

Respect for clergy drops, but among Republicans, not so much

Lauren Markoe Religion News Service | Dec. 18, 2013

Clergy used to rank near the top in polls asking Americans to rate the honesty and ethics of people in various professions. This year, for the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1977, fewer than half of those polled said clergy have "high" or "very high" moral standards.

But opinions on clergy differed markedly by party, with Republicans viewing them far more favorably than Democrats.

Overall, 47 percent of respondents to the survey gave clergy "high" or "very high" ratings, a sharp drop in confidence from the 67 percent of Americans who viewed them this way in 1985.

Among Republicans, 63 percent gave clergy one of the two top ratings for ethics, compared with 40 percent of Democrats.

In a piece accompanying the poll, Gallup Senior Editor Jeffrey M. Jones wrote that Republicans might think more highly of clergy, police and military officers "because those people work in traditional institutions in American society, which Republicans may hold in greater esteem because of their generally conservative ideology."

"Greater religiosity among Republicans than among Democrats also factors in to Republicans' higher ratings of clergy," Jones added.

Young people aged 29-34 tend to rate professionals more highly than those 55 and older, but the pattern does not hold for clergy. Less than one in three young people (32 percent) give clergy high moral marks, compared with 50 percent of those 55 and older.

This may be because young people tend to be less religious than older people, Jones writes.

This year, clergy took a back seat to nurses, pharmacists, schoolteachers, medical doctors, military and police officers.

Nurses are the most trusted and have been nearly every year since Gallup added them to the poll in 1999, with 82 percent of people saying they rank high or very high on the ethical spectrum. Clergy came in seventh of the 22 professions ranked.

The overall trend for clergy has sloped downward since 2001, with Gallup pollsters attributing the slide to scandals involving the sexual abuse of minors.

"The Catholic priest abuse stories from the early 2000s helped lead to a sharp drop in Americans' ratings of clergy, a decline from which the profession has yet to fully recover," Gallup Managing Editor Art Swift wrote about the poll.

But the Rev. J.C. Austin of Auburn Theological Seminary suggests another reason that the clergy's reputation has suffered. Too often, he said, divisive clergy overshadow those working toward the common good.

"We saw that this year, in particular, around the marriage equality debates when voices of faith were represented as the opposition even though countless people of faith fought for marriage equality precisely because their faith compelled them to do so," he said.

Though clergy seem to be dropping in the nation's esteem, they are far from the bottom of the list. Reading from the bottom up, the poll ranks lobbyists, members of Congress, car sales people, state office holders and advertising practitioners as the least ethical.

The poll of 1,031 Americans was conducted Dec. 5-8 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

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