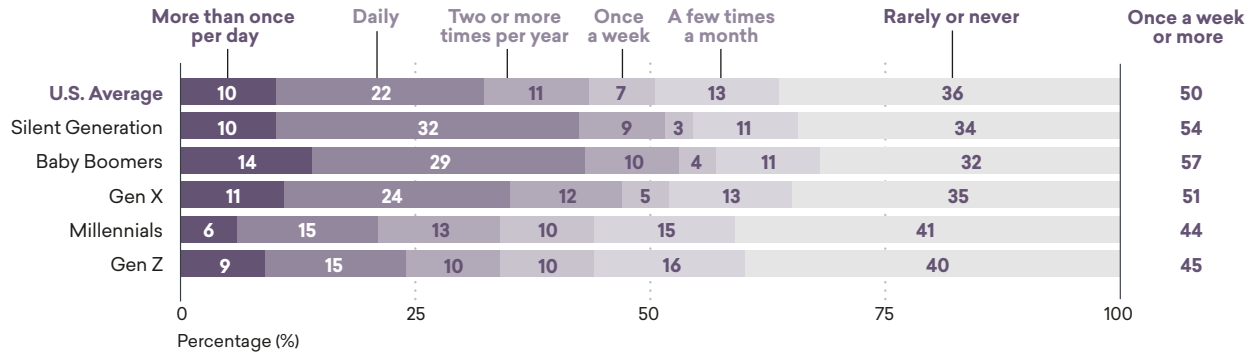
Note: Figure may not add up to 100% or subtotals indicated due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Personal prayers and other private religious activities are also important ways Gen Z engages with their faith. Almost half of Gen Z (45 percent) pray at least once a week, including one fourth of Gen Z (25 percent) who pray daily or more often.

Figure 2.6

Close to half of Millennials and Gen Z engage in prayers at least once a week

How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation, or religious study?



Note: Figure may not add up to 100% or subtotals indicated due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Participation in communities and movements is also a major venue through which Gen Z practices their faith. For example, a 2021 study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University found that, while only 13 percent of Catholic young adults attended Mass at least once a week, over one third of young Catholics participated in another form of religious activity, such as Catholic volunteer work or youth group. This may reflect a preference of format much more than a rejection of the faith: 43 percent of those who attended Mass less than weekly preferred to practice their faith outside of the parish.³²

The trend of young Americans practicing their faith outside of traditional houses of worship is perhaps a part of the broader trend of declining public confidence in institutions and a shifting information landscape. Gen Z has come of age in a political climate marked by increasing polarization, declining trust in major institutions, and numerous scandals involving the leadership of major faith institutions.³³ They have also grown up in a saturated information environment, as evidenced by the plethora of online services, apps, podcasts, YouTube explainer videos and TikTok series on religious content.³⁴ There are now more opportunities than ever to explore faith beyond the confines of local houses of worship.

In this context of the changing information landscape, Gen Z is slightly less likely than the national average to turn to faith communities to deepen their relationship with God (47 percent versus 54 percent). Perhaps surprisingly, **Gen Z Americans are more likely than older generations to turn to their respective faith traditions for belonging (34 percent versus 27 percent national average) and community (28 percent versus 24 percent national average).**

³² Mark M. Gray, Michal J. Kramarek, and Thomas P. Gaunt, "Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, November 2021, <https://cara.georgetown.edu>.

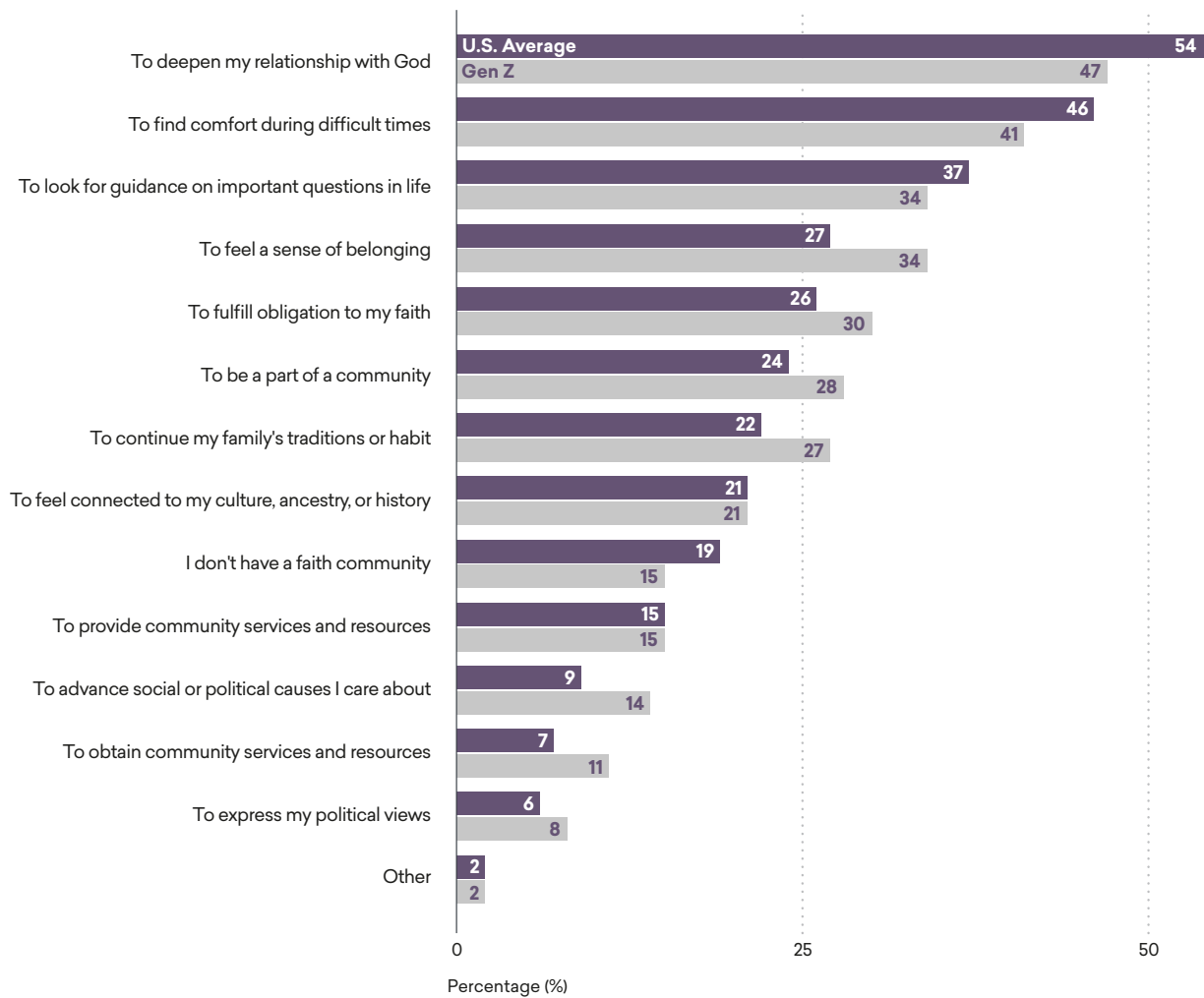
³³ For more information on the declining trust in institutions in the U.S., see Lydia Saad, "Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues," *Gallup*, July, 6, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508169/historically-low-faith-institutions-continues.aspx>.

³⁴ For examples of religious engagement and content through apps and social media platforms, see Madison Malone Kircher, "A Prayer App Turns to TikTok to Find Its Flock," *New York Times*, March 7, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/07/style/hallow-prayer-app-tiktok-wahlberg.html>; Justin Giboney, "How to Be a Christian Influencer Worthy of the Name," *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2024/may-web-only/how-to-be-christian-influencer-secular-world-social-media.html>; Amelia Tait, "Two billion views and counting: meet the stars of TikTok's religious community," *Stack World*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.thestackworld/news/society/people/two-billion-views-and-counting-meet-the-stars-of-tiktok-s-religious-community-1616003803583>.

Figure 2.7

Gen Z are more likely than average to turn to faith for belonging and community

Why do you turn to your faith or faith communities? Select all that apply.



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

“ I do go to a mosque around four to five times a year during Ramadan to give charity and help people. If there's ESL (English as Second Language) people who need help, I help them with English applications because I know the feeling. When I came to the U.S., I was scared, didn't know the language and everything. **The community is always helping and welcoming people. It's more than the actual religion, it's more of the connection between the people.**

– Amina, 22-year-old woman of Middle Eastern or North African descent, Muslim from Oregon

This finding may reflect a stage of life when people are establishing a sense of identity independent of their family. It may also reflect the higher rates of loneliness among younger Americans.³⁵ Either way, it shows that, **even as places of worship grapple with declining service attendance, they can offer younger people not only spiritual connection and guidance, but also opportunity to experience belonging in a community.**

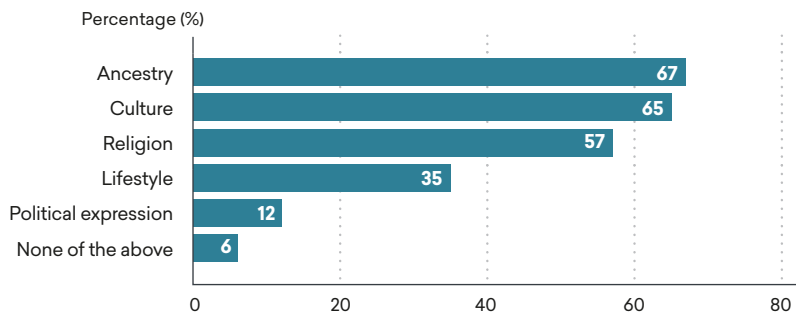
Perception gap: American Jews under 30

While our research finds that faith remains an important identity among young Americans, we also find that this reality is often unappreciated among older generations, especially concerning young Jewish and Muslim Americans.

For many Jewish Americans, Jewish identity is a combination of heritage and religion; for others, their Jewish identity is more cultural and secular. Around two thirds of American Jews say that being Jewish is a matter of ancestry (67 percent) and culture (65 percent), followed by religion (57 percent).

Figure 2.8 Most Jewish Americans see being Jewish as a combination of ancestry, culture, and religion

To you personally, is being Jewish a matter of ...? (Select all that apply.)



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Many Jewish Americans, regardless of their levels of religiosity, feel a strong sense of Jewish identity rooted in Jewish culture, traditions, heritage, and ancestry.

“I grew up not very religious at all, but very culturally Jewish. To me, being Jewish is more of where I come from, where my traditions come from, what my family and my ancestors have gone through to get me to where I am today.”

– Alyssa, 34-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, very liberal Democrat from New Jersey

³⁵ For more information on the epidemic of loneliness, see Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

“ I grew up in Russia... the word Jew was almost like a swear word. And my last name is very Jewish, so I did not tell people my last name because they could identify who I am and discriminate against me based on that. It took me a long time after moving to the US to get comfortable with telling people my last name and telling people that I'm Jewish. But I completely got past it. I embraced it. **Being Jewish is a huge part of my identity. I cannot distinguish being Jewish from being me. It kind of involves everything, the way I approach things, the generational trauma, whatever it is.** Religiously, I do pray, but I'm more agnostic. For me, it's more a cultural thing. It makes me happy to attend services. It relaxes me. I like Jewish food. I just enjoy the music, you know, all of it.

– Yulia, 54-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois

Others feel that their Jewish identity is primarily a religious affiliation. For some, their Jewish identity is not as salient due to their low levels of religiosity.

“ I guess Judaism is a part of me, but I wouldn't say it defines me. **I view it more as a religion.** I certainly follow the high holy days. **For me, it's just been more of a religion, and it's there, but it's not something I think of on a regular basis.** I'm not a very religious person.

– David, 44-year-old white man, Conservative Jewish, conservative Democrat from Connecticut

Religious service attendance among American Jews, despite its slight increase over the past two decades, has on average been lower than other religious groups.³⁶ Nonetheless, concerns exist within Jewish communities about disaffiliation and a weakening sense of identity among young Jewish adults.³⁷ Some American Jews we spoke with worry about a decline in religiosity and moral values among young Americans in general, including young Jews. Others feel that the rise in antisemitism and the Israel-Hamas war has reshaped many Jewish Americans' relationships with Jewish identity, with some becoming more active in their communities while others actively distance themselves from their Jewish identity.

“ I think [the decline in religiosity] is a challenge not just with Jews, but in general. Less parent involvement is [causing] more problems throughout [the country]. A lot of people that I know, they'd rather spend more time doing some stuff on their own than with their family. **It's not just about Judaism. I think it's not just the U.S., but the world as a whole.**

– Diego, 51-year-old Hispanic man, Conservative Jewish, moderate Independent from Connecticut

“ I think it could go either way. There are people that probably will be less inclined to go out and be actively Jewish. But there are a lot of young people that I've seen in my area forming groups to support Israel and to be supportive of each other. It just depends on what they surround themselves with and what they read and what they choose to do. But I think **some people will step away and not want to identify as Jewish and then other people, it will strengthen it even more.**

– Deborah, 40-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, moderate Independent from Florida

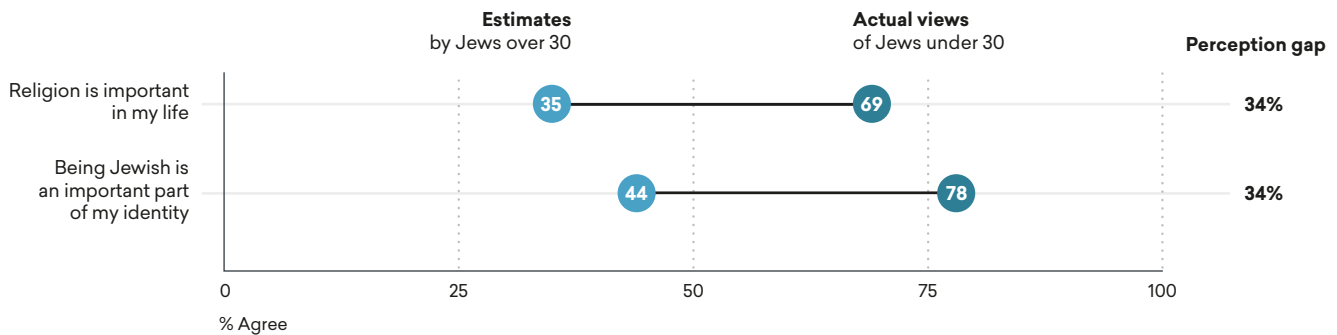
³⁶ Jones, "Church Attendance Declined Among All Religious Groups."

³⁷ Eugene Scott, "Religion Is Increasingly Less of a Focus for America's Jewish Community. What Does That Mean for Its Political Influence?," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/09/21/religion-is-increasingly-less-of-a-focus-for-americas-jewish-community-what-does-that-mean-for-its-political-influence/#new_tab

Our research finds that young Jewish Americans are far less disconnected from their Jewish identity than other Jewish Americans assume. Religion is nearly twice as important to young Jews as other Jewish Americans estimate (35 percent estimate versus 69 percent in reality). Additionally, **Jewish Americans above 30 vastly underestimate the proportion of American Jews under 30 who value their Jewish identity: while they imagine that less than half of young American Jews feel being Jewish is an important part of their identity (44 percent estimate), in reality 78 percent feel this way.**

Figure 2.9

Jewish Americans significantly underestimate how important religion and being Jewish is for young Jews




Note: Each perception gap shows the disparity between what Jews over 30 think Jews under 30 believe and what Jews under 30 actually believe.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Young Jewish adults express that Judaism is a crucial part of their identity, which has deeply shaped their upbringing and moral values. Some feel that compared to the older generations, young Jewish Americans are more willing to express their Jewish identity in public.


“ I’d also say that [being Jewish] is probably the most important part of my identity. I would say, in terms of how I approach my everyday life, it has a really heavy influence in the way that I live. From a cultural perspective, I guess since I’m on a college campus, there’s a pretty heavy identity with walking around on campus and wearing a kippah around and outwardly identifying myself as a Jew around lots of different people.
 – Eli, 21-year-old white man, Orthodox Jewish, liberal Democrat from Maryland

“ I feel like when my parents were my age, they were very private about being Jewish. They were always very protective and very reserved about their Judaism. But I feel like as [the younger generation] learn more and more about Judaism, we feel a connection spiritually that makes us want to share with the world what we as Jews are going through and how we feel about our Judaism. I feel like we’re a lot stronger and prouder and want to show everybody else what we have to offer to the world.
 – Tamar, 25-year-old white woman, Orthodox Jewish, conservative Republican from New Jersey

Some also stress that the campus protests and rise in antisemitism following the 2023 Israel-Hamas War has increased their awareness of their Jewish identity. Some feel that more young Jewish adults are going to Jewish places of worship for a safe space and a sense of community since the outbreak of the war.

 Surprisingly, the Chabad that I go to, the majority of people are young. **Especially after October 7, so many more people in their twenties or early thirties joined and got involved.** Many more joined Hebrew school. I see a big influx, and they are not judgmental. They don't judge what I wear, and I don't have to follow the rules that they follow.

– Yulia, 54-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois³⁸

 So especially over the last several months, where Jewish communities in college campuses have experienced some certain levels of antisemitism, **there's a lot of more active thought when it comes to the outward identification [of being Jewish] as well.** So I would say it's definitely a major part of how I think about myself and how I think about the way I go about every day.

– Eli, 21-year-old white man, Orthodox Jewish, liberal Democrat from Maryland

While the recent rise of antisemitism and the Israel-Hamas war have challenged young Jews, especially on college campuses, it has not largely driven them away from their Jewish identity. Instead, a new generation turns to Jewish communities for mutual support and a sense of belonging. While older generations may fear a weakening sense of Jewish identity among young Jewish people, the latter are finding new ways to express what being Jewish means to them.

Perception gap: American Muslims under 30

Echoing other studies, our research found that the American Muslim population is relatively young: more than one third of Muslim adults in the U.S. are under 30 years old (37 percent), compared to 20 percent of American adults overall.³⁹

Fear of secularization of young generations of American-born Muslims has always been present, as Muslim communities navigate integration into American society and preservation of their religion and culture, especially in the post-September 11 era.⁴⁰

As with Jewish Americans, many Muslim Americans underestimate the significance of religion and Muslim identity to younger people in their community. **Young Muslims are twice as likely to say religion is important in their lives than others estimate: Muslim Americans above 30 estimate that only 46 percent of Muslims below 30 say religion is important in their lives; in reality, 94 percent say so.**

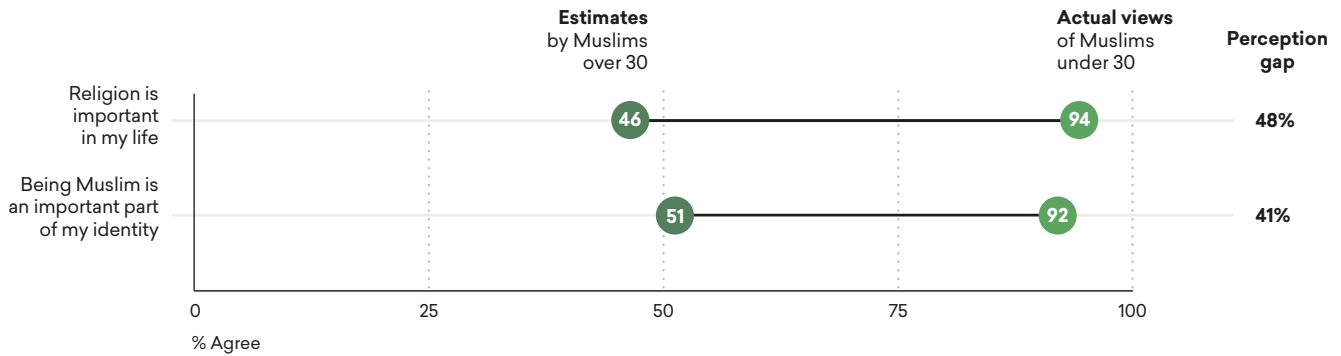
³⁸ Note: This participant attends services and events at a chabad but self-identifies as Reform Jewish.

³⁹ For studies on American Muslims, see Dalia Mogahed, Erum Ikramullah, and Youssef Chouhoud, *American Muslim Poll 2022: Full Report* (ISPU, 2022), <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2022-full-report>; "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans>. For information on the age distribution of U.S. adult population, see U.S. Census Bureau, "Age and Sex," *American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates*, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2022.S0101>.

⁴⁰ Yvonne Y. Haddad, Farid Senzai, and Jane I. Smith, eds., *Educating the Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Figure 2.10

Muslim Americans significantly underestimate how important religion and being Muslim is for young Muslims



Note: Each perception gap shows the disparity between what Muslims over 30 think Muslims under 30 believe and what Muslims under 30 actually believe.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

An overwhelming majority of Muslim adults below 30—nine in ten—say that being Muslim is an important part of their identity (92 percent in reality), while other American Muslims estimate that only around half of Muslims under 30 say so (51 percent estimate).

Young Muslims often attribute this perception gap to what they see as different expressions of Islam held between older and younger Muslims. Many feel that some older Muslims tend to equate not following certain traditions with secularization. Yet for the young Muslims we spoke to, being Muslim is often more a matter of the values they hold, rather than strict adherence to traditional practices.

“ I think there might be blurry lines between tradition and what religion is. As younger people we might be less traditional. But I personally don't think that that should affect how important religion is **because there's a difference between your relationship with the religion and with Allah and then traditions. So just because you don't follow some of the old traditions doesn't really mean that you don't find that religion important to you.**

– Kiara, 24-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from Minnesota

“ **Maybe in their generations being religious and being really pious looked a certain way and they still expect it to look the same in our generation, and it doesn't.** So the outward whatever's are not matching up with their internal model of what someone who's really religious and really cares about God should look like.

– Billie, 28-year-old Asian American non-binary person, Muslim, liberal Independent from Maryland

“ The culture [the older generation] grew up in is different... Growing up back home... women wear [the hijab] to represent themselves as Muslims [as] a sign of respect, to show they're a true believer. **Being younger, we're actually more knowledgeable and respecting and understanding of the religion itself,** rather than the physical appearance. Because in their point of view, you have to wear the hijab to be actually Muslim, when in reality, that's not what God said.

– Amina, 22-year-old woman of Middle Eastern or North African descent, Muslim from Oregon

For young Muslims, living according to their values and practicing religion in a way they view as prosocial and authentic keeps their religious identity relevant to their daily lives. The move away from more strict observances might unsettle older Muslims who are looking for the same signs of religiosity that marked their generation, but younger Muslims say their faith identity is still strong.

Despite the frequently discussed declining trend in weekly religious service attendance and religious attachment, faith is still an important part of life for most Americans. Whether they draw spiritual comfort from a personal connection to God or a sense of cultural support and belonging from a religious community, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Americans highly value their faith.

As in many other aspects of society, however, technology and generational shifts are re-shaping the way believers participate in religious life.

The transformation and proliferation of diverse beliefs among religious groups, from the past to the present, serves as an example of faith communities' capacity to evolve with the times. One could argue that the U.S. has become a place of religious innovation, from the Pilgrims who brought a passionate commitment to religious freedom to America's shores, to generations of immigrants who introduced religious traditions and practices from around the world. From the worship music of Pentecostalism and megachurches, to televangelism and the adoption of new media technologies, Christian faith has both shaped and been shaped by America's evolving identity. Similarly, American Judaism has been transformed by waves of Jewish immigrants since the early 19th century, evolving through the adoption of practices like English sermons and organ music to the splintering and development of different branches.⁴¹ These transformations are powerful testament to the spirit of dynamism and resilience of faith communities in the U.S.

As younger generations have less trust in institutions, there may be less commitment to formal institutional structures and hierarchies, local meeting places and the authority of specific religious leaders. But faith may remain prominent as its expression evolves to reflect changing times and a new generation.

⁴¹ Stephen R. Weisman, *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

Misperception 3: Religious Americans are intolerant

“ [When I see the term “Evangelical Christians” I think of] born-again Christians that have become Christian Nationalists who think that the government should be Christian and religion comes before all else. [I think of] their religion and their narrow minded point of view. They do not believe in the separation of church and state as clearly defined in the constitution.
– Steve, 72-year-old white man, liberal Democrat from California⁴²

“ The United States was built on the premise of freedom of religion as well as other freedoms and rights. Everyone and their beliefs are equal and we should be tolerant and accepting of each other.
– Taylor, 67-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, conservative Republican from California

In public discourse about religion in public life, faith is often associated with fundamentalism and intolerance. When we asked more than 130 Americans what comes to mind when they see the term “Evangelical Christians,” many panelists brought up political extremism and Christian nationalism.

This chapter explores the gap between perceptions and reality regarding support for religious pluralism and church-state separation, particularly among American Evangelicals and Muslims. The chapter further examines the actual views of America’s faithful, focusing on Protestants and Catholics, on two often contested issues related to the role of religion in the public arena: funding for religious schools and places of worship, and the role of Christianity in American culture and history.

Perception gap: Religious pluralism and belonging

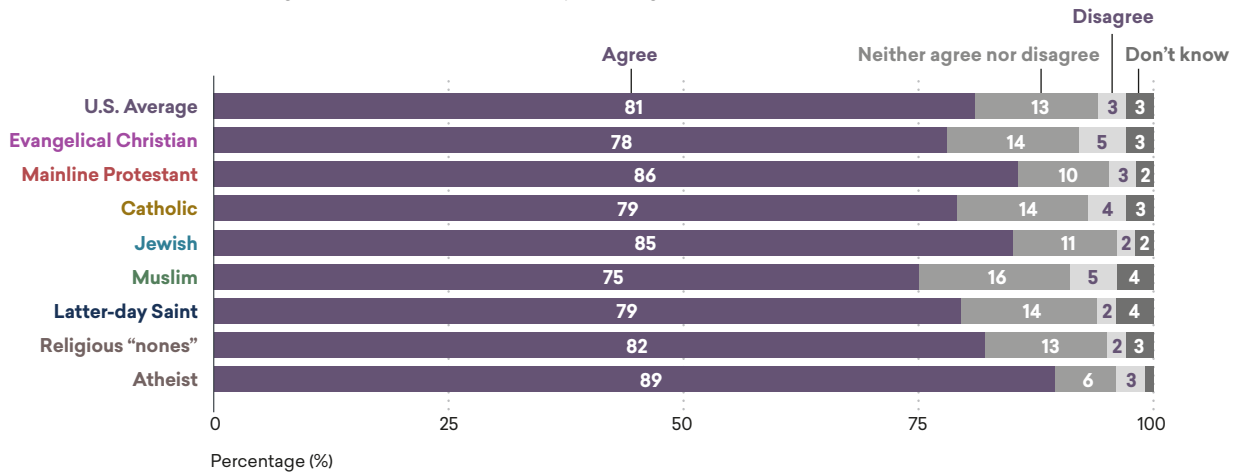
Americans’ support for religious pluralism is nearly universal. More than eight in ten Americans want the United States to be a nation where people of every religion and no religion feel that they belong. Only three percent disagree. This holds true across all faith groups and political parties, including people of faith and people with no religious affiliation.

⁴² Please note that this Americans in Conversation participant did not disclose his religious affiliation.

Figure 3.1

Most Americans want the US to be a country where people of all religions feel that they belong

"The United States should be a place where individuals of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong."

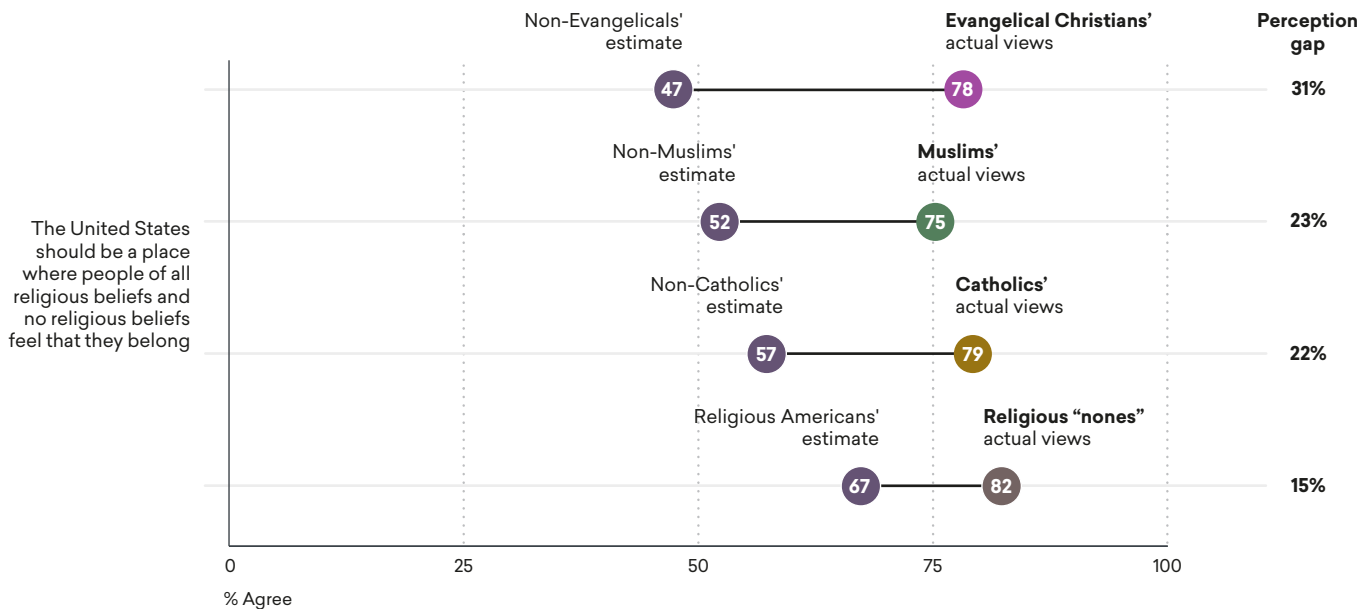


Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding. The category "religious 'nones'" is inclusive of atheists.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Yet Americans underestimate support for religious pluralism among Evangelicals, Muslims and Catholics. Americans estimate that only around half of Evangelicals (47 percent) and Muslims (52 percent) support this ideal, while in reality 78 percent of Evangelicals and 75 percent of Muslims agree that the US should be a place where people of all religions feel that they belong. Similarly, non-Catholics estimate that around six in ten Catholics agree with the statement on religion (57 percent), when almost eight in ten Catholics (79 percent) actually agree.

Figure 3.2

Americans underestimate support for religious pluralism among Evangelical Christians, Catholics, Muslims, and Religious "nones"



Note: Each "estimate" dot represents the estimate of a faith group's views by those outside that group. For instance, the first "estimate" dot shows the percentage of Evangelical Christians that non-Evangelicals think agree with the statement "the United States should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong." The corresponding perception gap shows the disparity between what non-Evangelicals imagine Evangelicals to believe and what Evangelicals actually believe.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Our research also finds a perception gap concerning religious “nones,” albeit at a smaller scale: **Religious Americans underestimate support among religious “nones” for the idea that the U.S. should be a country where people of all religions feel they belong.** Religious Americans believe that 67 percent of religious “nones” support religious pluralism, whereas 82 percent of religious “nones,” including 90 percent of atheists, embrace the ideal.

In reality, Americans across faith traditions and those without religious affiliation express strong support for religious freedom and pluralism.

“It is our First Amendment right to freedom of religion without fear of discrimination. It also allows people of different faiths and atheists to respect each other and promote harmony.

– Yasmin, 55-year-old Asian American woman, religious “none” (agnostic), moderate Democrat from Arizona

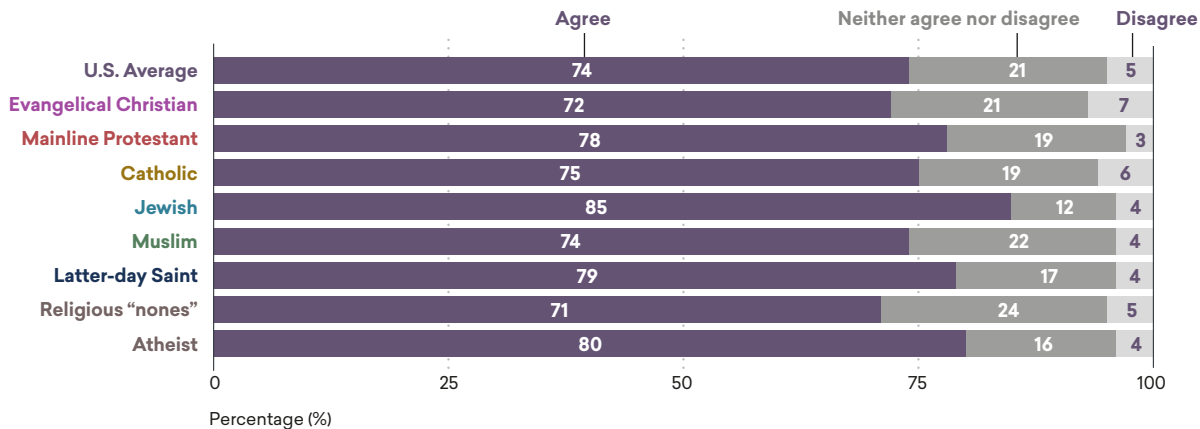
“Absolutely. We should be a melting pot for religious beliefs as well as no religious beliefs.

– Tyler, 62-year-old white man, Catholic, conservative Republican from New Jersey

Not only do the majority of Americans support the idea of the U.S. as a place where people of all religious affiliations feel that they belong, but most are also open to getting to know individuals from different religious backgrounds. More than seven in ten Americans across faith groups are open to interacting more with someone from a different religious background. This interest in greater engagement is high even among Americans with no religious affiliation, with 71 percent, and 80 percent of atheists, expressing interest in greater connections to those who hold different religious beliefs.

Figure 3.3 Over 7 in 10 Americans across faith groups are open to interacting more with someone from a different religious background

"I would be open to interacting more with someone from a different religious background than me (e.g. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.)."



Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding. The category “religious ‘nones’” is inclusive of atheists.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

“ I’m proud to be Christian. But **I’m not going to disassociate or not hang around somebody just because they are not Christian or are agnostic or some other religion. I’ll try to be respectful of other people’s beliefs.**

I would expect them to be respectful of mine, too.

– Douglas, 56-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican from Georgia

“ I grew up in a really small town where most people were Christian, so I didn’t really have exposure outside of that for a while. But when I got to college, I learned about the different facets of Islam and Judaism. Everyone was super welcoming, open to sharing ideas and listening to mine. I have a lot of Jewish friends who welcomed me in with open arms and I went to Shabbat. It’s like a Friday night thing where they bring like Jewish people together and cook them dinner and then the rabbi talks for a while. **In my experience, people are very friendly and these interactions [with people of other faiths] made me a better, well-rounded person overall.**

– Aaron, 23-year-old white man, Mainline Protestant, conservative Republican from Colorado

Our analyses reveal that existing negative attitudes, political ideology, and personal relationships with members of a faith group are key factors driving misperceptions about Evangelicals, Muslims, Catholics, and religious “nones” regarding their support for pluralism. These drivers point to potential pathways to correct false assumptions about different communities and improve interfaith relations.

Perception gap regarding Evangelical Christians

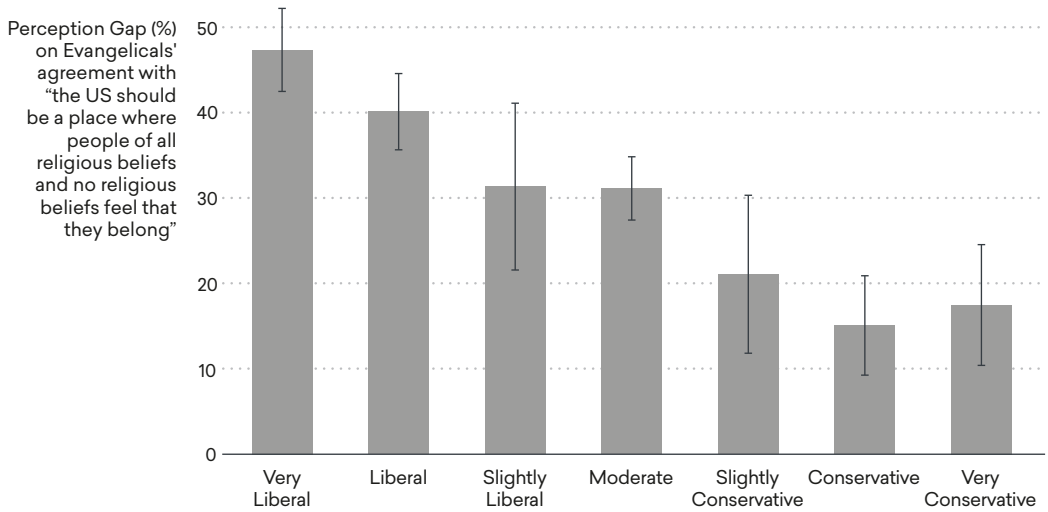
For non-Evangelicals, **negative feelings towards Evangelicals** and **liberal political affiliation** predict misperceptions of Evangelicals’ support for religious pluralism. Put simply, the people who dislike Evangelicals the most and those who identify as liberal tend to have the most inaccurate predictions about what Evangelicals believe on this topic.

Political ideology: Among non-Evangelicals, the more *politically liberal* they are, the *larger* their misperceptions of Evangelical support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many Evangelicals believe “the U.S. should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong”).

Figure 3.4

Liberal political ideology correlates with misperceptions of Evangelical Christians

The more liberal non-Evangelicals are, the greater their misperceptions about Evangelicals' support for religious pluralism



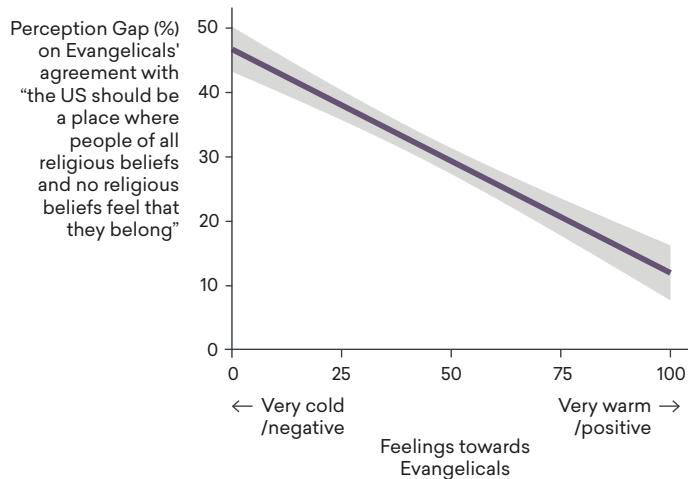
Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Feelings towards Evangelicals: Among non-Evangelicals, the *colder* they feel towards Evangelicals, the *larger* their misperceptions of Evangelical support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many Evangelicals believe "the US should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong").

Figure 3.5

Negative feelings towards Evangelicals correlate with misperceptions

The more negatively non-Evangelicals feel towards Evangelicals, the greater their misperceptions about Evangelicals' support for religious pluralism



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Evangelicals and belief inaccuracy. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

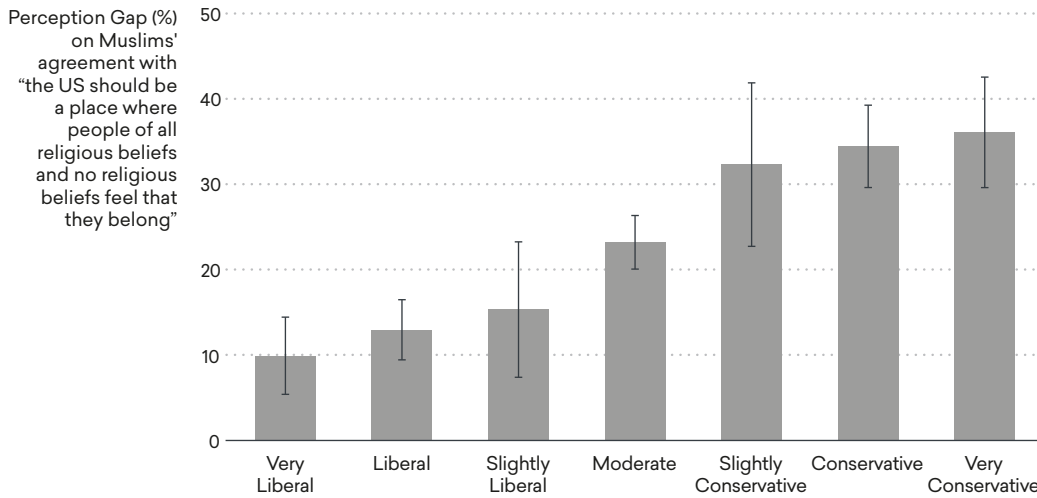
Perception gap regarding Muslims

For non-Muslims, **political conservatism** and **negative feelings towards Muslims** predict the misperceptions of Muslims' support for religious pluralism. The people who dislike Muslims the most and those who identify as conservative tend to have the most inaccurate assumptions about Muslims' acceptance of religious pluralism.

Political ideology: Among non-Muslims, the more *politically conservative* they are, the *larger* their misperceptions of Muslim support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many Muslims believe “the U.S. should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong”).

Figure 3.6 Conservative political ideology correlates with misperceptions of Muslims

The more conservative non-Muslims are, the greater their misperceptions about Muslims' support for religious pluralism



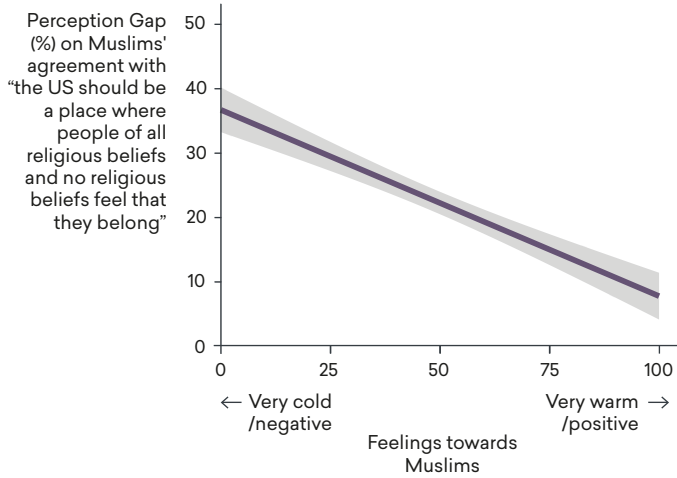
Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Feelings towards Muslims: Among non-Muslims, the *colder* they feel towards Muslims, the *larger* their misperceptions of Muslim support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many Muslims believe “the US should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong”).

Figure 3.7

Negative feelings towards Muslims correlate with misperceptions

The more negatively non-Muslims feel towards Muslims, the greater their misperceptions about Muslims' support for religious pluralism



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Muslims and belief inaccuracy. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Perception gap regarding Catholics

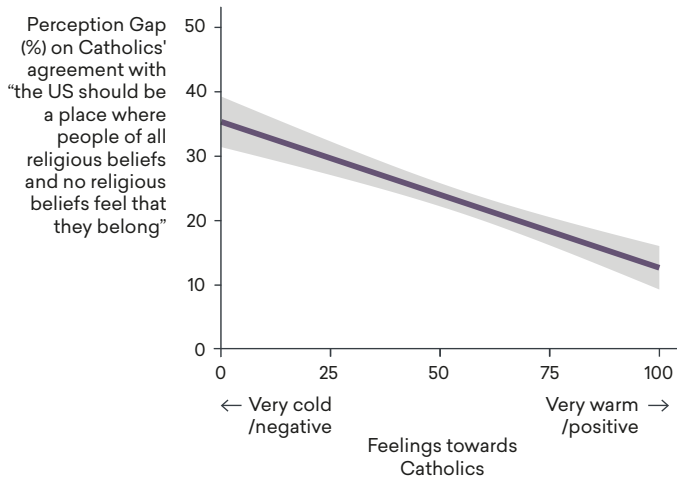
For non-Catholics, **negative feelings towards Catholics** predicts the perception gap concerning Catholics.

Feelings towards Catholics: Among non-Catholics, the more *coldly* they feel towards Catholics, the *larger* their misperceptions of Catholic support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many Catholics believe “the U.S. should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong”).

Figure 3.8

Negative feelings towards Catholics correlate with misperceptions

The more negatively non-Catholics feel towards Catholics, the greater their misperceptions about Catholics' support for religious pluralism



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards Catholics and belief inaccuracy. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Perception gap regarding religious “nones”

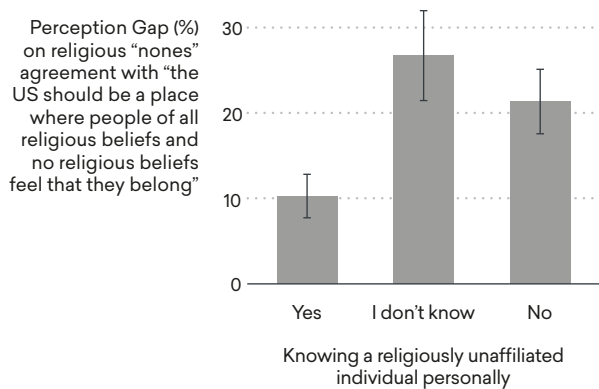
For religious Americans, **negative feelings towards the religiously unaffiliated**, and **personal relationship with anyone who is religiously unaffiliated**, predict misperceptions of religious “nones.”

Knowing a religiously unaffiliated individual personally: People who personally know someone who is religiously unaffiliated are more accurate in their perceptions of religious “nones.” People who are uncertain or who do not personally know any religiously unaffiliated individuals have larger misperceptions of religious “nones” support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many religiously unaffiliated American believe “the US should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong”).

Figure 3.9

Contact with religious “nones” correlates with misperceptions

People who personally don't know any religiously unaffiliated individuals have larger perception gap on religious “nones”



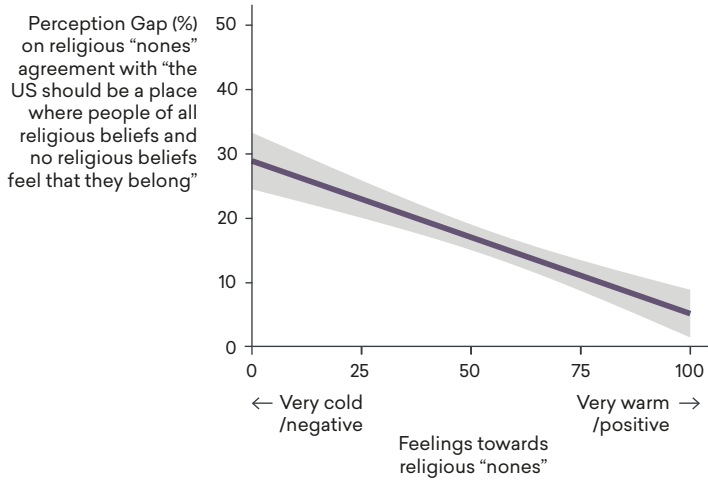
Note: Error bars = 95% confidence interval
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Feelings towards religious “nones”: Among religious Americans, the *colder* they feel towards the religious “nones,” the *larger* their misperceptions of religious “nones” support for religious pluralism (the more they underestimate how many religiously unaffiliated American believe “the U.S. should be a place where people of all religious beliefs and no religious beliefs feel that they belong”).

Figure 3.10

Negative feelings towards religious “nones” correlate with misperceptions

The more negatively one feels towards religious “nones,” the greater their misperceptions about support for religious pluralism among religious “nones”



Note: This graph shows the relationship between feelings of warmth towards religious “nones” and belief inaccuracy. Line indicates a regression line. Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

The relationship between misperceptions of a specific faith group and negative attitudes towards that group suggest two important points: first, correcting perception gaps is crucial for improving relations between the group and those outside its community; and second, it is particularly urgent to address the views of those who harbor the most negative attitudes. For organizations and leaders working on improving relations between religious Americans and the religiously unaffiliated, it is especially important to emphasize both groups’ support for pluralism and to foster personal relationships between members of the groups.

Entrenched assumptions about the intolerance of particular religious communities make it much harder to build trust and connection. The fact that Americans across religious groups are often more committed to pluralism than their neighbors think is important to publicize. **A greater public awareness of the extent of common ground among Americans of both majority and minority faith groups can strengthen resilience against efforts to divide communities and stir up conflict and fear.**

Perception gap: Separation of church and state

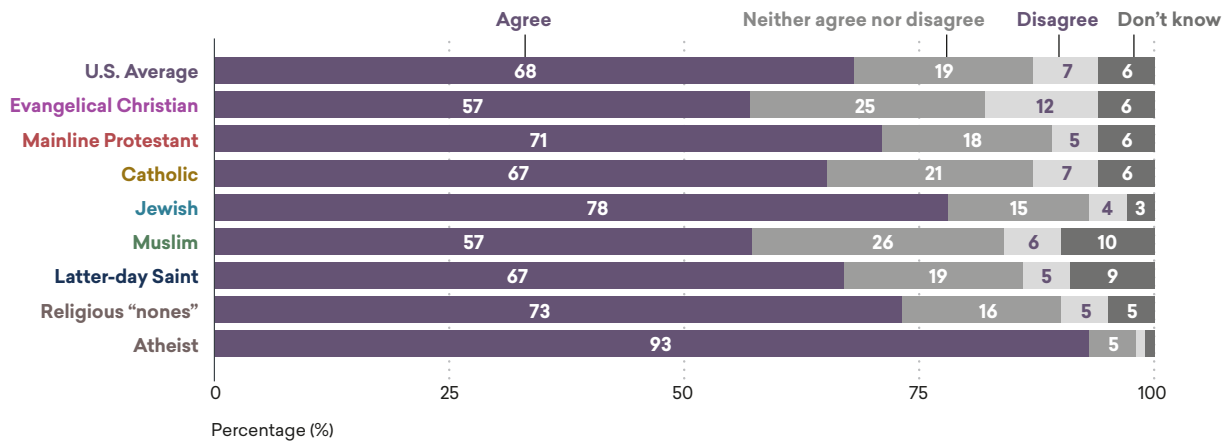
The misperception that Americans want to see other religious groups excluded coincides with similar misperceptions about how religious groups view the separation of church and state. Enshrined in the first amendment of the Constitution, the secular nature of the U.S. government is one of its founding ideals, ensuring religious freedom for all faith groups. News coverage and commentary that focuses on Christian nationalism and Islamist militancy can overstate the share of Americans' who lack a commitment to the separation of church and state.

In reality, most Americans, regardless of their faith tradition, support the financial and organizational separation of governmental and religious institutions. **Only seven percent of Americans – including 12 percent of Evangelicals and six percent of Muslims – disagree with church-state separation.** This broad support extends across political affiliation and other demographics.

Figure 3.11

Most Americans across faith traditions say it is important to ensure separation between church and state

"It is important to ensure financial and organizational separation of religious institutions from government institutions in the United States."

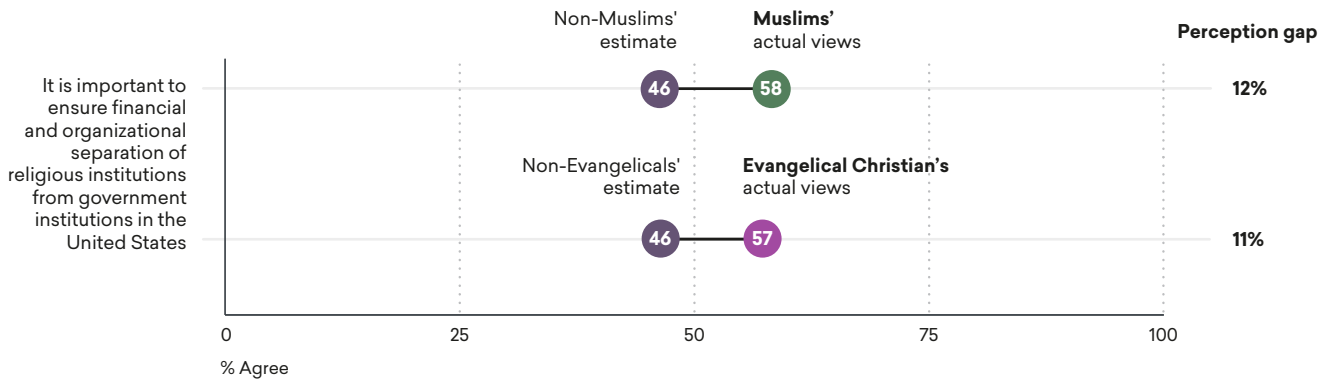


Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding. The category "religious 'nones'" is inclusive of atheists.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

At the same time, **Americans slightly underestimate support for the separation of church and state among Muslims and Evangelical Christians**, although these perception gaps are relatively small. Non-Muslims think that 46 percent of Muslims agree with separation of church and state, while almost six in ten Muslims express support (58 percent). Similarly, non-Evangelicals estimate that less than half of Evangelicals (46 percent) agree it is important to ensure separation of religious institutions from government institutions in the U.S. In reality, close to six in ten Evangelicals (57 percent) agree.

Figure 3.12

Americans underestimate support for church-state separation among Evangelical Christians and Muslims



Note: Each "estimate" dot represents the estimate of a faith group's views by those outside that group. For instance, the first "estimate" dot shows the percentage of Muslims that non-Muslims think agree with the statement "it is important to ensure financial and organizational separation of religious institutions from government institutions in the United States." The corresponding perception gap shows the disparity between what non-Muslims imagine Muslims to believe and what Muslims actually believe.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Americans broadly recognize that the separation of church and state is one of the founding commitments of the United States, and that it ensures religious freedom and equality. At the same time, some also argue that, while they agree with church-state separation, they should still be able to influence politics with values informed by their faith.

“**When you start trying to inject religion, to me, in politics, you’re starting to alienate certain parts of the population.** Because there are all different kinds of religious beliefs. And then there are people that don’t have any religious beliefs at all. In my opinion, the two shouldn’t mix. It’s like oil and water. **Too many things can go awry and too many people can get pushed out and alienated.**

– Earl, 71-year-old Black man, Catholic, liberal Democrat from New York

“**I don’t think government and religion should be mixed together in any way.** They should be two separate entities. **We all have different religions or none at all and religions shouldn’t affect the way the government works in my opinion.**

– David, 41-year-old white man, Conservative Jewish, liberal Republican from New Jersey

“**It’s important to keep the government from controlling churches or forcing people into a specific religion, and it’s important to keep a single religious institution from taking over the government. But if atheists and others get to influence politics with their values, religious people should also get to.**

– Amanda, 40-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican from Pennsylvania

Do Americans support separation of church and state in practice?

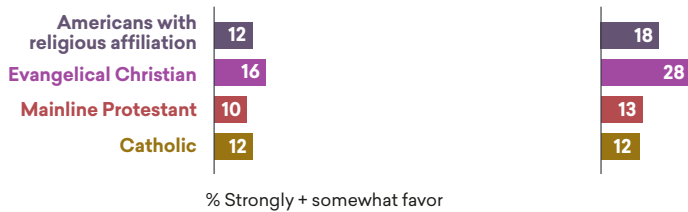
The separation of church and state is not just an abstract or theoretical concept for Americans, either. Most also support the separation of church and state when it comes to actual policies. The overwhelming majority of America’s faithful do not support policies that explicitly deny the religious liberty of religious minorities. For example, only around one in ten Protestants and Catholics support banning new construction of non-Christian houses of worship.

Figure 3.13

Most Americans do not support policies that deny religious outgroups the right to practice

To what extent do you favor or oppose the following...

Banning new construction of non-[my faith] houses of worship Requiring political candidates to be [my faith] to be elected to public office



Based on U.S. adults who are religiously affiliated.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Similarly, most Americans do not support requiring political candidates to be followers of their own religion in order to be elected to public office. Only around one in ten Mainline Protestants and Catholics favor requiring political candidates to be Christian or Catholic. While the majority of Evangelical Christians do not support this idea, it is noteworthy that more than one in four (28 percent) do support requiring political candidates to be Christian.⁴³ Some Christians we spoke to support this requirement out of concerns that political leaders and institutions are straying away from what they see as America’s Christian foundations. Others express bias against non-Christians and religiously unaffiliated Americans.

But overall, our conversations with Americans find that most people strongly reject the idea of requiring political candidates to be Christian. Some feel that while a candidate’s faith or values might be personally important to them, they would not support a mandatory requirement for candidates to be Christian.

“ [Requiring political candidates to be Christian] is a ridiculous idea to me. **While I likely do not agree with Ilhan Omar on anything, voters elected her fairly, and she should be allowed to serve.** ”
– Daniel, 63-year-old white man, Protestant, slightly conservative Independent from Missouri

⁴³ The support for requiring political candidates to be Christian among a quarter of Evangelicals echos a recent Pew Research finding about levels of support for Christianity being declared the official religion of the US. See “Christianity’s place in politics, and ‘Christian nationalism,’” *Pew Research Center*, March 15, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/15/christianitys-place-in-politics-and-christian-nationalism/>

“ I would not support [requiring candidates to be Christian]. I would just hope that whoever is elected is caring for people and is for life and equality.

– James, 32-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, moderate republican from Missouri

“ Pope Francis says, who am I to judge, right? I don't think religion has any bearing on the ability to do the job or how much you care about your state, your local government, your community, your country.

– Melissa, 53-year-old white woman, Catholic, very liberal Democrat from Georgia

Our research echoes previous studies in showing that, while support for church-state separation far exceeds opposition to it, Americans have mixed views towards policies that allow the presence of religion in public spaces and schools.⁴⁴ Three in ten religious Americans favor providing public funding to private religious schools of their own faith. Support for public funding to private Christian/Catholic schools is strongest among Evangelical Christians (42 percent), followed by Catholics (32 percent).

Only slightly fewer religious Americans (24 percent) also support funding private religious schools whose faith tradition is *different* from their own. For example, more than a quarter of Evangelicals (27 percent) and Catholics (28 percent) favor funding non-Christian and non-Catholic religious schools with tax dollars.

Figure 3.14

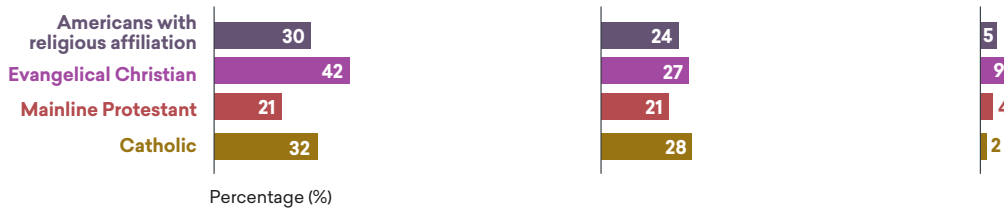
A significant minority of Evangelicals and Catholics support providing private Christian schools with public funding, but few support funding policies that discriminate against non-Christian religious schools

To what extent do you favor or oppose the following...

Favor funding private [my faith] religious schools with tax dollars

Favor funding private non-[my faith] religious schools with tax dollars

Favor funding private [my faith] religious schools BUT OPPOSE funding private non-[my faith] religious schools with tax dollars



Based on U.S. adults who are religiously affiliated. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

44 "In the U.S., Far More Support Than Oppose Separation of Church and State," *Pew Research Center*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/10/28/in-u-s-far-more-support-than-oppose-separation-of-church-and-state/>.

Only 4 percent of religious Americans—fewer than one in ten Evangelical Christians, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics—hold the view that Christian private schools should be funded while non-Christian religious schools should *not*. This reflects an endorsement of pluralist values—there is little support among Christians for funding policies that discriminate in favor of America’s largest religion.

Many Christians, particularly those with liberal leanings, feel that private schools in general, including religious schools, should not receive public funding.

“ Religious schools can’t have it both ways. So, religious, not necessarily Catholic schools, they want to have the freedom to teach their own curriculums, and they don’t want to be held to the criteria that public schools are? So if that’s the case, then they shouldn’t be accepting public money either. You can’t have it both ways. **You need to either adhere to the public policies to receive the public money or you’re entitled to not adhere to those policies, but then you shouldn’t take public money.**

– Peter, 33-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, very liberal Democrat from Texas

“ I went to a private high school. My mom worked herself half crazy to pay for it. **If you want your kid in a private school, you pay for it.** The public doesn’t pay for it. The taxpayer dollars should be going to the public schools.

– Hazel, 61-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, very liberal Democrat from North Carolina

Evangelicals and Catholics who support public funding for private Christian schools express concerns with the quality of public-school education and the low pay that private religious school teachers receive.

“ **I would support any school funding to help bring more education to kids.** So I definitely would support a Christian funding for a school.

– James, 32-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, moderate Republican from Missouri

“ I don’t have a problem with [giving Catholic schools public funding]. I was a teacher, so I could tell you that **Catholic school teachers tend to make almost three percent less than a public school teacher in salary.** So that could be another reason why there’s fewer Catholic schools, because there’s fewer teachers that can live off of that wage. So **anything to help the teachers out, I’m definitely for.**

– Danielle, 32-year-old white woman, Catholic, conservative Republican from Pennsylvania

Beliefs about the role of Christianity in American society

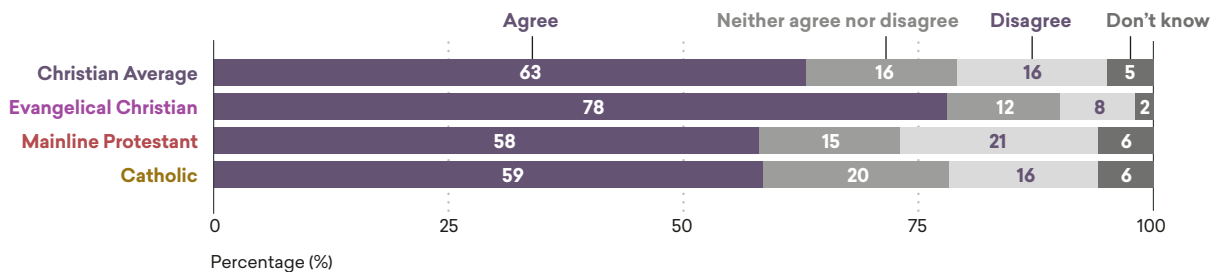
Misperceptions around religious Americans' commitment to pluralism reflect the often conflicting ways people think about the role of Christianity in American history and culture. Since the arrival of the Pilgrims, Christians have profoundly influenced the trajectory of the U.S. One of the most influential values brought by those escaping religious persecution was religious freedom, which became a foundational principle of the U.S. Constitution. At the same time, many non-Christian traditions have significantly shaped the social fabric of American society. Yet these two legacies can be falsely presented as mutually exclusive—where acknowledging Christian influence is seen as rejecting religious diversity, and highlighting non-Christian communities is viewed as denying Christianity's historical significance.

Our research shows that most Americans believe that Christianity is central to American society. Six in ten Christians—including almost eight in ten Evangelicals and the majorities of Mainline Protestants and Catholics—believe that the U.S. was founded on Christian values. Such widely held beliefs are also supported by other studies, in which 60 percent of Americans, including nearly 70 percent of Christians, agree that the founders intended for America to be a “Christian nation.”⁴⁵

Figure 3.15

Most Christians believe that the US was founded on Christian values

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
 “The United States was founded on the values of Christianity”



Based on U.S. adults who identify as Protestant or Catholic.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

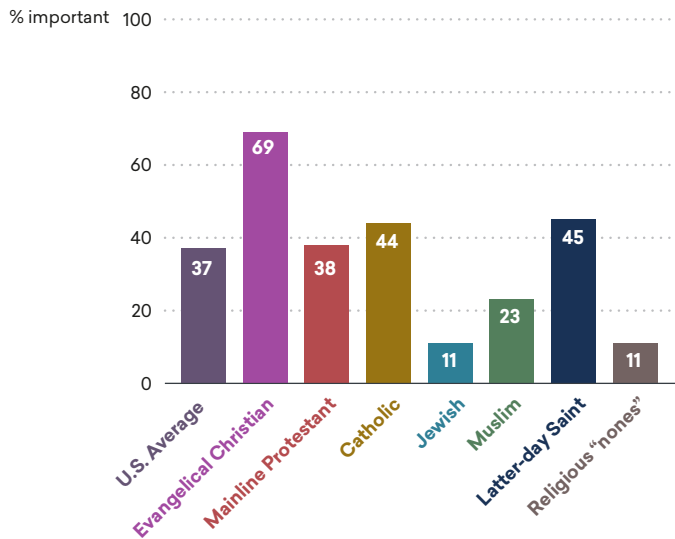
But for many, the idea that the U.S. was founded on Christian values is simply a statement of historical fact, rather than an overt prescription for what America should be in the 21st century. The majority of Americans do not consider being Christian central to American identity. A sizable minority—37 percent of Americans—say being Christian is important to being American. Agreement is highest among Evangelicals (69 percent), followed by a plurality of Latter-day Saints (45 percent) and Catholics (44 percent).

⁴⁵ “45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a ‘Christian Nation,’” *Pew Research Center*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/45-of-americans-say-u-s-should-be-a-christian-nation/>.

Figure 3.16

Many Evangelicals, Latter-day Saints, and Catholics see being Christian as important to being American

In your opinion, to what extent is being Christian important for being American?



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

However, it's important to delve deeper to understand this belief. Conversations with Americans across faith traditions reveal a nuanced and complex picture shaping these views. Most Americans, including most Christians, feel that being American is not defined by religious affiliation.

“ I do not feel people need to choose a certain belief to be an American. **The freedom in choosing a belief or no belief is part of being an American.** ”
– Jack, 43-year-old white man, Protestant, slightly conservative Republican from California

“ **The beauty of being in America is that this is a melting pot of different types of people, of different faiths, and that people have the right to choose to be what they want to be.** But someone specifically having to be Christian would go against everything that the United States stands for. ”
– Evelyn, 56-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Independent from Texas

“ **Religion does not define being an American,** as Americans can be any religion/denomination or even be agnostic or atheist. ”
– Flora, 46-year-old Asian American woman, religious none (nothing in particular), moderate Democrat from Virginia

Among those who feel that being Christian is important to being American, many hold this view because they feel that Christian values were significant to the country's founding and continue to be important to the majority of Americans today.

“ **I believe that the basic beliefs of a Christian are important to us as Americans** such as being kind, helping your neighbor, showing respect to your elders and obeying whatever rules are where you live or work.
– Liza, 38-year-old white woman, Catholic, slightly conservative Independent from Florida

“ **Most Americans have strong Christian views and values.** It is important to who they are and it speaks volumes about them.
– Arvin, 45-year-old white man, Independent, Politically Disengaged from Toledo, Ohio⁴⁶

“ In God we trust. **The nation was built by deists, most of whom were Christians and lived in a Christian society.** Removing that makes the country completely different.
– Chip, 38-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, Republican from North Carolina

Many Americans regardless of political ideology—including religious Americans and those with no religious affiliation—say that the U.S. was founded on Christian values because most of the Founding Fathers were Christian or because the founding documents reflected values rooted in Christianity.

“ **I think our country was founded on Christian principles.** I wouldn't say all of our Founding Fathers were Christians, but I'd say the majority of them were. They tried to protect our religious freedoms and things like the Constitution and Bill of Rights. **But I don't think you can't become an American citizen unless you're Christian.** Religion is getting more diverse these days.
– Douglas, 56-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican from Georgia

“ **That virtually all of the Founding Fathers held beliefs based in Christianity is a historical fact.** More importantly, they recognized that how their faith was interpreted and re-interpreted could lead to political disunity and intolerance. **“Christian values” were used to justify the enslavement of human beings and genocidal practices against indigenous populations. Yet, these same values ultimately put an end to these actions.**
– Brian, 72-year-old Black man, non-Evangelical Protestant, very liberal Independent from Arizona

“ **The people who wrote the constitution were influenced by Christianity,** and references to the Lord and faith appear in historical documents and speeches. **But, this does not change the fact that the U.S. was also founded on the principles of religious freedom** and separation of church and state.
– Yasenia, 23-year-old Hispanic woman, religious “none” (agnostic), very liberal Democrat from Nevada

⁴⁶ Please note that this Americans in Conversation participant did not disclose his religious affiliation.

At the same time, most firmly reject the idea that being Christian is a prerequisite to be American.

“**There is no theology that makes you American or makes you more American than other people. I think it can probably be helpful to understand Christianity because our country was founded on some religious principles.** But I don't think that you have to be a certain religion or have any religious affiliation at all to be a true American and be patriotic.
 – Trevor, 29-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Independent from Utah

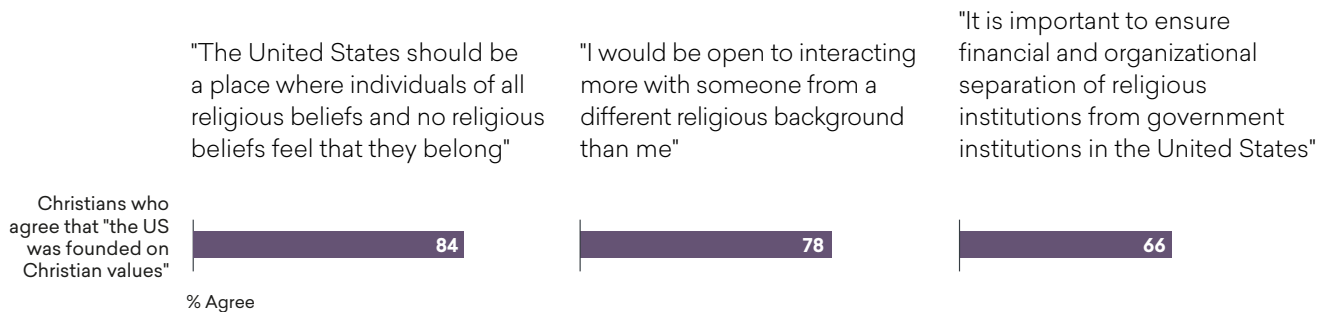
“**A lot of the principles our Constitution was based on are Christian ways of thinking but our Founding Fathers did not establish a national religion and our country was founded by people trying to avoid state religion. So no, you do not have to be Christian to be American.**
 – Melissa, 41-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Independent from North Carolina

Moreover, regardless of one's beliefs about the role of Christianity in American society, most Christians demonstrate strong support for religious pluralism, as well as the principle of separation of church and state. Among those who agree the U.S. was founded on Christian values, 84 percent still say that the U.S. should be a nation where people of all religions and no religion feel that they belong.

Figure 3.17

Most Christians support pluralism and separation of church and state, regardless of beliefs on role of Christianity in American history

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Most Christians do not see recognizing the influence of Christian faith on America in conflict with their commitment to building a pluralistic society. Most want people across different faith traditions and people without religious affiliation to feel a sense of belonging in the country. At the same time, many also think we should recognize the unique role that Christianity has played in the U.S. without minimizing the experience of non-Christian groups in American history and culture.

This duality between support for pluralism and desire to recognize the historic role of Christianity highlights the need to tell better stories around religious freedom and religious diversity—one that recognizes both the historical impact of Christianity and also honors the role that all religious communities have played in the development of contemporary America.

Exclusionary ideologies and the erosion of pluralism

While faith communities are often more committed to pluralism than is commonly assumed, a small but significant number of Americans remain intolerant of those with different or no religious beliefs. These sentiments can stem from a range of sources, including ignorance of other traditions, a sincere belief that one's own faith is the universal truth, or feelings of superiority or animosity towards those with different views. Although few Americans of any faith reject religious pluralism, these harmful voices are amplified by social media platforms and conflict entrepreneurs who craft narratives of existential threat, often justifying exclusionary policies or even violence in efforts to secure or retain power. For instance, some individuals espouse anti-Muslim views to advocate for increased political power for Christians or to exclude those who are not Christian or who lack religious affiliation.

“ Muslims are very against the LGBT community... So I think being governed by Christianity is the smarter move, or Catholicism, because we do not believe in killing people... **When you start to introduce too many different viewpoints, too many different religions, that's when things start to get a little tricky.**

– Anthony, 32-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from New Jersey

“ **Non-believers should feel a sense of not belonging** because they are not at a place where they should be for eternal salvation.

– Jack, 42-year-old white man, Protestant, very conservative Republican from Indiana

Positioning certain religious communities and their views as superior to others is a growing threat to religious freedom and pluralism in America, contributing to the erosion of democratic values and often inciting discrimination, violence and other harm. Exclusionary narratives spread by exploiting people's fears and anxieties, highlighting the most extreme voices within a religious out-group, and presenting them as representative of the whole. This heightens feelings of threat,⁴⁷ strengthens support for public policies that target specific faith groups,⁴⁸ and undermines pluralism, ultimately contributing to a vicious cycle in which people become more vulnerable to exclusionary beliefs and narratives.

The threat of exclusionary beliefs and narratives based on religious identity also highlights the need to better understand how they exploit vulnerabilities in human

⁴⁷ One example of the pundits that advocate for Christian supremacist ideology is Stephen Wolfe, who advocates for punishing non-Christians with banishment, imprisonment or the death penalty in his book “The Case for Christian Nationalism,” published by Pastor Doug Wilson's Canon Press. See more in Janet Meffred, “Christian Nationalists Emerging as the ‘Woke Right,’” *Janet Meffred*, May 9, 2024. <https://www.janetmeffred.com/p/christian-nationalists-emerging-as>.

⁴⁸ For example, the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley maintains a list of state legislative measures that negatively impact Muslim Americans: “Islamophobia Legislative Database,” Othering & Belonging Institute, UC Berkeley, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/islamophobia/islamophobia-legislative-database>.

psychology and spread through media and social networks. Scholars and pollsters have made significant contributions to this field through developing measures for authoritarianism, xenophobia/group bias, and Christian nationalism.⁴⁹

At the same time, some caution should be used when affixing labels such as “Christian nationalists” to a large swath of the American populace. For example, as detailed above, many Americans feel that Christianity and Christian values have played an important role in American society, but this does not make them advocates for a social hierarchy or ideology that prioritizes the rights of Christians over non-Christians. A clear distinction should be drawn between the large number of Americans who value the historical impact of Christianity in America, and the much smaller minority who are willing to enact harm and subvert democratic institutions. Conflating the two risks reducing entire communities to caricatures of religious zealots, while diverting attention and resources away from focusing on the small but dangerous minority who pose a serious threat to our democracy.

It is important to ask Americans not only what they believe about history and values, but also about the particular *implications* of those beliefs—the policies or laws they would support based on their belief. This could help reduce misperceptions, including those that contribute to a sense of threat within religious communities.

The next chapter explores the feelings of misrepresentation and threats that Americans of faith experience due to the false assumptions shared by many of their neighbors. We then turn to highlighting the common values that organizations, including places of worship, can elevate to encourage greater understanding and intergroup contact.

⁴⁹ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back For God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Pew Research Center, “45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a ‘Christian Nation’.”; “A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture,” *PRRI*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>; Over Zero and Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council, *The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America* (Over Zero, 2024), <https://www.projectoverzero.org/media-and-publications/belongingbarometer>.

Why many faith groups feel under attack: The impact of perception gaps

“Please do not paint us all with the same brush, because we are not all the same.”

– Ines, 67-year-old Hispanic woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from New York

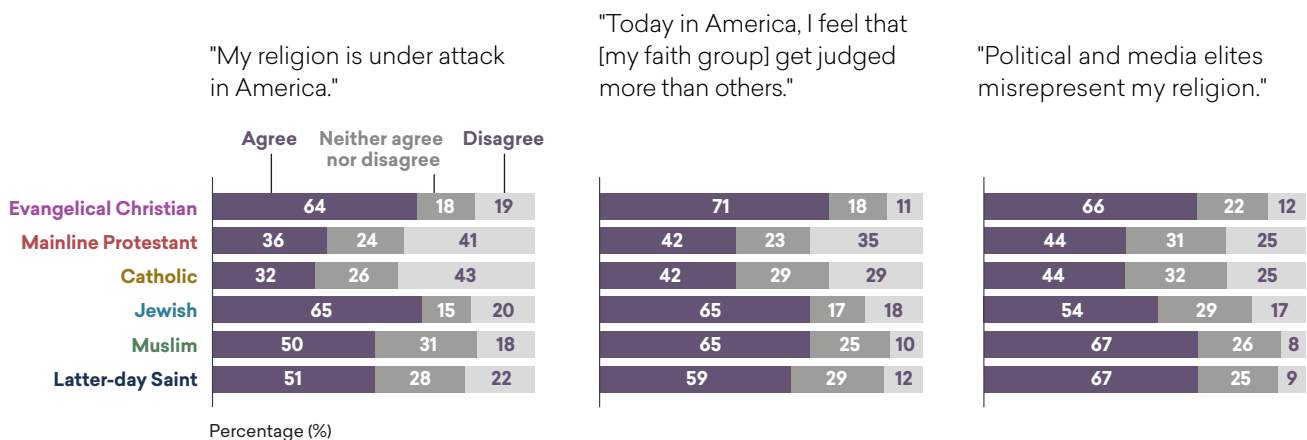
One way that polarization perpetuates in society is through exaggerated portrayals and misperceptions of different groups. One of the most concerning consequences is the contribution of these misperceptions to a wider environment where many religious Americans feel that their faith, and who they are, have become targets for ridicule, exclusion, and even violence.

Shared perception of threats

In many of the faith communities surveyed for this report, a majority feel that their group is under attack, judged, and misrepresented by political and media elites. The pervasive perception of threat is connected to feeling misunderstood and stigmatized. It is especially prevalent among religious minorities—American Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints—as well as among Evangelical Christians. Over seven in ten Evangelicals, almost two thirds of American Jews and Muslims, followed by almost six in ten Latter-day Saints, feel that their groups are judged more than others. Most among these groups also feel that their religion is misrepresented by political and media elites.

Figure 4.1 Many Americans across faith groups feel under attack, judged and misrepresented

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

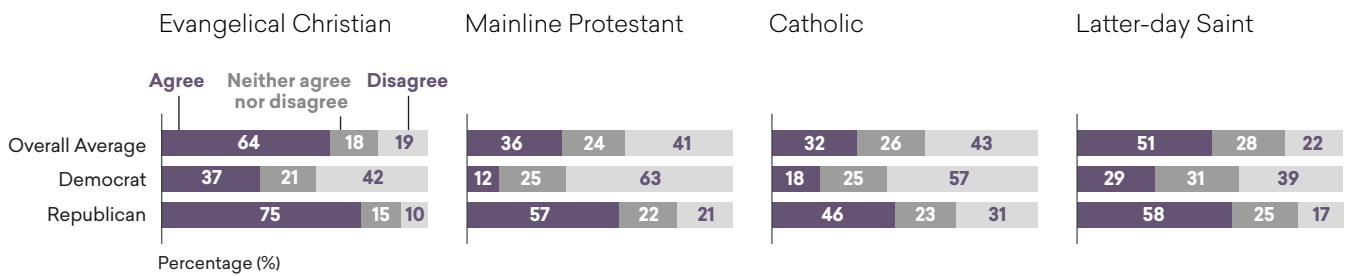


Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

The feeling that Christians are under attack, judged, and misrepresented is felt most strongly among Republican Christians. For example, Republican Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Latter-day Saints are at least twice as likely to feel that their faith group is under attack than their Democratic counterparts. The partisan differences are the most striking among Mainline Protestants. Republicans in Mainline Protestant communities are almost five times more likely than Democrats to say Christianity is under attack in America (57 percent versus 12 percent). One possible explanation for the sharp partisan differences is that perception of threat among Christian groups is likely shaped by one's political circle and sources of news and information.

Figure 4.2 **Republican Christians are much more likely than Democratic Christians to feel their faith is under attack and judged**

"My religion is under attack in America."

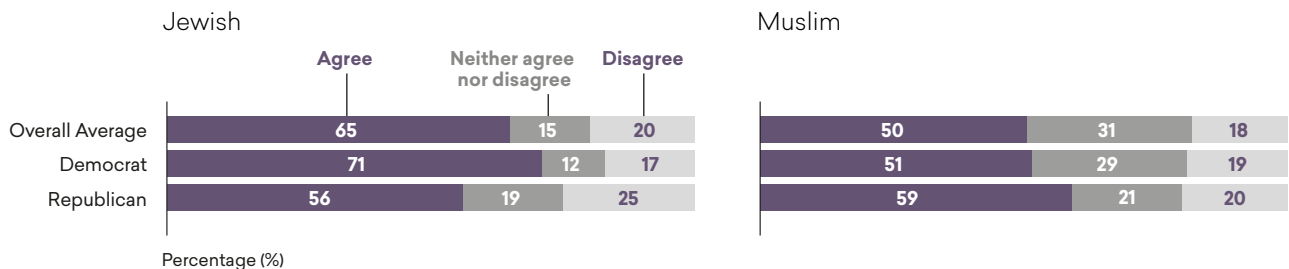


Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
 Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

In contrast, the majority of American Jews and Muslims feel under attack regardless of party affiliation. Differences between Democrats and Republicans within Jewish and Muslim communities are within the margin of error.

Figure 4.3 **Majority of American Jews and Muslims feels under attack, regardless of political party affiliation**

"My religion is under attack in America."



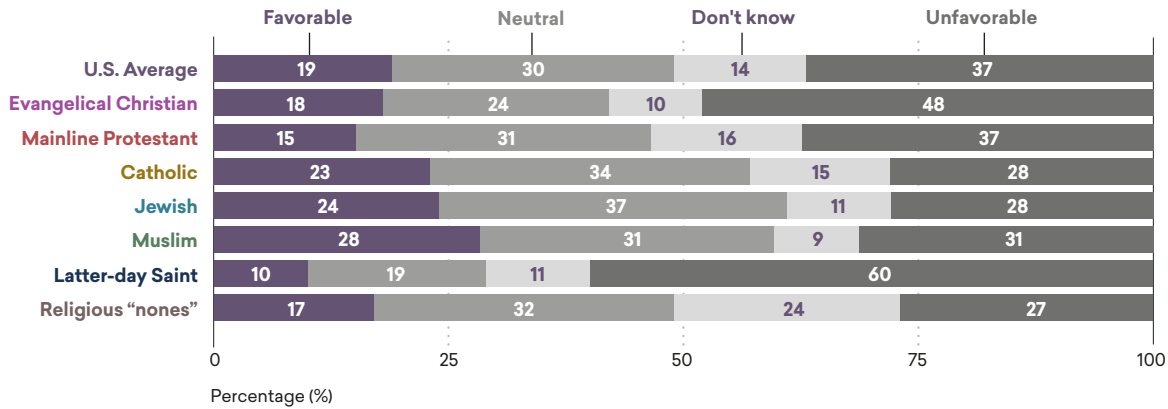
Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
 Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Differences between Democrat and Republican figures are within margin of error.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Almost two in five Americans feel that their faith group is portrayed negatively in popular culture, such as movies and TV shows. Latter-day Saints are the most likely to report unfavorable depictions of their group in popular culture (60 percent), followed by almost half of Evangelical Christians (48 percent).

Figure 4.4

Six in ten Latter-day Saints feel that depictions of their group are unfavorable, followed by almost half of Evangelicals

In general, do you think depictions of [my faith group, e.g., Christians/Catholics/ Jews/Muslims/Latter-day Saints/religiously unaffiliated] in American popular culture today, such as TV shows and movies, are...



Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Many Latter-day Saints feel that their faith is often ridiculed by Hollywood, the media, and popular culture which perpetuate inaccurate assumptions about their communities. Many also feel that they are often not recognized as real Christians by other Americans. Some are particularly dismayed by the lack of awareness of prejudice towards Latter-day Saints in American society and wish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would take a more active role in dispelling stereotypes.

“There’s definitely a lot of **misinformation**, but there’s also some **sly comments made by Hollywood**. There’s these undercurrents of where our religion is made fun of and referenced that way. **And that’s a little unsettling because you feel like we’re being mocked...** [It makes] you feel like our culture and our religion is attacked and not really fully understood.
– Tiffany, 41-year-old white woman, Latter-day Saint, conservative Republican from Idaho

“I think that the media doesn’t necessarily trash members of our church, but there are definitely polygamy and other stereotypes that people joke about. Like whenever people talk about Utah, it’s like, “oh, how many wives do you have?” That’s something that’s very prevalent in the media. But in terms of social media, if our church posts something, **you often see contention from other Christians being like, “these guys aren’t Christian, don’t listen to them.”**
– Michael, 20-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Republican from Colorado

“There’s times when **I would like to see the Church stand up for itself a little bit more**. Like when you have the University of Utah or BYU football teams traveling and the opposite fan base yells “F the Mormons.” **If you said that about Jews or Catholics or any other religion, I think you would get a lot of blowback and you just don’t get that as much with us.** I don’t know exactly why that is.
– Trevor, 29-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Independent from Utah

This feeling of being misrepresented and under attack is shared by many in other faith communities. Many who identify as Evangelical feel unfairly reduced to a monolith in which the diversity of political beliefs and spiritual practices among Evangelicals is ignored.

“ Christians give Christians a bad name, okay? Because you have those Evangelicals who are so radical. **Please do not paint us all with the same brush because we are not all the same.** There are some people who say they are Christian, but they are not, and there are some people who are atheist but are more Christian than the people who profess to be Christian.

– Ines, 67-year-old Hispanic woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from New York

“ In our smaller churches, we’re still thinking about our families, about taking care of the community, about reaching out to people, really getting people saved. **We don’t just want you here for your dollar. We really care about your soul.** And that’s the main thing, that **we’re being misrepresented by a lot of our big-name preachers.** They’re not representing the smaller churches.

– Preston, 52-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican

Some Black Protestants lament that the media and public conversations often equate Evangelicals with white conservative Evangelicals, overlooking the beliefs, traditions, and history of Black Evangelicals.

“ **[The media] only spends time talking to white Evangelicals. They very seldom talk to any Black Evangelicals.** So it stands to reason that the American public would make those two connections of conservatives and white Evangelicals.

– Leroy, 73-year-old Black man, non-Evangelical Protestant, moderate Democrat from Georgia

Some conservative Evangelicals and Catholics feel that they are always judged and depicted by the media and the general public as bigots or extremists.

“ I think as Christians, we’re targeted a lot. **It seems like the media and everybody else seems to focus on secular beliefs, so they try to label you as a hater just because you don’t agree with their point of view on certain issues.** But they don’t see that Christianity is a loving religion, and we accept people from all backgrounds and beliefs. Just because we might disagree with somebody about their lifestyle doesn’t mean we hate them or we’re against them.

– Douglas, 56-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican from Georgia

“ **America stands for religious freedom, but a lot of times it feels like it’s religious freedom for everyone but us.** Because when we try to stand behind our beliefs, all of a sudden, we’re haters and we’re not loving. But then other religious groups can do their thing and not get any negative result from that. So, yeah, I do feel like there’s definitely judgment.

– Susan, 41-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Republican from Indiana

“ **A lot of the time, I feel like they look at white Catholics as racist.** I’ve seen that on the media, on the news, and social media. That’s not at all true. There’s extremes to every side. For the vast majority [of white Catholics], that’s not true.

– Victor, 24-year-old white man, Catholic, conservative Republican from New York

Some Americans of faith feel that not only is their own religious group judged and misrepresented, but that American society as a whole lacks kindness towards those with different backgrounds and beliefs.

“ **I think everybody, every culture group is being judged by the other.** Whether you’re Evangelical, or no matter what your faith or religion is, no matter what your color is, no matter what your sex is, or if you’re confused about your sex. People don’t even say nice things anymore. **You can’t go on the internet. They yell at each other. People are just not kind anymore.**

– Brenda, 49-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Pennsylvania

“ I would say that I think the respect level for Christians has changed dramatically from the early 70s when I was growing up to now, because I think a lot of it has to do with social media and the way that people are using social media to voice their opinions. **They have no respect for religion,** for what other people are doing. And if you’re not doing what they’re doing or what they believe is right, then it’s automatically wrong. **I just see that there’s a lack of compassion and a lack of understanding that just because we don’t agree doesn’t mean we can’t get along.**

– Evelyn, 56-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Independent from Texas

“ **There’s a lot of misinformation and lack of education, lack of understanding that causes discrimination.** But I think it’s also because a lot of people just don’t care. They don’t care to know, or they don’t care to be taught. **Even if you explain your heart out to them, it doesn’t mean anything to certain people.**

– Aasim, 36-year-old Asian American man, Muslim, liberal Democrat from Texas

Jewish and Muslim experiences

While most faith groups feel under attack and judged by others, Jewish and Muslim Americans have a distinct experience of threats to safety in their daily lives. The U.S. has seen a disturbing surge in antisemitic violence, including the deadliest attack on Jewish people in U.S. history at the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue in 2018.⁵⁰ Studies by the Institute of Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) consistently show that Muslims and Jews are the groups most likely to experience religious discrimination.⁵¹ In the wake of the October 7, 2023 terrorist attacks led by Hamas on Israel, “soaring levels of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred” have been reported, including both online attacks and violence in the streets.⁵² Since the start of the most recent Israel-Hamas war, there has also been a spike in hate crimes against Muslim Americans, including the murder of 6-year-old Palestinian American boy Wadea al-Fayoume one week after the Hamas attacks on Israel.⁵³

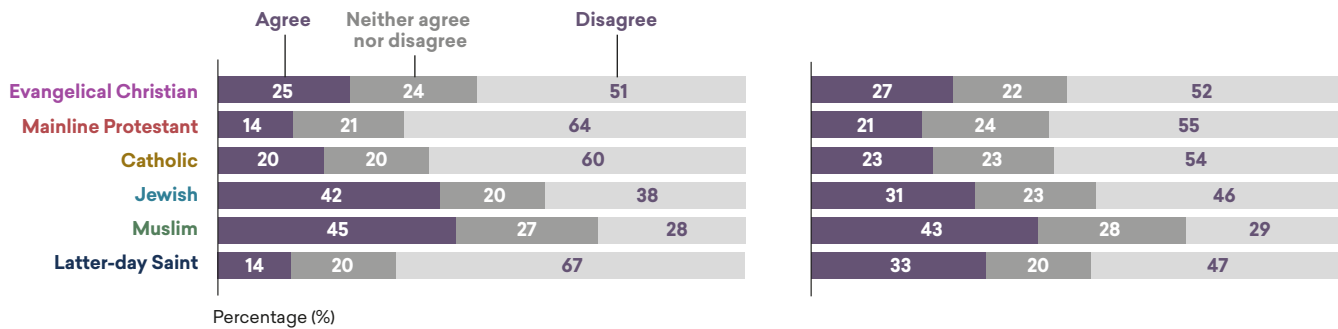
These trends have tangible impacts on the lived experiences of Jewish and Muslim Americans. Our study finds that **over four in ten Muslims and Jews in America feel or have felt unsafe in the past year because of being Muslim or Jewish**. In comparison, less than one quarter of Christian groups report feeling unsafe due to being Christian or Catholic. Muslims (43 percent) are also more likely to report feeling hesitant to share their religious identity.

Figure 4.5 Muslim and Jewish Americans are much more likely to feel unsafe in their daily lives

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

"In the past year, I feel or have felt unsafe because I am [my religion]."

"In the past year, I feel or have felt hesitant to share my religious identity."



Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

⁵⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “2022 FBI Hate Crimes Statistics,” *U.S. Department of Justice*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/2022-hate-crime-statistics>; Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Long, Ugly Antisemitic History of Jews Will Not Replace Us,” *Brandeis University*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.brandeis.edu/jewish-experience/jewish-america/2021/november/replacement-antisemitism-sarna.html>; Peter Smith, “Pittsburgh Synagogue Gunman is Found Guilty in the Deadliest Attack on Jewish People in U.S. History,” *Associated Press*, June 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-ba843b83bf674d2603a07add574f13ea>.

⁵¹ Dalia Mogahed, Erum Ikramullah, and Youssef Chouhoud, *American Muslim Poll 2022: Full Report* (ISPU, 2022), <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2022-full-report>.

⁵² Doina Chiacu, “US Officials Alert Religious Groups on Antisemitism, Islamophobia Threats,” *Reuters*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-urges-precautions-faith-communities-amid-antisemitism-islamophobia-2023-12-06/>.

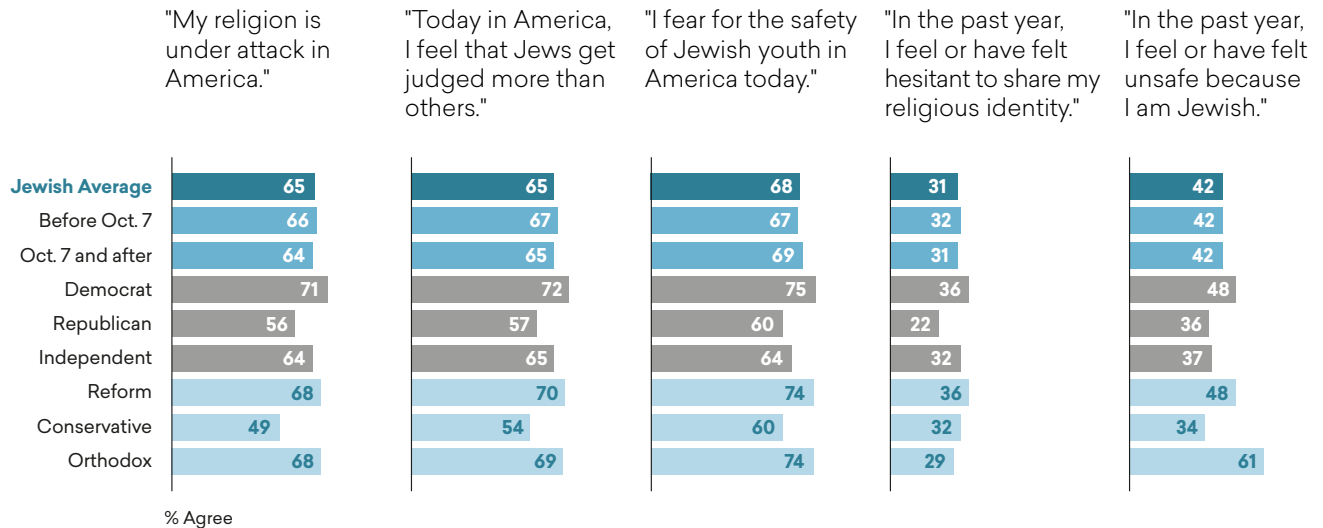
⁵³ Sakshi Venkatraman and Mirna Alsharif, “For Muslim Americans, a Spike in Hate Incidents Feels Reminiscent of Post 9/11 Islamophobia,” *NBC News*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/muslim-americans-spike-hate-incidents-feels-reminiscent-post-911-islam-rcna122570>; U.S. Department of Justice, “Attorney General Statement on the Killing of Six-Year-Old Child Wadea Al-Fayoume and Severe Wounding,” *Department of Justice*, October 15, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-statement-killing-six-year-old-child-wadea-al-fayoume-and-severe-wounding>.

Survey responses indicate that concerns about safety and threats remain consistent before and after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023. Jewish and Muslim Americans were oversampled in our study, with data collected from October 5 to October 30, 2023. This timeframe allowed us to compare responses before and after October 7, as the conflict in the Middle East erupted and domestic tensions escalated.

Our research found that, on average, feelings of being under attack and concerns about safety among Jewish and Muslim Americans were already significant before October 7, and they persisted afterwards. On the eve of the October 7 Hamas attacks, around two thirds of Jewish Americans felt under attack, judged, and fearful for the safety of Jewish youth. The level of concern and anxiety remained largely unchanged in the weeks following the Hamas attacks and outbreak of war. Notably, concerns about safety and threats are consistent across partisan affiliation, Jewish traditions, and demographics, where differences are within the margin of error.

Figure 4.6 **Anxiety around safety among Jewish Americans is high both before and after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023**

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?



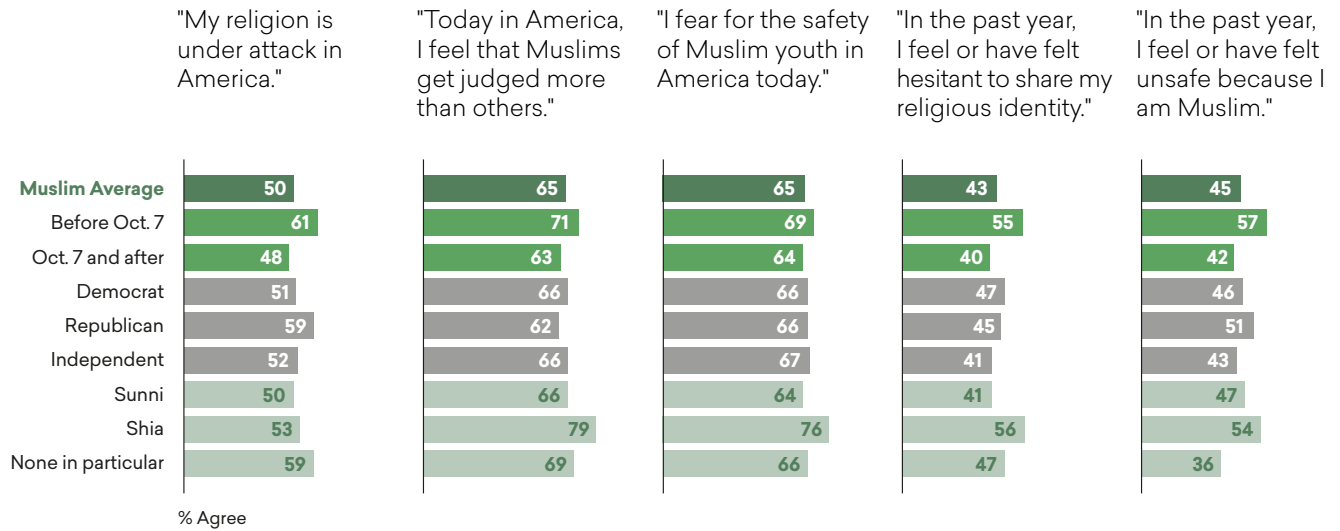
Note: Differences between pre-10/7 and post-10/7 figures and differences across political party and traditions are within margin of error. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Similarly, the majority of Muslim Americans felt judged and worried about the safety of Muslim youth both before and after October 7, with changes in these concerns falling within the margin of error. Overall, perceptions of threat and anxiety about safety among Muslim Americans is consistent across political affiliation, sects and demographics.

Figure 4.7

Anxiety around safety among Muslim Americans is high both before and after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?



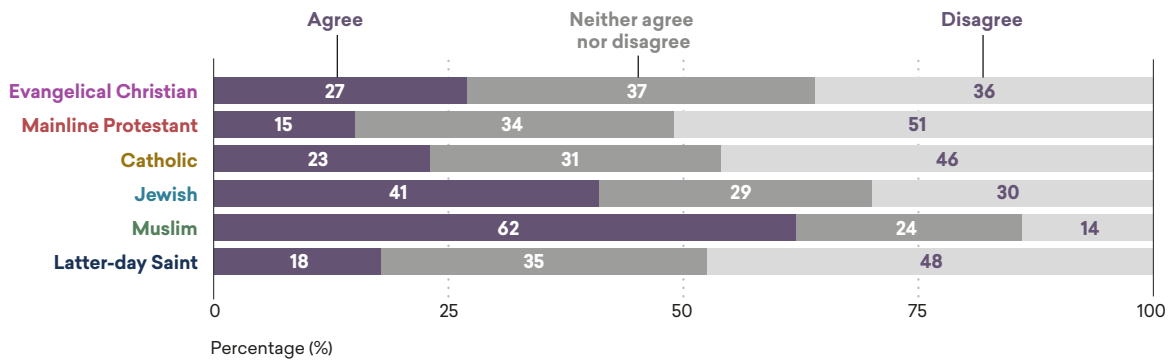
Note: Differences between pre-10/7 and post-10/7 figures and differences across political party and traditions are within margin of error. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

American Muslims and Jews are also more likely to feel that their allegiance to the country is questioned by others. Over six in ten Muslims say that Muslims are not seen as “American enough,” and four in ten Jews say that Jews are not seen as “American enough.”

Figure 4.8

Muslim and Jewish Americans are much more likely than other groups to feel not seen as "American enough"

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
 “[My faith group] are not seen as American enough.”



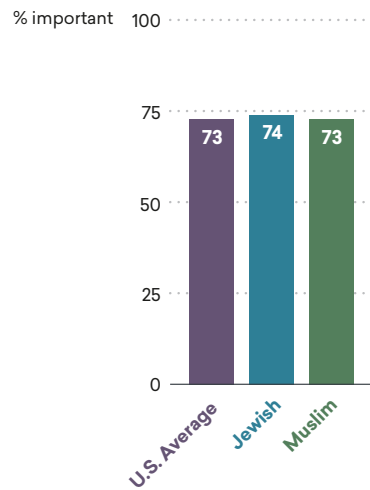
Note: Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

In reality, over seven in ten American Jews and Muslims say that being American is an important part of who they are.

Figure 4.9

Most Jewish and Muslim Americans say being American is an important part of their identity

How important to you is each of the following parts of your identity? [Being American]



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Many Muslim Americans we spoke to recount experiences with discrimination, which are often entangling with their gender and racial backgrounds. Many Muslim women, especially those who wear hijabs (traditional headscarves), often encounter different treatment in their daily lives, such as at grocery stores, due to their head-covering.

“ **If people see our appearance or how we dress, if our head is covered, you will see a change in behavior.** You see shop employees talking so nicely to the other customers, and as soon as they come to us, you will see a sudden change in their tone. Sometimes they don't even respond and just move on. **This is something that hurts very badly. We are a part of this community as well.**

– Ayesha, 31-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from Florida

“ I feel like the ridicule comes from ignorance. **I remember when I first started covering my hair and my body, and people around me would ask me if I'm oppressed. I'm like, how would I be oppressed if this is a choice that I'm making?**

– Beena, 32-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from New York

Orthodox Jewish women also share similar stories of being targeted and discriminated against because of clothing that signifies their religious identity.

“ Now that I wear more modest clothes, people in the city, like Borough Park in Brooklyn, know what a Jew looks like. So I do get looks. Sometimes I get nasty looks. Sometimes people will say something to me, especially like now. **Someone recently was trying to spit on me and say “you filthy Jew.” I hope that people aren’t doing this to other Jewish girls that can’t defend themselves sometimes.**

– Shayna, 23-year-old mixed-race woman, Orthodox Jewish, moderate Independent from New York

In addition to gender, American Muslims’ experiences with bias and discrimination are often enmeshed with their ethnic or racial backgrounds. Many Muslims of South Asian, Middle Eastern, or North African descent share personal experiences of being targeted in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

“ It was such a big deal to be a Muslim at the time of 9/11. **We were asked to take our rosary off the car mirrors at that time because even the cars were being targeted.**

– Aasim, 36-year-old Asian American man, Muslim, liberal Democrat from Texas

For Black Muslims, anti-Muslim prejudice often intersects with anti-Black racism. Some Black Muslim converts report feeling misunderstood by their communities after converting to Islam.

“ It seems like Islam has always been something that Hollywood must make fun of, or poke fun of, or deem as evil, or terrorists, or things of that nature. And then being Black, you’re going to be judged no matter what. **You’re [depicted as] an angry Black Muslim. You’re getting judged for both of them.**

– John, 48-year-old Black man, Muslim, slightly liberal Democrat from Indiana

“ When I was explaining to my friends that I was going to become Muslim, they’re like, “oh, you’re following an Arab religion?” **They thought I was trying to be less Black, if that makes sense.**

– Beena, 32-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from New York

In the aftermath of the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, many Muslim Americans we spoke to reported feeling targeted. Many feel that Muslims are reduced to a monolith and unfairly blamed for Hamas’ actions. Negative comments about Muslims in daily conversations and news stories have contributed to a sense of unease. Physical attacks on American Muslims and threats to mosques and Islamic centers have intensified concerns and anxiety.

“ Some things are ingrained into people from what they see on TV or on the news about Muslims. They group us all together. There have been a few Muslims here that have got attacked. **A couple of our mosques here had bomb threats. It’s scary.**

– Zainab, 45-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from Ohio

“ Right now, talking about Islam is a big deal. What if you’re searching for a job right now? Or what if you are in a situation where you overhear people talking about how much they hate Muslims just because of the state of the world right now? ... Some of the conversations that I’ve heard... **They don’t even see us as people. They see us as what’s going on in the Middle East. They see us as hostile and all of these things without having any personal knowledge.**

– Monica, 45-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Democrat from South Carolina

“ I feel like, especially CNN and on the news networks, since I’ve been growing up, since September 11, Muslims are just always talked about and it’s never a good piece. But we’re also your neighbor. For me personally, my name is not actually Bruno. **My name is actually Mohammed⁵⁴, which is a Muslim name. But I’ve had to create a barrier because I get judged off of my name right away. Like, if I put it on a form, then I don’t get said opportunities because of my name.**

– Bruno, 34-year-old Black man, Muslim, conservative Republican, from California

Some feel especially distressed and helpless as civilian casualties in Gaza continue to increase after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war.

“ **I’m Palestinian and Lebanese, so it does hit a little bit closer to home.** But I think it hits everybody in a special way because they’re hurting our Muslim brothers and sisters... **People are still dying in the process and it’s been really hard... It was really affecting my mental health, especially having a kid myself. It was hard to see other kids in that place.** I think it brought me to a little bit of a darker place, so I had to find ways to just pray for them and to do my part in a way that made sense to me.

– Layla, 26-year-old woman of Middle Eastern descent, Muslim, conservative Democrat from Massachusetts

“ A lot of people are talking about [Gaza] and I can see it’s really affecting everyone so deeply. **But I think the hardest part about it is just feeling helpless because we can go to protests, we can do all these things, but [the war] is still going on.**

– Kiara, 24-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from Minnesota

In conversations with Jewish Americans, many have expressed a heightened sense of fear since the October 7 Hamas attacks and the rise in antisemitism in the U.S. Many feel personally unsafe in their day-to-day lives, citing domestic tension in response to the Israel-Hamas war and incidents of Jewish individuals and institutions being targeted and attacked in public both locally and around the country. Some have refrained from wearing clothing or items that would signify their Jewish identity in public.

⁵⁴ Please note that the respondent’s real name has been changed to a pseudonym to protect his privacy.

“ In New York City, it's very tense in general... Women that look like me are getting punched in the face. **I'm concerned by being identified as what I am and just somebody on site hating my face and deciding to punch it like that.** I used to not have mace with me everywhere. It just feels very personal in a very sick kind of twisted way... You don't necessarily have to love everybody, but let people just have their life.

– Melanie, 44-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, moderate Republican from New York

“ **It's scary. Last Hanukkah, [my sister was] afraid to put [my niece] in a Hanukkah outfit.** It made me so sad because she had all these cute little dreidel outfits. She wore them at home and took pictures, but [my sister was] like, **I don't want to send her out into the world because I don't know what people think and I don't want someone to treat her badly. It just made me very sad.**

– Deborah, 40-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, moderate Independent from Florida

“ So for me, what's scary about these days since October 7 is that just how people can [see] a random Jew on the street and they would attack this person physically or with words [as if] this random Jewish individual has anything to do with what's going on in Israel...**It's scary to be outwardly Jewish in the way you dress or what you wear. I wear a Star of David, but I don't wear it outside of my clothes where people can see it, because you never know what someone who walks past me is going to think or say.**


– Ivan, 34-year-old white man, Reform Jewish, slightly liberal Independent from Ohio

Some Jewish Americans express concerns about antisemitism from left-wing activists, particularly regarding threats against Jewish students and institutions on college campuses. Others are worried about antisemitism among right-wing politicians, citing efforts to mandate religious instruction in public schools.⁵⁵

“ **I'm mainly worried about antisemitism on the far left because these people have a lot of power. We're talking about colleges, professors, people in politics that can make laws right and decide whether they protect Jewish kids on campus or not.** I think that it affected kids in college the most. My daughter... received a letter from Hillel that somebody put something with blood outside of Hillel just now over the summer. What surprised me is not just the antisemitism itself, but that if it was any other minority group that was attacked the same way, it would have stopped. People would be afraid, but there are no consequences, again, of attacking Jewish people.


– Yulia, 54-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois

⁵⁵ Sean Murphy, "What to Know About Oklahoma's Top Education Official Ordering Bible Instruction in Schools," *AP News*, June 28, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/oklahoma-bible-schools-religion-ryan-walters-b49021c09b0fab4d0976b2d3bf3ce511>.


 **We're dealing in a time right now where certain states are basically saying Christianity is the only way.** Christianity must be in schools. The Bible must be taught in every classroom. That's coming from a lot of conservative states and conservative governments. **That's saying that you as a Jew are not welcome anymore. Your religion is inferior. You can't practice your own religion, conform to this.**

– Alyssa, 34-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, very liberal Democrat from New Jersey

Some Jewish Americans feel that political polarization in the U.S. has contributed to a more divisive environment that gives rise to antisemitism and other forms of prejudice.


 **There was an idea that at one point [America] would be a melting pot. Instead, it just has become not the sum of its parts, but the parts of its sum. Right now, Jews happen to be on the list, but they'll come for the next group.** And that's the challenge. And I think part of it is on both sides, the extremes are the ones that are driving it.

– Diego, 51-year-old Hispanic man, Conservative Jewish, moderate Independent from Connecticut


 **I just feel like with this current landscape in our country, this divisiveness that has just been growing on all sides, we're allowing more violence and more harm to come to different subsets all over.** Jews especially, are feeling it right now, but it's not just us. Women are being attacked for the rights to our bodies. People who are gay are being attacked. People who are trans are being attacked. There's different ways of looking at it. As a whole, we're getting into a very divisive landscape. That's what's causing so much of this tension and animosity.

– Alyssa, 34-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, very liberal Democrat from New Jersey


Regardless of the differing opinions on the sources or causes of antisemitism, many Jewish Americans have felt a profound anguish from witnessing the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel and antisemitic violence in the U.S. Some report feeling more vulnerable and questioning whether Jewish people can feel a genuine sense of belonging in American society today. For many, the fear of harassment or violence due to being visibly Jewish, and the need to hide their Jewish identity, has been deeply alienating and traumatic.

 **As a people, [we] have been part of the diaspora, always uprooting your entire family...** Parts of my family, it's happened twice, from South America to Israel and then potentially back to the U.S. or South America. **[We're] just constantly feeling that safety is not guaranteed.**

– Melanie, 44-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, moderate Republican from New York

 **Most of my family died in the Holocaust.** Three of my grandparents. My dad became an orphan at the age of eight. They all perished in Holocaust. [My dad's] siblings, parents, grandparents, cousins, and it was equally bad on my mom's side. **When I woke up on October 7, my first thought was that it's happening [again].** I thought that when I left Russia, finally antisemitism was behind and I did not feel it in the U.S. I truly was shocked when I saw what was going on with the world.

– Yulia, 54-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois

 **I think in general, what happened on October 7 started something here that changed how we, as Jews, go out in our own communities and in our own world...**because there is this underlying fear that what starts in one place can come here. We've seen it in protests. That feeling, that animosity, that antisemitism is here [in the U.S.] too. It was like [the war] opened the door for [antisemitism] here. It's impacted us in a different way than we even realize because **it's shifted again how we're viewing our own identities and how we're viewing our own religion. Are we safe in ways that we didn't necessarily think about before?**

– Alyssa, 34-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, very liberal Democrat from New Jersey

The threats to safety that Jewish and Muslim Americans face, coupled with doubt about their allegiance, underscore the pressing need for greater resources to address and correct misperceptions about these communities. The pervasive sense of threat and marginalization among Muslims and Jews also highlights the value of elevating voices that affirm America's commitment to pluralism and to living in a society where people of all faith identities fully and equally belong. Our resilience against division will be strengthened if faith identities are normalized in the images that Americans see and the stories they encounter daily.

While support for religious pluralism and the separation of church and state is strong among Americans, increased polarization and “us-versus-them” narratives have led to many people across faith traditions—especially those most vulnerable to marginalization and dehumanizing rhetoric—feeling threatened and fearful. This sense of threat is particularly harmful, as it runs counter to the founding ideals of religious liberty and, as research shows, worsens intergroup relations, hindering interfaith contact.⁵⁶

The heightened sense of threat among Americans of faith is exacerbated by the narrow set of stories often told about religious life in the U.S. Our research uncovered false impressions that not only flatten the diversity of perspectives within and across faith communities, but also alienate groups that already feel marginalized and misunderstood. When faith identities are consistently associated with political parties, this reinforces polarized dynamics, including the simplistic “blue versus red”, “Democrats versus Republicans” binary, making it more difficult for America's faithful to play a greater role in transcending divisions.

⁵⁶ Z.D. Broeren and P.A. Djupe, “The Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate of Christian Nationalism: Experimental Evidence About the Implementation of the Rule of Law,” *Politics and Religion* 17, no. 1 (2024): 40–57.

The more normalized misperceptions become, the more likely it is that people see *themselves* and the world around them through that distorted lens—turning false perceptions into a lived reality.

In the context of heightened partisan animosity and polarization, efforts to reduce these perception gaps take on greater importance. **For individuals to feel respected and valued, they must first feel understood.** When society and neighbors can see you as you see yourself, it creates the possibility for greater connection across lines of difference. As we better understand each other, we uncover the rich common values and identities that Americans share, regardless of their religious affiliations, revealing a pathway out of social fractures and polarization.

In reality, faith identities—whether Evangelical or Latter-day Saint, Jewish or Muslim, Catholic or Mainline Protestant—coexist with many other sources of identity: our roles in our family, with friends, in neighborhoods, at work, engaging with sports and recreation, music, arts and other dimensions of our lives. **Recognizing the particularities of individual faiths within the broader context of Americans’ shared experiences and cross-cutting identities can help inoculate against the forces that are driving division and “us-versus-them” narratives.** Much more can be done to reduce the sense of threat currently felt by many people of faith and to build and sustain a culture of mutual respect, in which Americans from all faith backgrounds experience a fuller sense of belonging.

Common ground

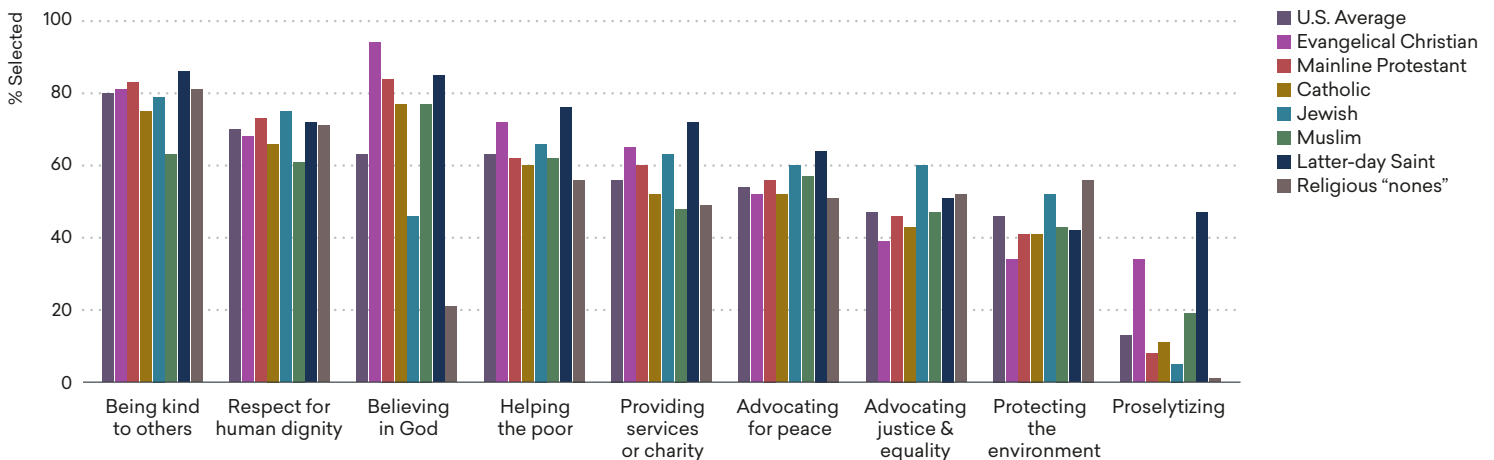
When we step away from framing faith through the confines of a political lens, richer and more authentic narratives of faith emerge—narratives that truly reflect the values and experiences of Americans. We can see more clearly that the vast majority of Americans across different faith traditions not only respect the beliefs of one another, but also find common ground in shared values. The similar aspirations for America’s future, shared by religious and non-religious Americans alike, give us realistic confidence in our capacity to move beyond the entrenched divisions of recent years.

Common values

There is significant commonality in the values cherished by Americans across different religious traditions. Most Americans, regardless of religious affiliation, say being kind to others is important to their faith tradition or personal conviction (80 percent), followed by respect for human dignity (70 percent).

Figure 5.1 Kindness and respect for human dignity are the most important values regardless of religion

[Religious respondents] In your opinion, which of the following are important to your religious or faith tradition? [Religious “nones”] In your opinion, which of the following are important to your values? (Select all that apply.)



Note: “None of the above” responses are excluded from this data visualization.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Conversations with Americans reveal that, despite differences in scripture and beliefs, faith offers answers to a common quest for moral principles and a sense of purpose when navigating daily life and hard times.

“I think it provides this stable, existential basis for me that is very grounding and comforting to know that certain things are true and to know that there is God. There is someone greater than all things, and that even though the world is like a mess, there is some kind of truth and justice.”
– Billie, 28-year-old Asian American non-binary person, Muslim, liberal Independent from Maryland

“ For me, being Christian is very important. It has been a big guide in my life. **It has helped me make better decisions throughout my life because I hold God first and foremost.** Being young and raised in church, it helped put discipline and instilled fear in me all at the same time.

– Loretta, 55-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Ohio

“ **I get a lot of the values and a moral compass from the church,** and that’s very helpful. I also find that I have a different purpose. Day to day life, going to work, coming home, helping out with the kids can seem mundane at times. **But this religion gives me a purpose that transcends that. It gives me hope and something to look forward to.**

– Trevor, 29-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Independent from Utah

“ **I think being Jewish is a big part of the ethics that I carry every day and the way I interact with other people, how I approach life, and how I think about my purpose.** It’s a very hard coded part of who you are, your inner soul, in a way.

– Melanie, 44-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, moderate Republican from New York

Americans of faith speak warmly of the role that different religious practices and rituals play in their lives. Among Christians, Protestants and Catholics mention daily prayers and Sunday services or Mass, while Evangelicals also engage in quiet times of Bible reading and prayer, as well as regular Bible studies. Religiously observant Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, emphasize studying Talmud, the central text of Judaism, and keeping kosher to comply with the dietary rules of Judaism. Regardless of their levels of religiosity, many American Jews talk about celebrating Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath or day of rest. American Muslims speak about attending Jummah, or Friday prayer, at the mosque and performing wudu, the Islamic ritual of cleansing the body before prayer. What unites these diverse practices is a common sense of higher purpose and sacred bond with God.

“ I pray every day. **Before I start the day, I pray to the good Lord to protect me, steer me on the right track, and help me make good choices.** And I always wear these [rosary beads] every day to protect me. I thank the good Lord for this.

– Riley, 24-year-old white man, Catholic, very conservative Republican from New York

“ I would say being Jewish is a major part of my identity. **I’m Orthodox and my life revolves around Judaism, whether it’s like Shabbat or just like the other holidays or keeping kosher.** My husband learns the Talmud every day in the morning and prays three times a day.

– Rebecca, 27-year-old white woman, Orthodox Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois

“ I take pride in being a Muslim. It’s not just during the holidays. **When I go to Jummah every Friday, I dress up. I make sure I take wudu. I do everything that I’m supposed to, how I’m supposed to prepare myself. I take pride in that.** I kind of go the extra mile, but I enjoy going that extra mile.

– Omar, 21-year-old Black man, Muslim, moderate Independent from New York

Regardless of how frequently they attend religious services or engage in prayers, faith remains significant in the lives of many Americans. Religion has often played a role in shaping formative childhood experiences—including after school Bible studies, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), Quran study and Hebrew schools, as well as Christian or Jewish summer camps. Faith is deeply intertwined with memories of families coming together—gathering around the dinner table to light the candle at Shabbat, eating dates to break fast at Iftar during Ramadan, and enjoying festive Easter brunches and Eid parties.

“ **I think religion goes hand in hand with culture. It’s how we grow up, and that’s how it also keeps us together.** I think being in a Catholic family, you get to experience more stuff together. And going to church is more of a family matter than anything else.

– Isabel, 39-year-old Hispanic woman, Catholic, moderate Democrat from Texas

“ Growing up, we had traditions. We did Shabbat every Friday. I don’t do it now, but I’ll occasionally light the Shabbat candles. It was hard for me personally to keep up those traditions just because I was on my own for the first time. But now that I’m engaged, it’s definitely something that I think about often. **I want to have a traditional Jewish wedding, and then when I have kids, I want to raise them culturally Jewish. I want to uphold all the traditions that we did when we were younger.**

– Hannah, 26-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, slightly liberal Democrat from Florida

Through participating in these activities, many people commemorate their beloved family members and the memories they hold dear—the grandparent who read the Bible to them at bedtime, or the beloved aunt or uncle whose cooking filled the house with delicious aromas during religious holidays.

“ **I feel Jewish when I make the same foods that my mother and grandmother made.** I feel connected to them when I cook for the holidays.

– Sarah, 66-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

“ I grew up Catholic. I went to Catholic school from kindergarten all the way up to freshman year of high school. I went to church every week after school and on the weekends. **I also had a grandmother who was very religious. She read the Bible all the time, had her candles. She was a big influence on me regarding religion and being Catholic to this day.** It definitely guides my morals and my day-to-day life.

– Anthony, 32-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from New Jersey

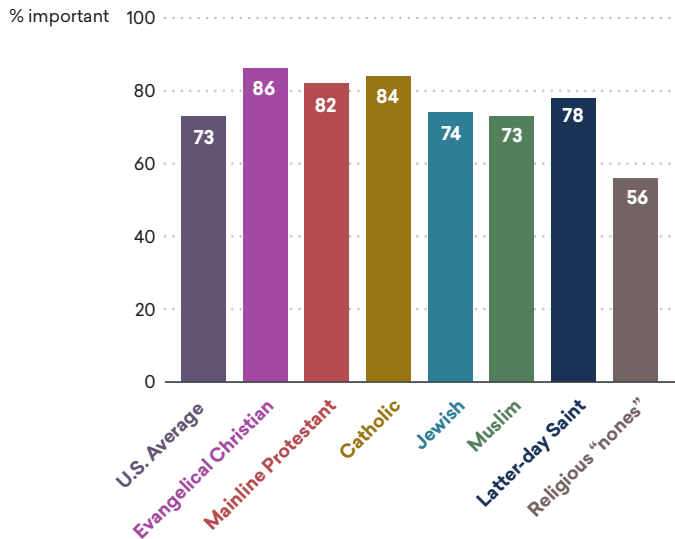
Although distinct in their formats and unique to different traditions, these practices reveal the common values of hospitality, love, and belonging that many faith communities cherish.

Superordinate American identity

In addition to moral values, Americans, regardless of religious affiliation, cherish being American. Over seven in ten Americans of faith across religious groups say that being American is an important part of their identity, with only small differences between groups. American identity is also important to the religious “nones,” although less so than for people with a faith tradition (56 percent, the lowest percent of the groups).

Figure 5.2 Most Americans view their American identity as important to them

How important to you is each of the following parts of your identity? [Being American]



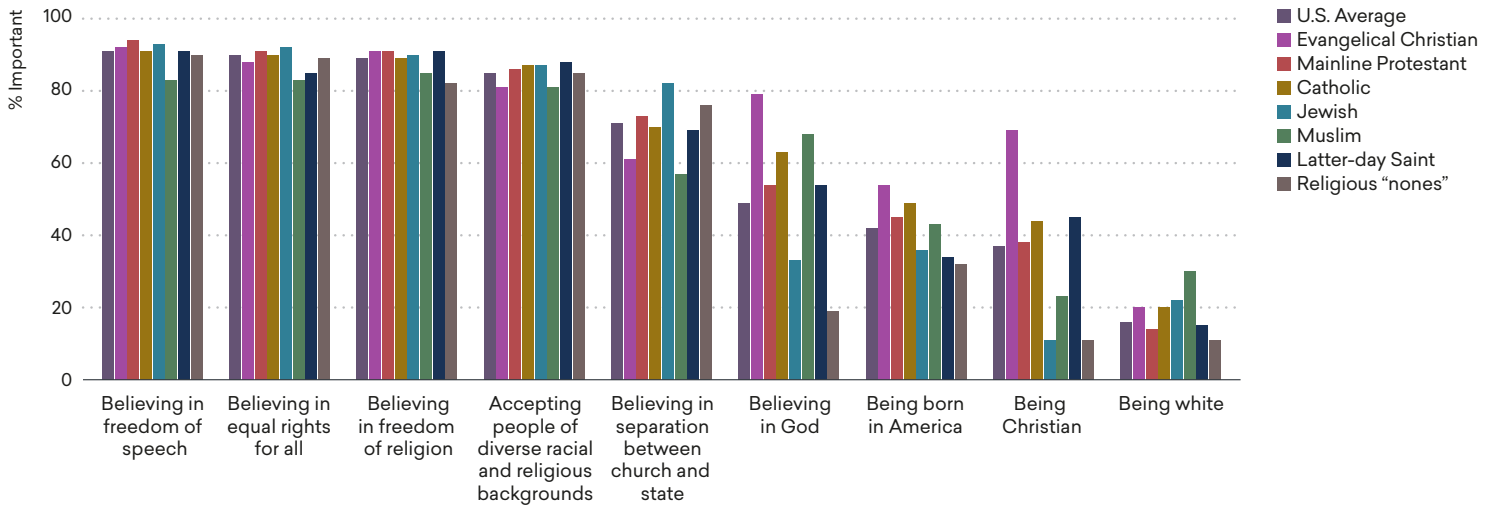
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Additionally, most Americans across faith traditions also strongly value freedom of speech, equal rights for all, and religious liberty. Around nine in ten Americans, including the overwhelming majority across faith traditions, say that believing in freedom of speech (91 percent), equal rights for all (90 percent), and freedom of religion (89 percent) are important to being American. Eight in ten Americans also believe that accepting people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds is important to being American (85 percent). In contrast, only 16 percent say being white is important to being American.

Figure 5.3

Most see believing in freedom of speech, equality, and freedom of religion as essential characteristics for being American

In your opinion, to what extent are the following characteristics important for being American?



Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

“**I don't really believe that it makes a difference what a person's religion is in the United States.** I mean, let's look at the historical foundation of what America is all about in the first place. We've all come from different places, backgrounds, religions, and they've all come through the United States. They've all come through the big cities. They've all come through here at one point in time or another in the past since the United States was founded. **Fair play, honesty, those are the foundations of what our flag stands for.**

– Earl, 71-year-old Black man, Catholic, liberal Democrat from New York

What are the stories America's faithful want to tell?

When we asked Americans of faith what narratives they would like to highlight about the beliefs, values, and aspirations of their faith communities, we again found a striking amount of common ground. Across the board, people express a desire to be seen as just like everybody else—diverse in their beliefs and traditions yet united by common values and life pursuits.

“**I would like all Americans to understand that just because we're Muslim doesn't make us any less American than they are.** We like baseball. **We like hot dogs, albeit beef hot dogs.** We like playing with our children. We like to do all the same things that every other American likes to do. **We pray five times a day, we go to a “church” on a Friday instead of a Sunday,** and we believe that all of us are equally blessed and are going to make it to heaven. I would like Americans to know in a nutshell that **we're all Americans, that we're good people and that if you get to know us, you're really going to like us.**

– Bradley, 44-year-old mixed-race man, Muslim, slightly liberal Independent from California



Get to know us before judging us.

– Haseena, 30-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from New Jersey



I guess a lot of people think that Christians are hateful, or we don't accept people because of their sins. But we are sinful ourselves. **We don't think that we're perfect. We are not self-righteous. People think that we're pushing religion and Christ onto them when in reality, if you have good news, you want to share it.**

– Delaney, 24-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Republican from Georgia



I wish that people knew we were true Christians, that we're all just trying to be like Jesus. We want to love everybody and serve everybody, and we want everybody to live in heaven together. We all make mistakes. At some point in time, we've all done hateful things, but that's not what we want to be. We don't want to be hateful. We really are just trying to love and serve.

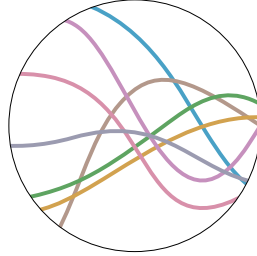
– Brittany, 30-year-old white woman, Latter-day Saint, very conservative Republican from Utah



It would be good if the media, even the local media, would promote some of the good things that the local churches do, whether it's local food drives or giving kids scholarships to attend college. I see more of that than a lot of what the media or social media promotes about churches. **It'd be nice to be able to show a lot of the positive work that our churches are doing, because I think the churches are a key foundational piece in the African American community.**

– Jonathan, 43-year-old Black man, non-Evangelical Protestant, liberal Democrat from North Carolina

In a diverse society, we can choose to build on common ground, or focus on our fault lines and fractures. Building on common ground starts with better understanding that, alongside our many differences, we share a surprising number of values and aspirations. A deeper appreciation of this common ground—including a more central place in media and cultural narratives like movies and television—could significantly change our polarized social dynamics.



PART II

Faith in a Polarized America

In Part I, we explored common misperceptions concerning faith communities in America. We found that religious Americans are much less defined by politics than is often assumed, that faith is integral to the lives of many Americans, and that the faithful are more committed to pluralism than broadly perceived.

At the same time, like the members of any other U.S. institution—a school, a workplace, or a family—congregants in every faith community are navigating the forces of polarization and social fractures. Our research found that some 70 percent of Americans feel that the U.S. is more divided politically than united. One of the effects of polarization is political sorting, or political self-segregation—Americans are increasingly clustering into politically homogenous communities and social networks. As a result, many voters now live in social environments with little exposure to individuals from the opposing party.⁵⁷ Our 2022 study found that around half of Americans (48 percent) say that all or almost all of their friends share their political views.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009); J.R. Brown and R.D. Enos, "The Measurement of Partisan Sorting for 180 Million Voters," *Nature Human Behavior* 5 (2021): 998–1008, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01066-z>; J.R. Brown and R.D. Enos, "The Measurement of Partisan Sorting for 180 Million Voters," *Nature Human Behavior* 5 (2021): 998–1008, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01066-z>.

⁵⁸ More in Common, *Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America's History* (More in Common, 2022), historyperceptiongap.us.

Like the rest of our society, faith communities are not immune to the forces of polarization. Within their own faith groups, many find themselves in conflict over issues such as sexuality, women’s rights, and race—issues at the intersection of individuals’ identities as believers and citizens, embroiled under the waves of intense political fights and culture war debates. For some, divisions over these issues have led to internal fissure and political self-segregation, with individuals and even congregations leaving their existing communities to join those they share more aligned political views with.⁵⁹ High profile examples include the split of the United Methodist Church since 2022 over gay marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy,⁶⁰ debate in the Southern Baptist Convention over women’s ordination,⁶¹ disagreements among Jewish communities over Israel and Palestine,⁶² and debates over gender segregation in American mosques.⁶³

In surveys and focus group conversations, we asked over 6,000 Americans of faith across the country to share their experiences with polarization. We wanted to know what issues, if any, divide their congregations and communities, and how polarization affects them personally and collectively. We found that forces of polarization are becoming more evident in some faith communities, where issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights are deeply affecting people’s relationships with their fellow congregants. At the same time, many faith communities demonstrate resilience against polarization and political self-segregation, as congregants still worship together despite differing political views.

In this chapter, we first dive into five case studies, each examining the dynamics of division and forces of polarization in the faith groups profiled in the report, including Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints. These case studies are not meant to be an exhaustive account of the impacts of polarization and division among America’s faithful. Instead, they offer insight into how Americans of faith, in their own words, understand and navigate some of the challenges confronting their communities. Following the case studies, we explore the unique assets, resources and traditions that faith leaders can use to illuminate a path forward towards building communities that are more resilient to the challenges of polarization.

⁵⁹ Aaron Earls, “More Americans Want Their Church to Share Their Politics,” *Christianity Today*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/november/church-partisan-political-division-lifeway-research.html>.

⁶⁰ Adrian Ashford, “The United Methodist Church Has Split Up. Here’s How It’s Affected North Texas,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/faith/2024/04/17/the-united-methodist-church-has-split-up-heres-how-its-affected-north-texas/>.

⁶¹ Brian Kaylor, “Some Baptists Debate About Women Preaching, Others Listen to Women Preach,” *Anabaptist World*, July 28, 2023, <https://anabaptistworld.org/some-baptists-debate-about-women-preaching-others-listen-to-women-preach/>.

⁶² Leah Donnell et al., “As American Jews Speak Out on Israel, Some See Rifts in Their Communities,” *NPR*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/04/24/1197956326/jewish-communities-divided-over-israel>.

⁶³ Aymann Ismail, “I’m a Muslim Man, and I’m Tired of Taking My Wife to Gender-Segregated Mosques,” *Slate*, February 20, 2020, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/02/mosque-gender-segregation-islam-aymann-ismail.html>.

Case studies: Experiences with polarization

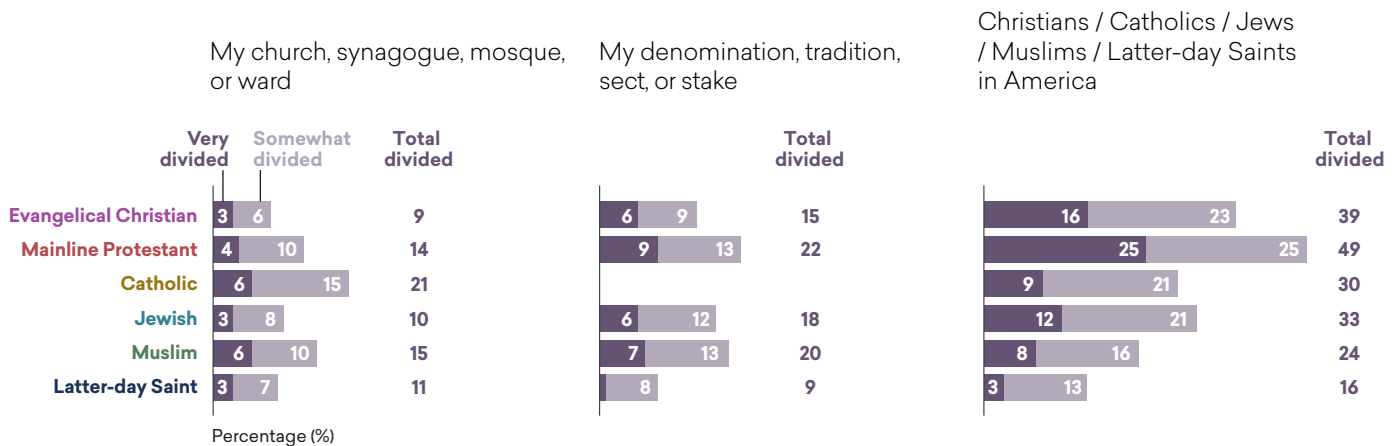
Local versus national division

Our study found that perceived political divisions within faith groups are more pronounced at the national level than at the local level, and that faith communities feel far less divided than the country as a whole. Around half of Mainline Protestants and almost four in ten Evangelical Christians feel that Christians in America are divided politically. Three in ten Catholics report a sense of division among Catholics in America. One third of Jewish Americans and around one quarter of Muslim Americans feel that their respective groups in America are politically divided. Latter-day Saints are least likely to feel divided nationally, with only 16 percent saying that their group in America is divided. While faith communities sense political divisions within their own groups, they do so at levels much lower than Americans sense the depths of our divisions in the country.

Figure 6.1

Feelings of division are more pronounced at the national level than local

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does each of the following feel?



Numbers in the first chart from the left are based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more. Numbers in the middle chart and the first chart from the right are based on all U.S. adults. Note: Figures may not add up to row totals due to rounding. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Local places of worship generally do not feel polarized. **Only around one in ten across most faith groups say that their churches, synagogues, mosques, wards, and other places of worship are politically divided.** Perhaps this reflects the reality that it is harder to feel distant from someone you know and see as often as you worship. On the other hand, congregations may also attract people more likely to hold similar beliefs, either because the surrounding community is homogenous, or because people may simply self-select to worship at places where they feel their beliefs are shared by others.

The low levels of division at places of worship suggests that local faith communities on average are not as divided and polarized as some might expect. At the same time, no faith community is a monolith. Communities experience the impact of polarization and political divisions unevenly and at differing moments. Factors

unique to each community, such as local dynamics and history, ideological composition, and contentious issues, all play a role in shaping each community's experience with political polarization. Moreover, polarization is not static. As national debates over policy and social issues grow more polarized and toxic, their impacts seep into local communities, affecting people's lives, relationships, and interactions at home, work, and in congregations.

Evangelical and Mainline Protestant communities

Compared to other faith communities, American Protestants are more likely to feel a sense of division among Christians at the national level. Almost four in ten Evangelicals and half of Mainline Protestants feel that Christians in America are divided. In comparison, among both Evangelical and Mainline Protestants who attend services regularly, only around one in ten feel that their churches are divided politically.

“ I don't really see the unity of Christians all being together to either support different political ideas or denounce different political leaders or anything. Because of the denominations and the different leaders that are involved, I don't really see the unity. ”
 – Cory, 34-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

Figure 6.2 Few Protestants say their local churches are divided

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does each of the following feel?



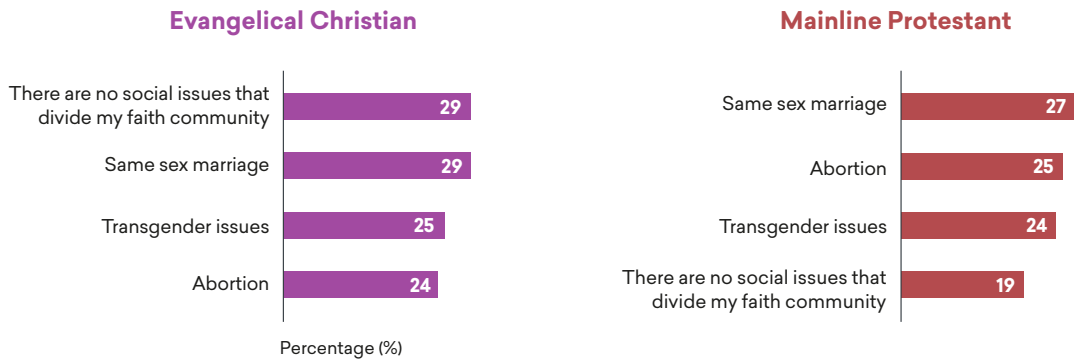
Feelings of division at the local level (i.e., my church) are based on U.S. adults who identify as Protestant and attend religious services a few times a year or more. Feelings of division at the denominational level (i.e., my denomination) and the national level (i.e., Christians in America) are based on all U.S. adults who identify as Protestant.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Around three in ten Evangelicals and two in ten Mainline Protestants say that there is no social issue that divides their communities. For the rest, same-sex marriage, transgender issues, and abortion are the most polarizing topics.

Figure 6.3

Most divisive social issues

Which of the following social issues, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Evangelical Christians and Mainline Protestants who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

For many Evangelical and Mainline Protestant congregations, political divisions are less pronounced because political conversations rarely come up during or after services. Some congregants belong to communities that share similar views, which reduces the likelihood of political conflicts.

“ Not that I know of any political division. **They don’t bring politics up often, so I don’t hear much about politics within the church.**
– James, 32-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, moderate Republican from Missouri

“ **When we have our little faith sermons online, 90 percent of the time, it is not about politics.** So I just haven’t had any experience with political division besides what I see on TV.
– Loretta, 55-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Ohio

“ In our particular church, we do not even discuss politics. **We’re just all one coming there for one reason only – to worship God.** Individually, they might discuss politics, but I haven’t been in a conversation where I discussed with anybody who I was going to vote for or anything like that, or whatever my political views are. That just doesn’t come up. **Political stuff doesn’t belong there at all.**
– Helena, 50-year-old Native American woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Oklahoma

“ **We’re at a small church and it’s very rural, so I think a lot of people in our community think the same way – very conservative. So not divided.** Most people are on the same page.
– Susan, 41-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Republican from Indiana

In some communities, however, the forces of polarization are becoming more evident, with LGBTQ+ issues and abortion as the main drivers of divisions. In some cases, beliefs of fellow congregants on these matters have caused some to leave their churches.

“ One couple left our church because our church didn’t talk against homosexual[ity]. I do think that different families have different ideologies or different perspectives. So, **some people would leave the church because the church supports homosexual[ity], or some people would leave the church because it didn't [speak] against homosexual[ity].** It's a hard topic to talk about in church.

– Tao, 57-year-old Asian American man, Evangelical Christian, conservative Independent from California

“ When I was going to church, one of the things that divided the church was being gay. And that’s partly one of the reasons why I chose to worship at home. My best friend at the time who went to church with me was gay. Everyone at church was united, especially around the holidays, they wanted to do everything for everyone. But then when it came to things like that, **when LGBT issues got on the news, it messed with the community a lot. It definitely split the community.**

– Tara, 28-year-old Hispanic woman, non-Evangelical Protestant, liberal Independent from Indiana

“ **Valuing life is a Christian value. I know it gets people very emotional during elections and it’s very controversial, but I think we should stick to our beliefs on that issue.**

– Douglas, 56-year-old white man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican from Georgia

Others feel that the broader climate of political polarization in American society has seeped into their congregations, making them hesitant to share their views with their fellow worshipers.

“ I know my husband has strong political views that don’t always align with many of his friends. And we all go to the same church. **We believe the same things about religion, but when it comes to politics, it’s a hard subject to talk about sometimes.**

– Jocelyn, 27-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, liberal Democrat from Pennsylvania

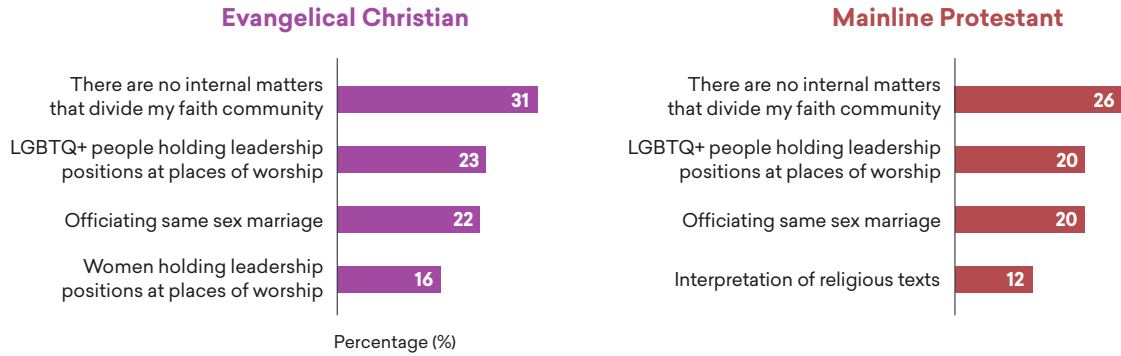
“ **I find it difficult to express my opinions at church because I just so happen to be of one party and most of my congregation is of another.** But I do not force my opinions upon them, and they don’t force them upon me. So we’re able to get along, so to speak, where we just refuse to clash over politics because we come from two different opinions on politics.

– Preston, 52-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Republican

When it comes to internal matters that divide faith communities, LGBTQ+ people holding leadership positions at their places of worship and whether to officiate same-sex marriage are among the most divisive internal matters within Evangelical and Mainline Protestant communities – perhaps a reflection of divisions in the nation’s largest denominations over these issues, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church.

Figure 6.4 Most divisive internal matters

Which of the following internal matters, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.

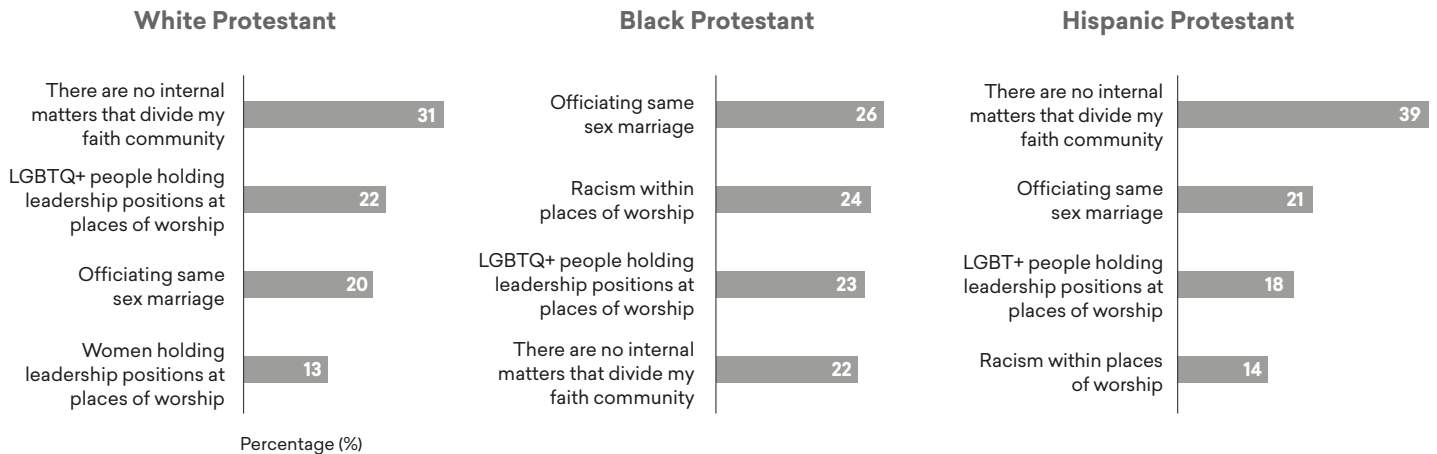


Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Evangelical Christians and Mainline Protestants who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Race also influences what an individual perceives to be the most divisive and pressing issues in their churches. Black and Hispanic Protestants are much more likely to also name racism within their places of worship as a significant source of division – 24 percent of Black Protestants and 14 percent of Hispanic Protestants say that racism is one of the most divisive issues in their faith community, compared to 9 percent of white Protestants.

Figure 6.5 Most divisive internal matters

Which of the following internal matters, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Evangelical Christians and Mainline Protestants who attend religious services a few times a year or more.

Some non-white Christians who attend racially integrated churches have experienced discrimination or discomfort in their congregations. Some feel hesitant to share their views on social and political issues.

“ **I was at another church that was predominantly white for two years, and I can tell you that there was racism, especially when it comes to the music.** Some people don't want to change, but like I told them, the only thing that doesn't change is God. We're always evolving, hopefully always looking to do better.

– Evelyn, 56-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, conservative Independent from Texas

“ **Racism is an issue.** I'm a Puerto Rican woman. **At one service, one of the elders of the church said America is not a racist country. I'm like, I don't care how you want to put it. I know you were never told “go back to Puerto Rico,” or “we don't like you because your skin is brown.”** You never had that, so don't tell me that racist things don't happen.

– Ines, 67-year-old Hispanic woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from New York

“ **My current congregation is predominantly white and fairly mixed. I can say that it has been difficult for me to feel like I can voice your opinions about certain things.** You don't necessarily feel like it could be a safe space. Not to say that if you brought it up, it would be confrontational, but you kind of get an idea of certain stances on different political issues.

– Crystal, 40-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Georgia

Some Black Christians feel that the lack of contact between churches, especially between majority-white and majority-Black churches, is a significant problem in Christian communities. Some point out that the lack of contact not only limits opportunities to exchange information and resources but also perpetuates misunderstandings and harmful stereotypes.

“ I've heard everything from pastors believing others are trying to poach their members, to how they don't want to partner with someone. **That's partly what's eroding Christianity in communities. People don't see churches coming together except when we have tragedies like shootings or the annual breakfast meeting where you have faith leaders come together. Everybody is in a silo.**

– Leroy, 73-year-old Black man, non-Evangelical Protestant, moderate Democrat from Georgia

“ I recently moved to a predominantly white congregation and came to know many youth-related activities that we had never heard of, even though I grew up in a church my whole life, but at a Black congregation. **The silo does hinder in so many ways understanding diversity. That [lack of contact] also lends to the idea that many Black churches are the same in some way.** Like [the Black Christians in this focus group], we all know that we're all different. **We have our own views, but it lends that brushstroke of painting everyone the same way.**

– Crystal, 40-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from Georgia

At the same time, there are also many communities that have resisted political self-sorting through intentionally advocating for inclusivity and the freedom of members of the community to hold differing political views—serving as positive models of political integration that have become rare in many American institutions.

“Come to serve, obey, worship, and just walk with the Lord. When we go, we’re all going the same way. **We’re not gonna be like “we don’t like you because you’re in a same sex marriage, outside of marriage, or you’re going to get an abortion.” It’s just very loving** and just how it should be.

– Devon, 24-year-old Black man, Evangelical Christian, very conservative Democrat from North Carolina

“For my church, probably more united than divided. Now that doesn’t mean that everybody 100 percent feels the same way. Only about 20 percent or 30 percent of the congregation might be as liberal as I am. And a lot of times, the congregation is split between liberal or conservative. But I think as a whole, **the church is united. They’re not fighting over politics.**

– Elaine, 72-year-old white woman, Evangelical Christian, moderate Democrat from North Carolina

While many Evangelical and Mainline Protestants feel the division among Christians in America more acutely on a national level, polarization also impacts local communities, causing some to self-sort into politically homogeneous networks. The fact that many individual churches do not reflect the racial diversity of their communities further limits opportunities for growth and learning through interacting across lines of difference. The perception of division within local faith communities varies based on multiple factors including one’s race and the ideological diversity of their congregations. Nevertheless, Protestants from a variety of backgrounds express a desire to bring their authentic and best selves to their place of worship, a goal often hindered by the fear of exacerbating divisions.

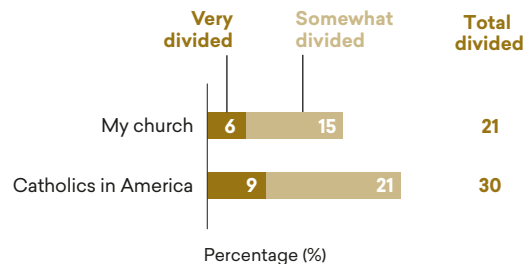
Catholic communities

Catholics are one of the most ideologically diverse faith communities in the United States. At the same time, less than one third of Catholics say that Catholics in America are divided politically (30 percent). About one fifth (21 percent) of Catholics who attend Mass a few times a year or more say that their parish is divided politically.

Figure 6.6

A minority of Catholics feel divided at the local and national level

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does each of the following feel?



Feelings of division at the local level (i.e., my church) are based on U.S. adults who identify as Catholic and attend religious services a few times a year or more. Feelings of division at the national level (i.e., Catholics in America) are based on all U.S. adults who identify as Catholic.

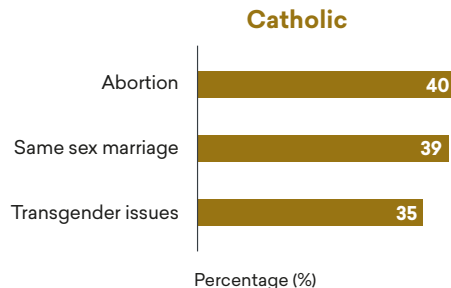
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Catholics stand out as the faith community most divided by abortion. 40 percent of Catholics who attend Mass more than a few times per year say that abortion is one of the most divisive issues in their parishes. A recent Pew study finds that about six in ten Catholics say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, but the differences in opinion based on political leaning are significant—78 percent of Democratic or Democratic-leaning Catholics support abortion rights, compared with 43 percent of Republican or Republican-leaning Catholics.⁶⁴

Figure 6.7

Most divisive social issues

Which of the following social issues, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Catholics who attend religious services a few times a year or more. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

⁶⁴ Justin Nortey, Patricia Tevington and Gregory A. Smith, "9 Facts About U.S. Catholics," *Pew Research Center*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/12/9-facts-about-us-catholics/>.

In conversations with Catholics, we found that the issue of abortion has created a noticeable divide within their parishes. Its significance in Catholic teachings, as well as its intersection with partisan politics, has significantly impacted the relationships of many Catholics with their parishes and with one another.

Some feel that abortion is so contentious that both parishioners and clergy members avoid bringing up the topic. Others note that some of their fellow worshipers openly share their views about abortion and abortion access, causing a significant rift within their parishes.

“ **The topic of abortion is not really spoken, but it’s danced around** and you know what’s being said and what the topic is. And **I guess it’s to not offend people.**

– Walter, 50-year-old Black man, Catholic, conservative Republican from Georgia

“ Abortion has been brought up in my church and **I don’t think they use the word abortion. It’s just kind of going around it.** But those issues have come up, especially probably around voting time.

– Lilian, 55-year-old white woman, Catholic, conservative Republican from Connecticut

“ There has been quite a bit of divisiveness around abortion in my community. There’s a heavy stance within my church against abortion rights. Sometimes the priest tries to avoid those topics, unless need be. **I try not to give my opinions on it too much. I don’t want to offend anyone or force my beliefs on someone. But sometimes I do notice some of the church members, they are a little bit more aggressive, and they are like, “no, this is what I believe, and this is how it should be.” And then it causes that divide.**

– Tina, 36-year-old Black woman, Catholic, very liberal Democrat from Texas

For Catholics who support access to abortion, the topic can be a source of internal conflict, especially when discussed during Mass. Some have even contemplated no longer attending Mass due to their views on abortion access. However, our conversations with Catholics often reflect the complexities with which they navigate the interplay between their faith, their personal beliefs and broader political debates.

“ **There’s been many times that I have held myself down and not walked out of church when I heard a priest, deacon, whoever, literally saying “you need to not vote for X person because they support abortion.”** If a girl came to me and said she wanted to have one, I would counsel her to not. However, I want it to be available, legal, and safe, and that has nothing to do with the morality of abortion. So it’s really hard for me when I hear a lot of that stuff about abortion in church. **The spiritual side of the church keeps me there, but the politics make me nuts.**

– Melissa, 53-year-old white woman, Catholic, very liberal Democrat from Georgia

“ I support abortion to a certain extent, just because I’ve seen personal experiences with things that women should not have to go through and it should be their choice. Abortion’s always been a hot topic in my church and my community because **some people think it should be completely done away with. And then there’s some people like myself who are like, “you say that, but God forbid it was your daughter and something happened.”**

– Anthony, 32-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from New Jersey

Some feel alienated by their fellow parishioners’ support for abortion access. Some believe that they are deviating from the foundational teachings of the Catholic Church, thereby causing division within Catholic communities.

“ As a practicing Catholic, I think that all lives should be glorified. **I think Catholics are just picking and choosing what they want to believe in these days. It’s like not one whole religion anymore.** The Catholic religion and the beliefs have been written for thousands of years, and they’re just picking and choosing these days. That’s what’s separating the church.

– Felix, 44-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from New Mexico

Besides abortion, LGBTQ+ issues are also seen as one of the most divisive issues by Catholics who attend Mass regularly. In 2023, Pope Francis formally approved allowing Catholic priests to bless same-sex couples and permitting transgender individuals to be baptized under certain circumstances.⁶⁵ The radical shift in the Vatican’s policy to make the Catholic Church more inclusive of LGBTQ+ Catholics sparked tension and conflict with some American bishops. For example, the Vatican removed Bishop Joseph Strickland, one of Pope Francis’ most vocal detractors, from his position in 2023, which led to a series of high-profile protests from his supporters in the U.S.⁶⁶ Disagreements and tension were also evident at the synod held in Vatican City in 2023, a summit of clergy members and lay people from around the world.⁶⁷

For some, the rift between the Vatican and more conservative Catholic leaders in America suggests that LGBTQ+ issues may become increasingly divisive in Catholic communities. But, unlike conflicts over abortion, the pope’s shift in policy towards LGBTQ+ Catholics does not appear to have had a polarizing effect on Catholic lay communities. While American Catholics do hold different views about Pope Francis’ policies on LGBTQ+ issues, a majority, regardless of political affiliation, continue to view the pope favorably. A recent Pew Research study finds that admiration for the pope largely transcends partisan differences, with majorities from both parties expressing respect for Pope Francis—though this respect is higher and near unanimous among Democratic Catholics.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Nicole Winfield and David Crary, “Pope Approves Blessings for Same-Sex Couples That Must Not Resemble Marriage,” AP News, Dec 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-LGBTQ+-pope-bfa5b71fa79055626e362936e739d1d8>; David Crary, “Vatican Steps Closer to Allowing Transgender People to be Baptized as Catholics,” AP News, Dec 9, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-transgender-catholic-baptism-godparents-82120d853570ec92f4db1cbf11ebc2f1>.

⁶⁶ Ruth Graham, “As Catholic Leaders Met, Fired Bishop Took His Message to the Street,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/us/as-catholic-leaders-met-fired-bishop-took-his-message-to-the-street.html>.

⁶⁷ Gerald O’Connell, “Synod Diary: The Synod isn’t Hiding its Disagreements. That’s a Good Thing,” *American Magazine*, October 25, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/10/25/synod-diary-divergences-246366>; Christopher White, “Bishops Walking Out, ‘Tiresome’ Listening: Inside Tensions at the Synod,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/view-vatican/bishops-walking-out-tiresome-listening-inside-tensions-synod>.

⁶⁸ Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey and Gregory A Smith, “Majority of U.S. Catholics Express Favorable View of Pope Francis,” *Pew Research Center*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/04/12/majority-of-u-s-catholics-express-favorable-view-of-pope-francis/>.

The minority of Catholics who hold unfavorable views towards Pope Francis primarily cite disagreements with his more inclusive stance on LGBTQ+ issues. Some feel that the pope's decisions, such as allowing blessings for same-sex couples, do not reflect their beliefs.

“ The pope made a decision about blessing men together. **I think that he interpreted some Catholic rule, but that was really not the way it was supposed to be interpreted.** So I think he twists things around.

– Lilian, 55-year-old white woman, Catholic, conservative Republican from Connecticut

“ I feel like this pope especially has gotten more politicized. **I feel like he's not making decisions based on the beliefs of most Catholics.** Rather, he's doing what would look right.

– Victor, 24-year-old white man, Catholic, conservative Republican from New York

At the same time, many Republican or Republican-leaning Catholics still view Pope Francis favorably. Some welcome his new policies towards LGBTQ+ Catholics, while others hold different views on LGBTQ+ issues but still support the pope for his initiative in uniting Catholics.

“ I feel that as a pope, he's trying to be even with everybody. So I feel him. **I just don't see anything bad of him. For me, it is even better because he's bringing everybody together and we're nobody to judge.**

– Sophia, 44-year-old Hispanic woman, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from Texas

“ I just think every different pope has their own viewpoints. **It seems to me that maybe this pope is liberal, but maybe he's trying to bring us more together as people.** I'm just thinking the pope is the leader of the church, trying to bring people together, trying to bring politics and religion and all that together. Without a leader, I think we would be a lot more separated.

– Felix, 44-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from New Mexico

Many Democratic Catholics express profuse praise for Pope Francis, particularly for his welcoming stance towards LGBTQ+ Catholics and for pushing the Catholic Church to be more inclusive of all. For some, Pope Francis' evolving position on LGBTQ+ issues increased their confidence in the Vatican.

“ **Pope Francis has been a ray of sunshine.** I like that he says, “who am I to judge,” and that he's been more welcoming of the gay community.

– Deborah, 57-year-old white woman, Catholic, liberal Democrat from New York

“ **My confidence and trust in the Vatican has gone up markedly in the past ten years because of this pope.** He has started to recognize a lot of the views that were taboo in the Catholic Church in the past. LGBTQ+ – although not so much about trans people – but he's starting to recognize them as a group of people that should be spoken about in the Church. **That has given me confidence that the Catholic Church is moving in the right direction to**

recognize all people. Now, I do realize that there are some pockets of Roman Catholic religion here in the United States that don't want to hear that. I really appreciated him sticking his neck out there. That's what he did. But he did get his point across that to love your neighbor as yourself, you have to love all people. And I agree with him.

– Earl, 71-year-old Black man, Catholic, liberal Democrat from New York

While the Vatican has signaled greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ Catholics through new policies, its stance against gender-affirming surgery and gender theory could potentially become another driver of division.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, many American Catholics affirm their support for Pope Francis and believe that he is pushing for necessary but incremental changes to the Catholic Church.

“ I think in general, he's a good man, and I do think he certainly is more open than his predecessor. Maybe in the back of his head, he knows that **he has to move incrementally, take baby steps. Not move too far too fast, just to avoid getting backlash from others.** But I think in his heart, he truly is a good man. **It's just my hope that the Church can evolve, whether it's the next few years, in the next decade, or whatever, just to be a bit more open to other people, other types of viewpoints.**

– Ryan, 48-year-old white man, Catholic, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

Lastly, the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandals caused significant tension and deep wounds in Catholic communities. While the topic of sexual abuse scandals was rarely brought up organically in focus group conversations, many Catholics, regardless of political affiliation, feel a strong desire for change and a shared sense of regret and anger towards the Catholic Church's handling of abuse in the past. At the same time, many are confident that their local churches have become much more vigilant and transparent in preventing abuse.

“ On that subject, child molestation, I'm very touchy on that subject there. I **don't care if it's a Catholic priest or any religious leader or just somebody up the street. That's just wrong.**

– Felix, 44-year-old Hispanic man, Catholic, slightly conservative Republican from New Mexico

“ The sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church – **I didn't even want to admit that I was a Catholic at that particular point in time in my life, because it was unpalatable.** I was an altar boy. I was in church my entire life, from the time I was in kindergarten. It's not that I was totally unaware of it, I had my suspicions my entire youth. **But when it finally did come to light, I was rocked, shocked, and lost my faith for a little while there. It took a minute for me to get back to the church.** It took a lot of counseling and talking to people I'm close to. But it was one of the most disturbing things of my life. I've gotten back to my religion, but at one point in time, I lost my faith because of it.

– Earl, 71-year-old Black man, Catholic, liberal Democrat from New York

⁶⁹ Nicole Winfield, "Vatican Blasts Gender-Affirming Surgery, Surrogacy and Gender Theory as Violations of Human Dignity," *AP News*, April 8, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-gender-surrogacy-abortion-pope-3f84d8eb97f045b0cfb0ec1efa4e614e>; David Crary, "Transgender Catholics Say New Vatican Document Shows No Understanding of Their Lives," *AP News*, April 8, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/religion-catholic-LGBTQ+-transgender-gender-theory-e36e68a6bfabb33729d0d3f53230bafa>

“ **It seems like the Church and each archdiocese are doing everything they can to keep that kind of stuff from happening again.** I pray that it doesn't happen again and that kids are protected everywhere. But anybody who's been through it, I can't imagine having that trust taken away. That's unimaginable. But I feel like they're doing a better job.

– Melissa, 53-year-old white woman, Catholic, very liberal Democrat from Georgia

Political divisions among Catholics tend to mirror national political trends, leading to significant divisions on issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. Even though disagreement over abortion has become polarizing in many parishes, respect for Pope Francis and people's attachment to Catholic identity provide common ground that communities can draw on to strengthen bonds and build resilience against the forces of polarization.

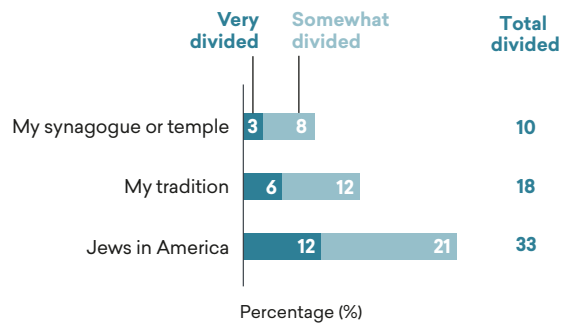
Jewish communities

America's Jewish communities are diverse, encompassing a wide range of cultural backgrounds, beliefs and religious practices. This diversity is evident across different Jewish traditions, including Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and other sects, each with its own distinct interpretations of Jewish law and culture. Around one third of Jewish Americans feel that Jews in America are divided, although local synagogues, temples, and other places of worship feel much less divided.

Figure 6.8

Most Jewish Americans say their synagogues are not divided politically

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does each of the following feel?



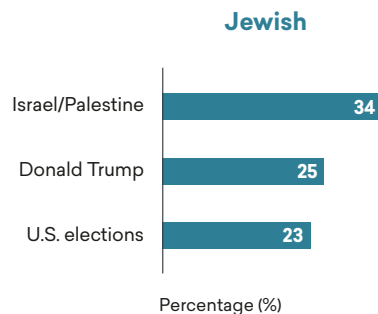
Feelings of division at the local level (i.e., my synagogue or temple) are based on U.S. adults who identify as Jewish and attend religious services a few times a year or more. Feelings of division at the denominational level (i.e., my tradition) and the national level (i.e., Jews in America) are based on all U.S. adults who identify as Jewish.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Among Jews who attend religious services at least a few times each year, Israel/Palestine is the most divisive issue, followed by national politics and elections.

Figure 6.9

Most divisive social issues

Which of the following social issues, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Jews who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

The effects of polarization and divisions within individual Jewish communities often reflect their ideological composition. Jewish Americans from more ideologically homogeneous communities or congregations feel a stronger sense of unity. On the other hand, many feel disconnected from other Jewish communities that hold different views.

“ **I think that different Jewish communities are united within themselves, but not united between one another.** For example, I live in the Chicago area, and the Jewish religious community in Chicago that’s known as West Rogers Park, is united. There’s a lot of significant overlap in terms of conservative values politically, as well as favoring repair of the world and charity. But there are other communities, whether the Conservative communities, the Reform communities, the Reconstructionist, that are straying so far from our Jewish values.

– Alex, 37-year-old white man, Orthodox Jewish, slightly conservative Independent from Illinois⁷⁰

“ In my community, there aren’t really any pro-Palestine supporters anywhere because I live in a very Jewish community that’s very Zionist. But my Jewish friends in the city, a lot of them are pro-Palestine. **I choose not to talk about it with them because that’s okay if you have a different opinion, but I’d rather not get into it with them. I’d rather not have that tension.** There is a big division between Jewish communities on that.

– Shayna, 23-year-old mixed-race woman, Orthodox Jewish, moderate Independent from New York

“ **There are just so many different groups of Judaism and people who are of different levels of faith.** I definitely could see within the individual groups, it’s unified, but outside of it, no, very divided.

– Chelsea, 33-year-old white woman, Jewish, moderate Republican from New York

In comparison, Jewish Americans from ideologically diverse communities are more likely to feel a sense of division and polarization that mirrors the rest of American society.

“ Being in a major state school close to D.C., even within the Jewish community, there’s a very wide range of political opinions from very liberal to very conservative. **So topics like Israel, Palestine, Trump, and the 2024 election would be polarizing the Jewish community because those would be polarizing in pretty much any community that isn’t politically similar.**

– Eli, 21-year-old white man, Orthodox Jewish, liberal Democrat from Maryland

“ **I think the Jewish community is very divided. Everybody has different views. There are Democrats, Republicans, liberals, conservatives. It’s just all varied.** It used to be like there was a core group of Jewish people who basically voted Democrat. I know that when I was growing up and I lived in Queens. But now a lot of Jewish people are more Republican because of taxes. So there’s all these political views that come into play, and it’s very divisive in the Jewish community.

– Sarah, 66-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

⁷⁰ Quote attributions are based on participants’ own self-reported identification of their race/ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, political party affiliation, and political ideology.

“ **The election is a big one, especially in South Florida.** Nowadays it just comes down to Trump. You hear Trump everywhere you go. It always just comes back to how Trump’s daughter is married to Jared Kushner. But it’s never about what Trump stands for for the Jewish people.

– Hannah, 26-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, slightly liberal Democrat from Florida

“ I don’t have any objection to any individual’s Jewish views, no matter whether I agree with you or not. **But I do resent when there are people that try to present this as the Jewish view, as representing Jews, when it’s just their own opinion or the opinion of their friends.**

– Ruth, 73-year-old mixed-race woman, Orthodox Jewish, moderate Independent from Nevada

The Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023 and the subsequent Israel-Gaza war have deeply affected many Jewish communities in the U.S. The war has led to the loss of friendships for some Jewish Americans due to disagreements over support for Israel. Many are pained by the positions taken by fellow community members, while others deal with accusations and arguments that often play out on social media.

“ **I do not engage, I do not keep in touch with people that are anti-Israel.** I will not try to convince them. It’s not my job to do that.

– Yulia, 54-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois

“ **[I] unfriended in real life somebody who referred to my family as being fascist.** That person happens to be Jewish and very well educated. [I’ve] known [this person] for almost 20 years... I’d say the vast majority of the community is a bit more about being supportive of each other.

– Melanie, 44-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, moderate Republican from New York

“ I was a little bit surprised that **some people I’ve been friends with for a long time or even acquaintances... how many people were sharing false information about Israel.** They didn’t necessarily share this ideology, but after October 7, some of the anti-Israel things were jarring. Like, where did this come from?

– Ivan, 34-year-old white man, Reform Jewish, slightly liberal Independent from Ohio

Overall, many Jewish Americans feel a strong sense of unity and support within their local communities and congregations. Jewish places of worship and institutions are seen as safe spaces where individuals can process their emotions, feel a sense of belonging, and participate in community activities such as organizing fundraisers or donation drives. This communal support plays a critical role in helping members navigate challenging times and maintain their connection to their faith and each other.

“ October 7 happened on a holiday, Simchat Torah. We were supposed to have an event at Chabad for that holiday... At the beginning I thought [the events] would be sad, but they were more uplifting. We [were] sending prayers to hostages, to soldiers. It's very positive. Nobody ever says one [negative thing]. It's more like let's say a prayer and say l'chaim to peace and that this horror will stop... It's all just about keeping the community together. **When [October 7] happened, I didn't know who to talk to...I just felt guilty having a normal life, seeing what's going on. And so Chabad really brought us all together. It was a place for us to go and feel supported that we're in it together.**

– Yulia, 54-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, conservative Republican from Illinois⁷¹

“ **There's a safe space when the rabbi or other spiritual leader is making room to say, you don't have to be in fear to bring [the war] up because even if somebody isn't 100 percent [agreeing with you], everybody is of the same mindset that this is human suffering.** This is about being compassionate, about donating. A big part of the religion is about giving back and whether it's money or volunteering. That's also the spirit that I'm very proud of to see amongst many of the community groups. It's about how we can give back even also to schools... how can I give to the [Hillel] so that kids have [a place] to go for a meal, to discuss, to feel like their anxiety can come down and be in a place where they don't have to worry about being Jewish.

– Melanie, 44-year-old white woman, Conservative Jewish, moderate Republican from New York

“ I would say my community is, everybody I know is supportive of Israel, and it really hasn't been very divisive. There are people who say things on Facebook, but nobody that I'm close with or who's around me. **We all feel the same and are supportive and just do lots of prayers.**

– Deborah, 40-year-old white woman, Reform Jewish, moderate Independent from Florida

Witnessing the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel and the rise in antisemitic incidents in the U.S. has been deeply painful for many Jewish communities. While most report that their synagogue is not politically divided, many have experienced ruptured relationships or felt alienated from other Jewish Americans with differing views on the war. Despite these tensions, places of worship have continued to provide crucial spiritual comfort and a sense of belonging.

⁷¹ This participant attends services and events at a chabad but self-identifies as Reform Jewish.

Muslim communities

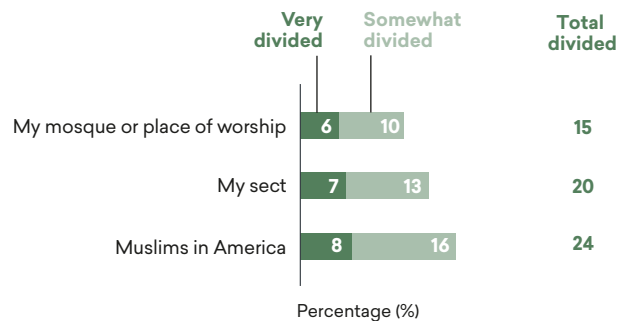
Muslim Americans are perhaps the least understood of the major faith groups in the United States, despite the long history of Muslim presence in the country. The number of American Muslims has grown significantly in recent decades, reflecting new waves of migration into the United States from several continents. However, media and public discourse often portray American Muslims as a monolithic community, assuming a singular Muslim perspective in contrast to non-Muslim groups.⁷² In reality, there is no single Muslim perspective. Instead, the Islamic faith is shared by a diverse array of communities, each with its own unique ethnic origins, socioeconomic backgrounds, immigration experiences, and spiritual practices.

Overall, only about one quarter of American Muslims (24 percent) say Muslims in America are divided, and 15 percent of Muslims who attend religious services say their place of worship is divided politically.

Figure 6.10

Few Muslims say their local mosques or places of worship are politically divided

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does each of the following feel?



Feelings of division at the local level (i.e., my mosque) are based on U.S. adults who identify as Muslim and attend religious services a few times a year or more. Feelings of division at the denominational level (i.e., my sect) and the national level (i.e., Muslims in America) are based on all U.S. adults who identify as Muslim.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

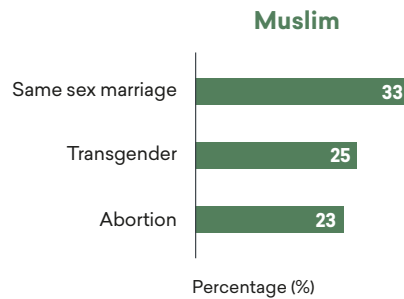
When it comes to points of division within American Muslim communities, our research found that many of the same issues dividing broader American society are at play. Gender and LGBTQ+ issues are among the most polarizing social issues—33 percent of Muslims who attend religious services regularly say opinions on same-sex marriages divide their place of worship, followed by transgender issues (25 percent) and abortion (23 percent).

⁷² Rochelle Terman, "Islamophobia and Media Portrayals of Muslim Women: A Computational Text Analysis of US News Coverage," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no.3 (2017): 489–502, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx051>; Nazita Lajevardi, "The Media Matters: Muslim American Portrayals and the Effects on Mass Attitudes," *The Journal of Politics* 83, no.3 (2021): 1060–1079, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/711300>.

Figure 6.11

Most divisive social issues

Which of the following social issues, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Muslims who attend religious services a few times a year or more. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Issues of gender and sexuality are often mapped onto debates about whose interpretations of Islam are “true” or “correct.” For some young Muslims, division on these issues stem from generational differences.

“ The division I see is between the overlap of other modern social justice issues, like LGBT stuff... between younger people who have slightly different opinions and then older people who have more traditional opinions. Or **between Muslims who think that other Muslims are too traditional and strict, and then Muslims who think that certain political opinions or opinions on social things are not Islamic.**

– Billie, 28-year-old Asian American non-binary person, Muslim, liberal Independent from Maryland

“ **I think it really has to do with tradition... lack of education on these topics and a lack of interaction with the people in [LGBTQ+] communities.** Now with more education and awareness on this situation, I think it is harder for older folks to adapt to it because they have been taught and ingrained with ideas since they were little. And as you get older, it’s a lot harder to change the way you think.

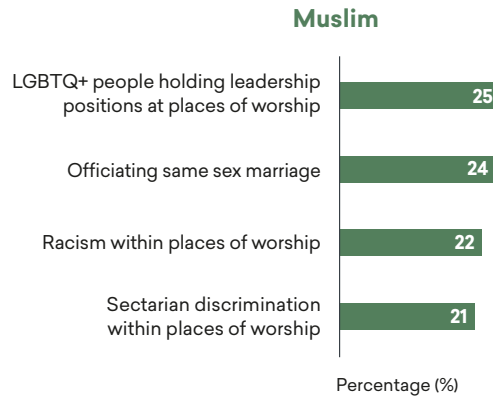
– Kiara, 24-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from Minnesota

At the same time, similar to other communities with diverse backgrounds and religious beliefs, Muslims in America also experience internal divisions driven by group differences and conflicts. For example, one in five Muslims who attend services more than a few times a year report racism and sectarian discrimination as concerning issues within their places of worship.

Figure 6.12

Most divisive internal matters

Which of the following internal matters, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Muslims who attend religious services a few times a year or more. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Some Muslims have personally experienced sectarian division and differential treatment due to racial backgrounds in their places of worship.

“ I unfortunately have witnessed division in South Dakota when we had to get a new imam. **The person that most people thought should rise to become the imam... other people were saying things about him, like how he practices Shia and he’s going to turn the mosque into a Shia mosque.** [I think] we should respect each other and learn from each other, and this is what Allah wants us to do.

– Bradley, 44-year-old mixed-race man, Muslim, slightly liberal Independent from California

“ The mosque I previously went to was Arab. We were almost one of the only African American families there, and this man kind of sought us out. I noticed he would be everywhere that I turned around. One time **I was playing with the other kids after service in the parking lot, and of course, I took my hijab off. This man literally bypassed my father and approached me. He was just very direct, very aggressive and said “put your scarf back on.”**

– Monica, 45-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Democrat from South Carolina

Many young Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds see discrimination and inter-ethnic discord as a significant issue within Muslim communities. Some feel that rather than overt hostility or antagonism, much of the inter-ethnic tension arises largely from a sense of competition over perceived superiority or authority in interpreting Islamic teachings and traditions.

“ **Obviously Muslims are of all races and ethnicities, but there is a lot of stigma with colorism and racism within our community.** I think especially for older folks, it’s a little bit harder, I guess, for them to accept people that they see as different from them based on color or race.

– Kiara, 24-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from Minnesota

“ I think there’s like an **“Arab versus non-Arab” thing in communities, and for some reason one is more superior than the other, which is not true in any aspect.** I think there is this superiority inferiority thing amongst cultures, too, that divides people.

– Layla, 26-year-old woman of Middle Eastern or North African descent, Muslim, conservative Democrat from Massachusetts

“ **It’s not just Arab versus non-Arab. There is that division between Arabs.** Arabs who were born and raised in America – their ethnicity is Arab, but they’re not taken as seriously as Arabs who were born in an Arab country because they’re American.

– Amina, 22-year-old woman of Middle Eastern or North African descent, Muslim from Oregon

Like other faith groups, Muslim Americans are navigating differences in a polarized society, in particular the conflicts across generational and cross-cultural lines. At the same time, division is not the defining experience within Muslim communities. While sectarian discrimination exists in some communities, for others there is often an indifference towards sectarian differences and a strong sense of unity and tolerance.

“ My family or the generations before me, they think of themselves as Sunni. **But for me personally, my choice wouldn’t be as Sunni or Shia. I consider myself just to be a Muslim.** I support both Sunni and Shia. I love Prophet Muhammad, and I love Prophet Hussain.

– Noor, 20-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from New York

“ **I would not define myself as Sunni or Shia or anything at all. I prefer to be just Muslim because either way, my faith stays still.**

– Haseena, 30-year-old Black woman, Muslim, moderate Independent from New Jersey

Many Muslim Americans appreciate the connections and the sense of belonging they forged in their local mosques or Islamic centers. Some particularly value their communities’ ability to transcend differences and provide a supportive environment for Muslims by birth and converts alike.

“ I am actually a recent convert. **When I converted, I really felt super accepted by the community.** I didn’t really know anybody there. **They didn’t know me, but I was being celebrated,** and they were all very kind, and it really felt like I had joined a community of people that actually cared about me. It was very heartwarming.

– Kiara, 24-year-old Asian American woman, Muslim, very liberal Democrat from Minnesota



It's a community where you will see every type of race. When you go to prayer, Eid and Ramadan, the community is amazing because there's so many different types of people. **It's such a beautiful religion that brings so many people together.** I just got goosebumps talking about it. But, yes, I'm just so proud.

– Maryam, 33-year-old white woman, Muslim, moderate from Georgia

Muslim Americans constitute a diverse religious minority in the United States, representing a wide range of backgrounds, including sects and ethnic origins. Similar to the rest of American society, Muslim American communities have varying views on LGBTQ+ issues, and a more noticeable divide between different generations when it comes to issues of gender, sexuality, and religious practices. Despite these differences, most feel united by a common faith identity and a desire to be better understood by non-Muslims. Muslim identity and communal bonds emerge as crucial tools to inoculate communities against potential hardening of political identities and partisan self-sorting prominent in American society.

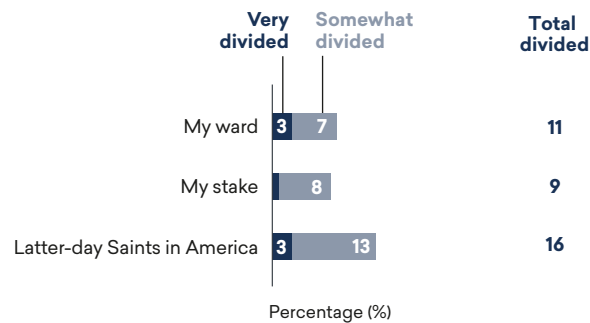
Latter-day Saint communities

Latter-day Saints stand out as the faith community most resilient to political division and polarization both at the local and national levels. Only 11 percent of Latter-day Saints feel that their ward is divided politically, and only 16 percent feel that Latter-day Saints in America are divided.

Figure 6.13

Very few Latter-day Saints say their ward, stake or Latter-day Saints in America are divided

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does each of the following feel?



Feelings of division at the local level (i.e., my ward) are based on U.S. adults who identify as Latter-day Saint and attend religious services a few times a year or more. Feelings of division at the denominational level (i.e., my stake) and the national level (i.e., Latter-day Saints in America) are based on all U.S. adults who identify as Latter-day Saint. Note: Figures may not add up to row totals due to rounding. Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

For many Latter-day Saints, political discussions are heavily discouraged in their wards due to the Church’s official stance on political neutrality. Wards often encourage their members to participate in civic activities, but they are not allowed to promote political parties, platforms, or candidates.⁷³

“Every once in a while, there’s a comment at church that skirts around a political topic, and then everyone kind of laughs nervously and just tries to move on. But for the most part, politics don’t come up in conversation generally, at least in my experience in my area, in my ward.

– Nicole, 45-year-old white woman, Latter-day Saint, conservative Republican from Arizona

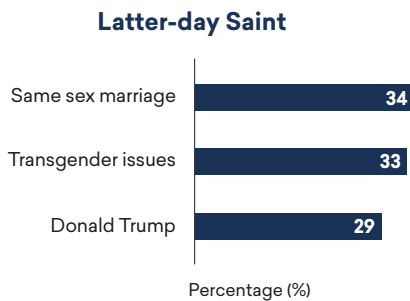
But just like many communities in America, Latter-day Saints are also grappling with issues around gender and sexuality. Around one third of Latter-day Saints who attend services regularly say that same-sex marriage (34 percent) and transgender issues (33 percent) are divisive in their wards.

⁷³ “Political Neutrality and Participation,” *Newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, June 1, 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/official-statement/political-neutrality>.

Figure 6.14

Most divisive social issues

Which of the following social issues, if any, are divisive within your faith community (e.g., your church, synagogue, mosque)? Select all that apply.



Note: The percentages in this table are calculated among Latter-day Saints who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Likewise, the broader climate of polarization in American politics has left its mark on Latter-day Saint communities, especially in settings outside of religious spaces where political discussions take place. Some feel hesitant to talk about politics, while some liberal members of the Church report feeling somewhat marginalized, citing the moderate or conservative political leanings of most Latter-day Saints as reasons for their discomfort.

“ I think we aspire to be a group that includes anyone. I don't know if that's necessarily always true in practice. **People in my family and friends who are more left leaning, they sometimes feel ostracized. They sometimes feel like they don't fit in as much. At the same time, having a different view does not make you unworthy in the church.** None of those things have anything to do with party preferences or political preferences. **But I do think there's a social climate in the church that gravitates a lot more towards people who have conservative views generally.**

– Trevor, 29-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Independent from Utah

“ **We all know politics can be very contentious, and I think we generally try to avoid contention in the church.** Most members try to avoid contention in their lives as well. I have in-laws who have completely separate beliefs or strong opinions that I don't necessarily agree with. When we get together, we know we're going to try to avoid this conversation, so everybody can avoid having a fight that we know will just end poorly for everybody.

– Sean, 31-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Independent from North Carolina

“ There was an instance when a few people in my community sent me Facebook friend requests. I read their social media posts, and they're downright hateful. And I'm like, wait a minute. How can I go to church with these people when I notice that they have a public face and a private face? And **where are they on their teachings about Christ and love when everything they say is so venomous when they're outside of church?**

– Teresa, 64-year-old white woman, Latter-day Saint, liberal Democrat from Louisiana

However, conversations with Latter-day Saints around the country reveal that when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues, many are not embroiled in a divisive “us-versus-them” fight around who is right or wrong, just or unjust, true-believer or apostate. Instead, many are dealing with practical struggles about how to reconcile religious beliefs that are seemingly in conflict—such as loving people regardless of their backgrounds, but also advocating for marriage between a man and a woman only.

“ LGBTQ+ issues I think are probably the biggest source of division in the church. We are definitely taught to love one another, to love our neighbor, but there’s also things that you can’t necessarily do if you are a part of that community. **So it’s really hard to be like, we love you, we accept you, but we still understand that this is a sin.**

– Michael, 20-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Republican from Colorado

“ **We want to be accepting and understanding of people, but it’s hard a lot of times because we were taught that marriage between a man and a woman is what God wants us to have.** We want them to have the same beliefs as us, but understand that everybody has their own thoughts, belief system, and they have their own choices and abilities to make those choices. **I think it’s hard to advocate for what you want, but also wanting other people to find their own happiness and find their own way.** I have multiple friends who are members of the church and part of the LGBTQ community, and I think they have kind of that same struggle within themselves.

– Sean, 31-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Independent from North Carolina

Nevertheless, Latter-day Saint communities and wards are generally not places that feel divided. Instead, the impact of America’s polarization is often experienced at a personal level—individuals feeling weary of political division in American society and struggling to find a political home that aligns with both their values and policy preferences.

“ In terms of Donald Trump, I think that’s just that our religion does tend to lean right, but him being the Republican candidate, it’s kind of like, well, he’s not that great of a guy, but he’s also kind of close to our beliefs. So, that mix right there definitely causes some contention.

– Michael, 20-year-old white man, Latter-day Saint, slightly conservative Republican from Colorado

While the Church’s stance on political neutrality has helped to reduce the extent of political division within wards, it does not mean that Latter-day Saint communities are immune to the effects of societal fractures. But the strength of communal bonds, shared experiences and a strong faith identity gives Latter-day Saints communities significant resources to deploy in navigating change and polarization.

The contour of division: Healthy conflict versus high conflict

Intrafaith disagreements are not new. Nor are all differences or conflicts within faith communities toxic. Journalist Amanda Ripley makes the distinction between healthy conflict and high conflict—healthy conflict involves serious and intense friction but avoids collapsing into patterns of dehumanization.⁷⁴ In contrast, high conflict is characterized by feelings of contempt and disgust that are all-consuming, thus creating an “us-versus-them” mentality in which everyone ends up worse off. As the case studies have shown, some conflicts that faith communities currently experience are natural disagreements stemming from diverse backgrounds and values, such as differing views towards Pope Francis among American Catholics, or intergenerational conflicts among American Muslims.

While faith communities remain far less polarized than the American public at large, conflict over some issues, such as abortion, could veer into high conflict. There are accelerants that make disagreements within faith groups potentially divisive:

- In the context of the growing polarization and politicization of our culture, many of the issues people of faith care about and see as central to their faith are increasingly intertwined with politics. Abortion, LGBTQ+ issues, poverty, and immigration intersect with deeply-held beliefs about human life, generosity, and moral values. These issues converge with policy debates often characterized by intense tribalism and partisan rancor.
- As debates on these issues become increasingly toxic and partisan in political arenas, the language of tribal politics can seep into congregational life. This includes narratives that dismiss or dehumanize people who hold opposing views, or the adoption of a simplistic “red versus blue” lens that reduces complex stances on issues to partisan politics. At the local level, it has become harder for politically diverse communities to thrive, and far easier for them to separate and self-sort into opposing factions that mirror the binary presented in our national politics and culture.
- Many Americans look to their faith for guidance on social issues, and to help define right and wrong. At the same time, Americans have different views on whether specific stances on social issues are indicative of being a good member of their community. For example, our research found that 65 percent of Evangelicals and 51 percent of Catholics believe that “being a good Christian/Catholic” means opposing abortion. Forty-six percent of Jews agree that “being a good Jew” means supporting the government of Israel, whereas 28 percent disagree. Disagreements are inevitable, but become harmful when stances on these issues are used to exclude members of their community. It becomes particularly dangerous when disagreements escalate into personal attacks on an individual’s worth or shift towards dehumanizing language. Seeing the other person as less deserving of life, less of a human being, is both a violation of our foundational ideals as a democratic society and an established precursor to violence.

⁷⁴ Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

The acceleration of issues such as abortion and Israel/Palestine into high conflict is particularly pervasive when:

- The essentialization and “stacking” of identities risks tying political identities with other social identities that are much more central to individuals. This allows conflict entrepreneurs to instrumentalize identity, seeding and benefitting from escalating conflicts. They might do this by adopting fear-based tactics to increase their own following, or even spreading disinformation to discredit their opponents.
- Religious leaders are already stretched thin by existing pastoral concerns and the aftermath of the pandemic, protests, and elections. Journalists and researchers have consistently found that clergy burnout rates have skyrocketed. The Barna Group found that pastors’ feelings of loneliness and isolation have increased over the past seven years.⁷⁵ Many clergy members shared that the vitriolic tone of political discourse has played a role in their own significant mental health challenges as they try to meet the increasing mental and spiritual health needs of their congregations.⁷⁶
- Faith communities, just like any community in American society, are operating in an environment of heightened uncertainty and accelerated changes in global culture, economy, geopolitics, and much more. Each community is going through different sets of profound changes:
 - Evangelical Christians are navigating a shift in political culture since the 1970s where they have increasingly been placed in the spotlight with strong political power but also entrenched association with political conservatism.
 - Mainline Protestants are wrestling with the challenges of engaging young members, how to handle schisms within denominations and the pattern of congregations leaving their denominations due to differences in beliefs.
 - Catholics find themselves amid growing tension between the pope’s effort to reform the Catholic Church and the outspoken conservative critics among American bishops.
 - American Jews are grappling with trauma and internal divisions over the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, while facing heightened levels of antisemitism and othering in American society in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war that began in 2023.
 - American Muslims are navigating what it means to be Muslim American amidst intergenerational differences and growing diversity, while continuing to grapple with the pain and vulnerability of anti-Muslim bias in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and 2023 Israel-Hamas war.
 - Latter-day Saints are renegotiating their place in American culture and politics as they grapple with continuous negative portrayals of Latter-day Saint communities in popular culture and the lack of a political home.

Changes can make people feel insecure, anxious, and fearful of others, adding fuel to the fire of existing “us-versus-them” frameworks. The information environment and the silos from which people operate can intensify the anxiety towards accelerating change. However, change does not necessarily deepen societal divisions. It provides opportunities for people to come together if community leaders can adeptly navigate conflicts to transcend false binaries. The next chapter turns to the unique traditions and resources America’s faithful can draw on to build common ground and resilience against the forces of polarization and political self-sorting.

⁷⁵ Barna Group, “7-Year Trends: Pastors Feel More Loneliness & Less Support,” *Barna Group*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastor-support-systems/>.

⁷⁶ Giovanna Dell’Orto, “Clergy Burnout, Mental Health Summit Address Challenges,” *AP News*, October 9, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/clergy-burnout-church-mental-health-summit-570e71ec96575abc92865ad5ba1491e6>.

The power of faith in a polarized world

Existing resources within faith to counter polarization

In these deeply divided times, faith leaders and communities can make a unique contribution to mitigating the dynamics of toxic polarization. While it may not be the primary purpose of most faith communities, many traditions possess a wealth of wisdom and other resources that can help Americans in navigating conflict and bridging divides.

At their core, faith institutions offer congregants a sense of meaning and belonging more profound than politics. Although this may not prevent polarization within their own houses of worship, it provides a means to counter the forces of division. When faith institutions act with integrity to their values, they help congregants shape an identity deeper than politics. By fulfilling their intended roles, faith institutions lower the relative importance of politics, thus reducing the perceived stakes.

As Part I: Common ground reveals, the deep and rich common ground that Americans share is a powerful asset for faith leaders. By emphasizing shared values—kindness, dignity, freedom, and equality—faith leaders can foster unity and reduce fear. Highlighting a common American identity humanizes individuals beyond partisan and demographic labels, creating a foundation for deeper understanding and connection.


We need to be reminded of our capacity to navigate change and overcome differences. Faith leaders can draw confidence from the rich history of faithful Americans bridging divides and catalyzing positive change. Suspicion and prejudice towards Catholics was once commonplace—to the extent that doubts were cast over John F. Kennedy’s bid for the presidency in 1960—but has all but disappeared today. Similarly, the multifaith civil rights movement of the 1960s, led by Black Christian leaders, stands as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of faith in driving social progress.

Faith communities can also furnish stories of fostering pluralism without giving up on distinctives. In recent years, churches such as the Evangelical megachurch Crossroads have pioneered racial reconciliation work; Jewish leaders have inspired civic engagement and bridge-building through embracing the tradition of debate and conversation; and Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faith leaders across the country have frequently organized interfaith programs and events to foster greater understanding.⁷⁷


In addition to taking inspiration from past examples of overcoming entrenched conflicts, faith leaders can draw from the scripture, values, and practices central to their faith as they lead their congregations through the fog of disinformation and competing versions of reality. Unlike political arenas that prioritize winning and ideological conformity, many faith traditions and communities emphasize self-reflection and humility. Religious leaders often encourage their congregations to confront discomfort, doubt, and the complexities of their faith—skills that are

⁷⁷ For an example of churches working on racial reconciliation, see Chuck Mingo, Lynn Watts, and Troy Jackson, “The Megachurch, the Pastors and the Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/ohio-megachurch-crossroads-race.html>; for an example of Jewish organizations that mobilize communities to strengthen American democracy, see A More Perfect Union: The Jewish Partnership for Democracy, <https://www.jewishdemocracy.org/>; for examples of interfaith organizations and programs, see Shoulder to Shoulder campaign, <https://www.shouldertoshouldercampaign.org/>; Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, <https://mfnn.org/>; Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, <https://sosspeace.org/>.


invaluable in navigating polarization. Organizations like [One America Movement](#), [The After Party](#), and [Interfaith America](#) show that depolarization skills can be honed, offering practical guidance and strategies for promoting dialogue and (re)building relationships. Many community and faith leaders also demonstrate the potential to root their efforts to address toxic polarization in their spiritual teachings and to encourage their own congregation to connect across lines of difference.

 **The Quranic text that guides my commitment to addressing toxic polarization within the Muslim Community is 2:143, ‘Thus We made you a balanced community, that you may be witnesses to humanity, and that the Messenger may be a witness to you.’ A witness is a proof and in the context of humanity, an ideal Muslim is a living proof of balance, justice, equity and moderation. Based on this, how can I remain silent confronting toxic polarization when I will be asked by God, ‘What were you doing when humanity was convulsed by toxic polarization fueling divides, injustice, inequity and oppression?’**


– Shaykh Ibad Wali, Senior Muslim Advisor, The One America Movement

 **Judaism deeply values a commitment to coming together across divides and to seeing the humanity of others even when we disagree. When I struggle to maintain an open mind or listen to another’s perspective, I turn toward Jewish sources of wisdom. I look towards the Talmudic Rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, who disagreed on matters of great importance, but who still brought their families together in marriage despite their differences. I recite a teaching from Pirkei Avot 4.1 which asks, “Who is wise? One who learns from every person.” And I sing “A world of loving-kindness will be built,” from Psalm 89:3 to remind myself that each of us must lead with loving-kindness if we wish to succeed at creating a better country and a better world.**


– Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin, Associate Rabbi, Washington Hebrew Congregation

 **As a Roman Catholic priest, Jesus inspires me to seek to deepen unity among all people, and to overcome toxic polarization. In Jesus, I find an example of one who was willing to engage the so-called other, the outcast and even those who disagreed with him or sought to do him harm. He crossed over to them, remained curious in his encounters and always sought to bring about unity, life and peace. Though I fall short in living up to Jesus’ example, I am nevertheless motivated to conform my life to his.**

– Father Aaron Wessman, author of *The Church’s Mission in a Polarized World*

 **Jesus says in Matthew 22:37-40 that the essence of following him is to love God and to love our neighbor. In such polarized times, it can be hard to even know our neighbors, let alone love them! That makes it all the more important for Christians to do the intentional work of understanding others in our community, so we might seek their good and follow Jesus faithfully.**


– Pastor Tom Breeden, Pastoral Senior Advisor, The One America Movement

 **The Episcopal Church has long spoken about becoming the beloved community, a vision profoundly articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This call for community along with Jesus' commandment to 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Mark 12:31) has deeply inspired and grounded my commitment to being a spiritual bridge builder.**

In a world often divided by toxic polarization, many claim to be bridge builders, yet often only construct their side, leaving a gap in the middle. No one wants to traverse a bridge with a gap; it's incomplete and dangerous. This metaphor fuels my dedication to eliminating polarization, striving to ensure that our bridges of love and understanding are complete and strong. Inspired by our faith traditions and rituals, such as the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, which symbolizes unity and reconciliation, I am committed to fostering connections that span differences. Through prayer, reflection and action, I continue to encourage congregations to connect across lines of difference and embody the inclusive love that Jesus taught.

By working together to complete the bridge of love, we can all journey towards the beloved community that Dr. King envisioned and that the Episcopal Church seeks to build—a community where justice, peace and love prevails.

– The Rev. Canon Randy Callender, Canon for Mission in The Episcopal Diocese of Maryland

 **The Book of Mormon is a beautiful religious text that has helped me to deepen my Christian faith and commitment to discipleship. It tells of moments in time when people worked harmoniously together resulting in societies without war, poverty, hunger or division – what, in our faith, we refer to as Zion. So for me, this scripture has become a roadmap for building toward the Beloved Community here and now. But it is also a powerful cautionary tale about toxic effects of prejudice, hatred and polarization and the violence that can flow from it. As a believer I want to be on the right side of that dichotomy, doing my part to create a healthy and just pluralistic society alongside good people of all faiths.**

– Jennifer Walker Thomas, Co-Executive Director, Mormon Women for Ethical Government

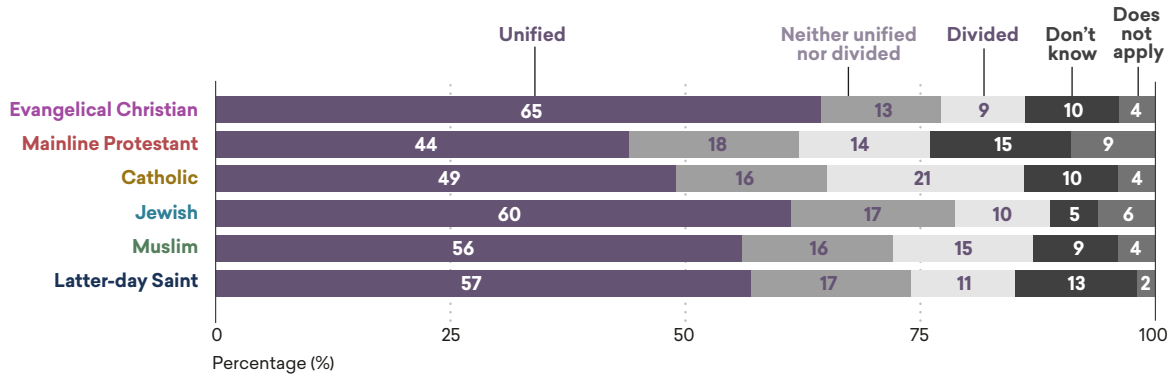
Opportunities: Trust in faith leaders and demand for spiritual guidance

Faith leaders have not only the resources and tools to navigate polarization, but also unique opportunities to help Americans connect across divides. Even though many Americans are aware of the contentious conversations around religion and politics at the national level, political division is not the defining feature of most people's experiences with their local faith communities. The vast majority of Americans who attend religious services at least a few times a year would not characterize their places of worship as politically divided.

Figure 7.1

Feelings of political division at local congregational level are low

Thinking about the United States today, how unified or divided politically does the following feel? [My church/synagogue/mosque/ward]



Based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
 Note: Figures may not add up to row totals due to rounding.
 Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Instead, faith is still a powerful identity that transcends differences, fosters connections and nurtures belonging. Conversations with Americans across faith traditions highlight the important role faith still plays in our social and spiritual infrastructure. For many Jewish and Muslim Americans, synagogues and mosques provide an oasis of community and bring people together to celebrate holidays and feast days that the wider American community does not. People cherish the times when congregations come together to support each other, such as offering childcare and rallying to offer financial support to struggling members.

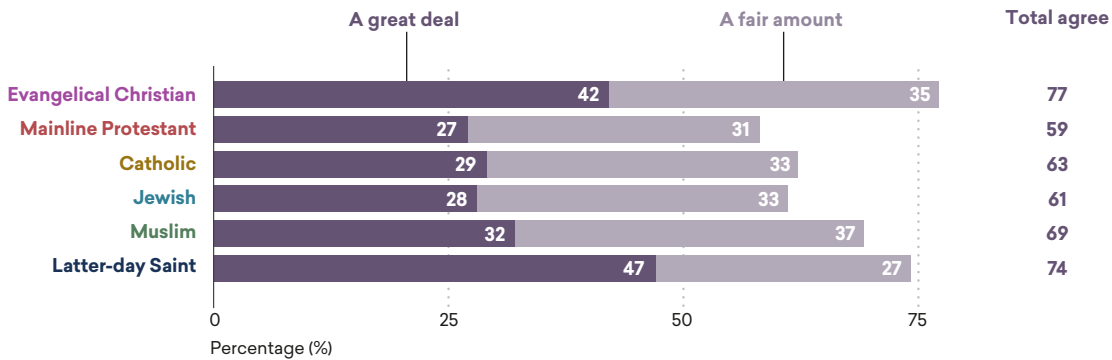
Moreover, most Americans of faith trust their religious leaders, and many look to them to help navigate division. The majority of Americans across faith traditions who attend services regularly have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the leaders of their churches, synagogues, mosques and wards. In another research study conducted in September 2023, we found that only a minority of Americans have confidence in the U.S. Congress (39 percent), media organizations (40 percent), and American corporations (48 percent) to do what is right for America.⁷⁸ The high trust in local faith leaders stands in stark contrast with the declining trust in other institutions in American society.

⁷⁸ The data points referenced were collected in survey interviews More in Common conducted with 1,392 U.S. adults (including an oversample of 107 Jewish Americans) from September 15-20, 2023, as a part of the *Changing Attitudes on Antisemitism in America, Before and After 10/7* report. The specific data points referenced are not included in the report. For more information on methodology, please see <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/2ssh4ld5/changing-attitudes-on-antisemitism-in-america-before-and-after-october-7.pdf>.

Figure 7.2

Trust in local faith leaders remains very high

How much trust and confidence do you have in the following?
Leaders at my church, synagogue, mosque, or ward



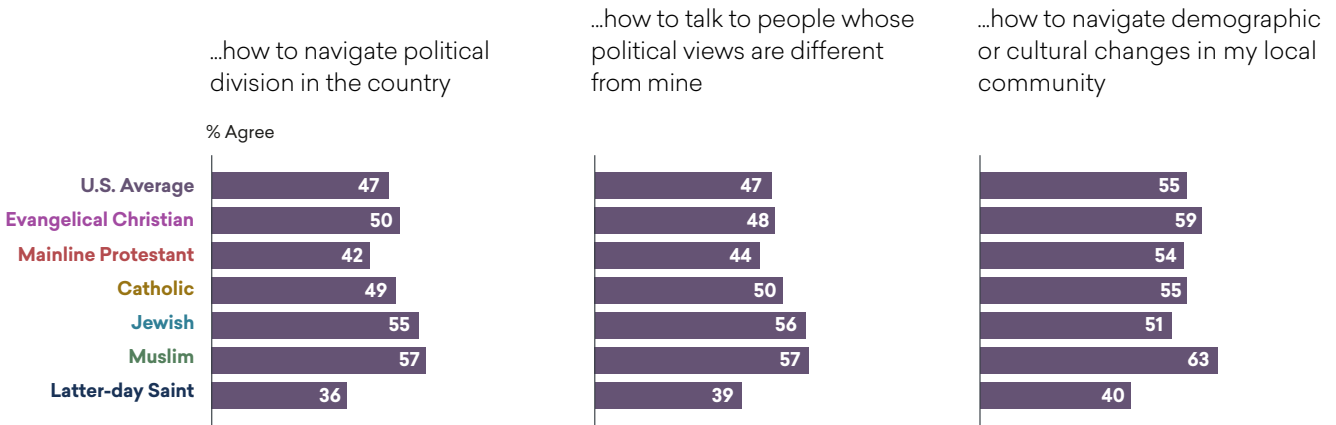
Based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Note: Figures may not add up to row totals due to rounding.
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Around half of Americans who attend religious services at least a few times a year want their religious leaders to provide guidance on navigating division, cultural changes, and talking to people with different political views.

Figure 7.3

There is extensive need for spiritual guidance on how to navigate polarization and demographic changes

"I want religious leaders at my place of worship (e.g., my pastor, priest, rabbi, imam, etc.) to provide guidance on..."



Based on U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or more.
Survey question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common/YouGov, 2024

Conversations with Americans of faith reveal that many are not looking for faith leaders' insights on voting choices and policy opinions. Rather, people yearn for practical guidance on how to embody the values central to their faith in the complexities of daily life.

“ I would say I personally like it when I hear sermons that teach me how to be a better person, how to live my life better, how to be closer to God. I do disagree with the Catholic Church on several issues... **I want to learn more about just myself and how to be closer to God. I don't want to feel like I'm being lectured by a political position that I feel is unfortunately turning off a lot of people to go into Mass.** I don't know if they can't at least change their minds, [but] at least try to tone it down a bit sometimes.

– Ryan, 48-year-old white man, Catholic, slightly liberal Democrat from New York

“ I belong to the Republican Party, and I feel that some views that are generally held by the Republican Party also align with the Church and the gospel of Jesus Christ. **But there are some places where I have a harder time. One specific example is immigration. The Republican Party is a lot stricter, and you hear about the encampments and sending immigrants back. I have a hard time with that because I think what would Jesus do? While he would want us to follow laws, he would also want us to take care of everyone.** So, that's an issue I go back and forth on in the church. If a person is in a country illegally, they're still allowed to hold a temple recommend, which is a sign of worthiness that you are able to enter the temple, the House of the Lord. To me, it's a real conflict.

– Brittany, 30-year-old white woman, Latter-day Saint, very conservative Republican from Utah

“ There's so much going on with social media, word of mouth... **If I could have the support of my church and my community to help me navigate that and help me stay grounded in my faith, I think that would be helpful,** especially for a lot of the younger generations that are being brought up with all of this [information] at a young age.

– Jocelyn, 27-year-old Black woman, Evangelical Christian, liberal Democrat from Pennsylvania

Despite the country's polarizing political climate, the majority of Americans still believe that Americans have more in common than what divides us.⁷⁹ Faith leaders have a unique opportunity to be the positive role models and voices of connection and belonging in a society suffering from the effects of polarization. Through building relationships and emphasizing the common humanity congregants share with their fellow worshippers and people outside of their faiths—including those who do not identify as religious—faith communities can strengthen belonging and social cohesion both within and beyond its walls.

⁷⁹ Our research found that 66 percent of Americans agree with the statement “Americans have more in common than what divides us.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

Faith groups in America have historically played a crucial role in building local communities, establishing institutions for education, housing and care, and advancing progress in many other ways. Perhaps even more importantly, they have worked to form people, placing emphasis on cultivating moral character, teaching values, and shaping imagination and connections to others. But we now inhabit a world that is very different from that of previous generations. Much is changing, much more is uncertain.

What is the role of faith and faith communities as we navigate these changes, and specifically as we navigate them in very polarized times? In a country where almost three quarters of Americans say religion is important to them, this positive potential is yet to be realized.

This report suggests that a key reason is false impressions of America's faithful. Too often, faith groups are seen through the lens of political conflict, and made into stage props in the theater of our culture wars. Conflict entrepreneurs—sometimes including those within faith groups, even though they may be unrepresentative of their congregations—are able to stoke conflict in part because of false assumptions that partisanship and toxic polarization have dominated pews and pulpits.

This report finds not only that politics is not central to the faith of most religious Americans, but that more than half consciously look to their faith to find their way through these divided times. Most of all, they look to their faith for connection to God, connection to tradition, and connection to one another. In addition, faith often operates as a “sensemaker” for Americans, working to make sense of a complex world. The larger stories into which faith invites us can give us a sorely-needed sense of perspective on the conflict elevated on digital platforms, and offer respite from the exhausting polarization of today's America.

America's faithful can play a far greater role in addressing our society's polarization and the loneliness and disconnection that makes people more vulnerable to “us-versus-them” divisions. The reach of faith groups into different communities of Americans in every part of the country is unequalled. They define many of life's most important rites of passage, from baptism and bar/bat mitzvah to weddings and funerals, and to celebrations that mark different seasons of the year such as Christmas, Ramadan and Passover. Rooted in scripture and rituals that emphasize self-reflection, humility, and empathy, local faith communities are among the few remaining spaces where diverse Americans gather for personal reflection, spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and communal problem-solving.

To realize this potential, we need to overcome false assumptions about faithful Americans, especially when it comes to politics and religious intolerance. We need to foster a greater recognition that, for many Americans, faith is an important part of who they are. Faith shapes their values, formative experiences, family life, communities, and sense of being. While the number of people who are religiously

unaffiliated has increased over the past decades, the majority of Americans still see being a member of their tradition as important to who they are. But this does not mean that they are intolerant of others whose beliefs are different from their own.

We also need an awakening of our imaginations. Perhaps it starts with a deeper recognition that politics is much less central to the lives of most Americans than our polarization might suggest. Politics and partisanship are not the main lens through which people view the world; neither should they be the main framework for understanding America's faithful. For most Americans, other things are more important, and by building on other sources of shared identity and common ground, we can put the sources of our divisions into better perspective. Faith has an important role in doing that, both because faith connects us to others different from ourselves, and because faith can provide a different perspective on life drawing on values, traditions and beliefs that go back many thousands of years.

Building on the insights in this report, we see unique opportunities for different actors to help address the dynamics of polarization within their faith groups, between faith groups, and in American society more generally.

Faith leaders can and should draw on the wealth of wisdom and other resources from their traditions to help their communities navigate conflict and bridge divides. Most local faith communities feel far less divided than the country as a whole, and not all conflicts within faith groups are toxic. Most Americans of faith still have high levels of trust and confidence in their local faith leaders and turn to them for guidance on navigating polarization and societal changes. Through emphasizing shared values and drawing on sacred texts and rituals, faith leaders can nurture healthy conversations and inspire their congregations to connect across lines of differences.

In addition to efforts around bridging divides, faith communities have the capacity to provide valuable reflections on the human and spiritual dimensions of polarization. Why has politics become such an ultimate, apocalyptic struggle for its combatants in this generation? Why are people drawn towards identifying with these conflicts? What are we lacking in our lives today that make the sugar-hit of political conflict seem so alluring? And, how do we provide a much healthier alternative that feels relevant to the way that we live today?

Organizations and institutions can play a role undoing false impressions of faith communities, particularly regarding their support for religious pluralism. Misperceptions contribute to an environment where faithful Americans feel misunderstood and threatened, impeding interfaith dialogue. Organizations that bring people of different faiths together can build upon our common ground, emphasizing shared values such as kindness, hospitality, and love expressed through rituals distinctive to different faith traditions, as well as civic values and a common American identity. Additionally, such organizations can extend their focus to include the religiously unaffiliated, who are more likely to feel the absence of community and belonging. In the context of increasing isolation and loneliness in our society, creating opportunities where people can feel welcomed, respected, and connected to people different from themselves takes on new importance.

Those who tell the stories of who we are, from reporters and commentators to creatives and influencers, have both a responsibility and an opportunity to cast a larger vision for an America in which everyone can belong. Telling the stories that respect people's differences but also find our common humanity can contribute towards a healthier pluralism. Many Americans want to see their faith portrayed

in ways that highlight its positive impact on their lives, the significance it holds for them, and the good it brings to their communities. By doing so, the media can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious life in America.

America's faithful need a rediscovered sense of hope and a renewed sense of possibility around who they can be, and the contribution they can make to healing the country's divisions. This will look, sound and feel different for each faith group. It starts with their own communities and the distinctive resources of each tradition. But making progress on our divisions can ripple out from within faith communities to American society more broadly, at a time when the nation is looking for hope and a way out of troubled times.

Appendix

Calculating perception gaps

A perception gap refers to the difference between a person's estimate of a group's views and the reality of that group's views.

To calculate them, we first measured the percentage of a given faith community who agree with a set of statements. Second, we surveyed people and asked for their estimates of the given faith community's views. Then, we calculated a "perception gap" which quantifies the accuracy of estimates of the views of the given faith community relative to the reality we measured.

For example, if a non-Muslim person estimates that 50 percent of American Muslims agree that "the U.S. should be a place where people of all religions and no religions feel that they belong," when in fact, 75 percent of Muslims agree, then their perception gap for this issue would be 25 percentage points.

To calculate the perception gap that Americans have towards faith communities that they are not a part of, we simply averaged across estimates that Americans outside a given faith community make for that faith community. For example, to measure the perception gap that Americans hold towards American Muslims, we averaged across estimates that non-Muslims have for American Muslims. Similarly, to measure the perception gap that Americans hold towards Evangelical Christians, we averaged across estimates that non-Evangelicals have for Evangelical Christians. In perception gap charts, data points corresponding to the estimated percentages given by Americans outside of a given community (e.g., non-Muslims, non-Evangelicals) are all labeled as "the general public's estimate" for simplicity.

To better understand what drives perception gaps, we conducted regression analyses to examine the effects of several predictors. All regression results reported are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Categories and terminology

How does More in Common measure the religious identity of survey respondents?

Similar to Pew Research's methodology, we rely on respondents' self-identification to measure their religious identity.⁸⁰ One of the key questions we asked is "What is your present religion, if any?", where respondents were asked to choose from the following list of answer options: Protestant, Roman Catholic, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular.

Then, all respondents were asked to answer "Aside from religious beliefs, do you consider yourself to be any of the following in any way (for example, ethnically, culturally, or because of your family's background)?" with the same list of answer options as above.

⁸⁰ "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions." *Pew Research Center*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/07/05/how-does-pew-research-center-measure-the-religious-composition-of-the-u-s-answers-to-frequently-asked-questions/#question-1-measuring-religious-identity>

In addition, all Protestants (including respondents who identify as any type of Protestant or respondents who answered “something else” and specified that they are “Christian,” “just Christian,” or a member of a specific Christian denomination) were asked two follow-up questions: “Would you describe yourself as a born-again or Evangelical Christian?” and “As far as your present religion, what denomination or church, if any, do you identify with most closely?”

All respondents who identified themselves as Jewish in the religious affiliation question or the cultural/ethnic identity question were asked “Thinking about Jewish religious denominations, do you consider yourself to be Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, other, none in particular, or don’t know?”

All respondents who identified themselves as Muslim in the religious affiliation question or the cultural affiliation question were asked “are you Sunni, Shia, other, none in particular, or don’t know?”

Finally, all respondents received a standard series of demographic questions, including about their race/ethnicity, gender, birth year, political ideology, and political party affiliation. Protestants who identified as Black or African American were asked “Do you consider your church to be majority Black or a historically Black church?”

To request data sets broken down by subgroups within each faith tradition (e.g., by race, denomination, tradition, sect, etc.), please contact us@moreincommon.com.

What groups do the labels such as “U.S. Average” and “Evangelical Christians” in the charts refer to? Why does More in Common adopt these specific labels to categorize different religious groups?

Below we provide a brief definition of the key labels used to describe different faith communities throughout the report. While group labels are a helpful tool, we acknowledge that they cannot fully encompass the diversity of beliefs and preferred self-identification of all Americans within each faith tradition. Whenever possible, we try to speak with precision on statistically significant findings and highlight nuances or differences across subgroups.

U.S. Average: When we use the terms “U.S. average,” “Americans in general,” or “Americans on average,” we are referring to the weighted *representative* sample of U.S. adults, which includes both secular Americans and Americans of faith.

Americans of faith: When we use the terms “Americans of faith” or “Americans across faith traditions,” we are referring to the respondents who are categorized as Evangelical Christians, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, or Latter-day Saints in our survey. Due to sampling constraints, our surveys did not obtain enough interviews with Americans of other faith traditions to be able to analyze them separately.

Americans who attend services a few times a year or more: For questions that probe on experiences within one’s own congregation or place of worship, we focused on data from Americans who attend religious services a few times a year or more. The data visualization charts for such questions have a note at the bottom that signifies the focus on Americans who attend religious services a few times a year or more.

Protestants: Respondents who described themselves as “Protestant” in the “what is your present religion, if any” religious affiliation self-identification question, as well as respondents who answered “something else” in the religious affiliation question and specified that they are “Christian,” “just Christian,” or a member of a specific Christian denomination (e.g., Baptist, Methodist).

By combining the answers to the born-again/Evangelical self-identification question, we divide Protestants into two groups:

Evangelical Christians: Those who were categorized as Protestants and answered the born-again/Evangelical self-identification question by saying they describe themselves as “born-again or Evangelical.”

- This study uses “Evangelical Christians” and “Evangelical Protestants” interchangeably, although the former is used more frequently due to how Evangelicals are often referred to in public discourse.
- We acknowledge that while the born-again/Evangelical self-identification question is used in most polls on religious groups, political scientists are continuing to test and refine its wording.⁸¹
- In the aftermath of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, some commentators were concerned that some self-described Evangelicals are not actually religious but adopt the label because they are politically conservative or Republican, and those who are Evangelical theologically may not choose to describe themselves as Evangelical due to its perceived association with political conservatism.⁸² However, existing research shows that Evangelicals are among the most religiously observant groups in the American adult population, and the percentage of self-identified Evangelicals who are not religious is small.⁸³ We similarly found that self-identified Evangelicals are consistently among the most religious groups, with over six in ten reporting that they attend religious services a few times a month or more. In addition, 49 percent of Democratic Protestants and 61 percent of politically Independent Protestants identify as born-again or Evangelical, suggesting that most Evangelicals regardless of political ideology still choose to self-identify as such in survey responses.

Mainline (or non-Evangelical) Protestants: Those who were categorized as Protestants and answered the born-again/Evangelical self-identification question by saying they do NOT describe themselves as “born-again or Evangelical.”

- The term “Mainline Protestantism” is commonly used by religious studies scholars and polls.⁸⁴ It loosely encompasses Christians usually connected with traditional denominations such as the United Methodists, Evangelical Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians (PC-USA) and those who do not typically identify as Evangelical or born-again.
- This study adopts this term to refer to Protestant Christians who would not describe themselves as born-again or Evangelical, due to its wide use in polling and media coverage. However, we acknowledge that it is an imperfect term whose definition is still subject to debate and is rarely used by the people it encompasses to describe themselves. We also acknowledge that there are Christian denominations who identify as neither born-again/Evangelical nor mainline.

⁸¹ Frank Newport, “The Thorny Challenge of Defining Evangelicals,” *Gallup*, June 9, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/507062/thorny-challenge-defining-evangelicals.aspx>.

⁸² “How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions.”

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Jack Jenkins, “What is a Mainline Christian, Anyway?,” *Religion News Service*, July 8, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/07/08/what-is-a-mainline-christian-anyway/>.

Catholics: Respondents who described themselves as “Catholic” or “Roman Catholic” in the “what is your present religion, if any” religious affiliation self-identification question.

Jewish: Respondents who described themselves as “Jewish (Judaism)” in the “what is your present religion, if any” religious affiliation self-identification question.

Many Jewish Americans perceive their Jewish identity as a blend of cultural heritage, ancestry, and/or religious affiliation. Due to the nuances of Jewish identity, respondents who firstly described themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular” in the religious affiliation question, and secondly identified as Jewish in the cultural affiliation question were asked the same sets of questions for Jewish respondents in the remainder of the survey. One example question is “how important is being Jewish to you personally?”

However, given that this report focuses on the experiences of division and polarization within religious communities, when we use the term “American Jews” or “Jewish Americans,” we are specifically referring to respondents who identified as Jewish in the “what is your present religion, if any” self-identification question. Data on respondents who identify as Jewish only culturally or ethnically are available upon request.

Muslim: Respondents who described themselves as “Muslim (Islam)” in the “what is your present religion, if any” religious affiliation self-identification question.

Latter-day Saints: Respondents who described themselves as members of “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon)” in the “what is your present religion, if any” religious affiliation self-identification question.

Religious “nones” (sometimes also the religiously unaffiliated): The combined umbrella group of respondents who described themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular” in the “what is your present religion, if any” religious affiliation self-identification question. Some charts feature the specific data breakdown by those who describe themselves as “atheist.”

