

CHAPTER 6

Religion and Politics

Most Latinos see religion as a moral compass to guide their own political thinking, and they expect the same of their political leaders. Most view the pulpit as an appropriate place for the expression of political views. These attitudes are widely shared among Hispanics of all the major religious traditions.

Two-thirds of Hispanics say that their religious beliefs are an important influence on their political thinking. More than half say churches and other houses of worship should address the social and political questions of the day. By nearly a two-to-one margin, Latinos say that there has been too little expression of religious faith by political leaders rather than too much. Churchgoing Hispanics report that their clergy often address political matters, although the extent of that practice varies considerably by issue and by religious tradition.

The extent to which Hispanics believe religion should play an important role in politics varies, often quite starkly, depending on religious tradition. In each of the measures utilized by this study, a role for religion in public life is endorsed by larger shares of evangelicals than by members of other religious traditions.

Compared with evangelicals, for example, Catholics and mainline Protestants are much less likely to say that their religious beliefs are a very important influence on their political thinking, although the difference in views is narrower on other measures. Secular Latinos are predictably far less inclined to grant religion a role in politics. Significantly, however, more than one-in-three seculars acknowledge that religion plays some role in shaping their political thinking.

Nativity also matters. Generally speaking, foreign-born Latinos are more likely to say that their religious views are very important in influencing their political thinking and that political leaders should be more vocal about their faith.

This chapter examines the link between religion and politics by focusing on questions that were designed to probe attitudes in this area. The results for each question are analyzed by religious tradition, by nativity and, where relevant, by frequency of church attendance.

A separate discussion at the end of this chapter focuses on attitudes and perceptions on immigration and discrimination. Both are central to the lives of many Hispanics and, over the past year, have been topics of considerable political debate across the country.

Faith and public life

The importance of religious beliefs on political thinking

Two-in-three (66%) Latinos say that their religious beliefs are a very important or a somewhat important influence on their political thinking. Among Hispanic evangelicals, more than eight-in-ten (86%) feel this way. Indeed, a clear majority of evangelicals (62%) say their religious beliefs are a “very important” influence, a far greater share than among Latino Catholics (36%) and mainline Protestants (38%).

A significant minority (30%) of Hispanics, however, say their religious beliefs are either not too important or not at all important to their political thinking. Almost one-in-three (32%) mainline Protestants hold that view, as do 30% of Catholics.

Figure 6.1
Influence of Religious Beliefs on Political Thinking

Generally speaking, how important are your religious beliefs in influencing your political thinking?

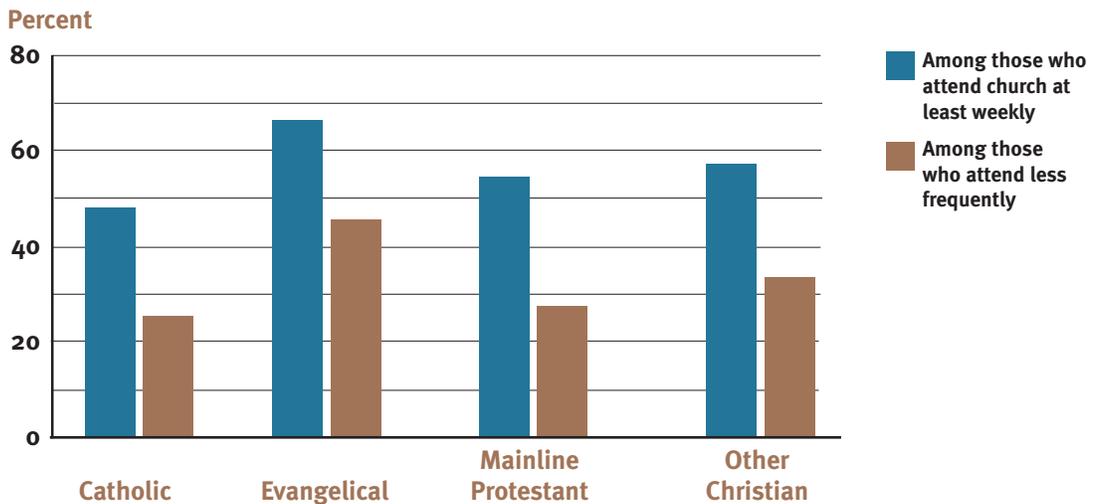
Among...	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too important	Not at all important
All Hispanics	38%	28%	13%	17%
Catholic	36	30	15	15
Evangelical	62	24	6	6
Mainline Protestant	38	27	12	20
Other Christian	51	15	6	23
Secular	14	23	15	44

There is a significant difference among Catholics by nativity on this question. About four-in-ten (41%) foreign-born Catholics say their beliefs are very important in framing their politics, compared with 26% among the native born. The same pattern is evident among mainline Protestants, though to a lesser extent than Catholics. Notably, there is no difference by nativity among evangelicals, with similar majorities of both foreign and native born agreeing that their religious beliefs are very important (62% and 64%, respectively).

A large number of secular Hispanics (44%), not surprisingly, say that religious beliefs are not at all important as an influence on their political thinking. However, a substantial minority of secular Latinos acknowledges that religion weighs on their political views. One-in-three (37%) say religious beliefs play either a very important or a somewhat important role in their politics.

Frequency of attendance at religious services is especially significant on this question. By often large margins, and regardless of religious tradition, those who attend religious services at least once a week are more likely to say that their religious beliefs are a very important influence on their political thinking, compared with those who attend church less frequently. Among evangelicals, for example, 68% of weekly churchgoers feel this way, compared with 47% among those who attend less often. The difference is about as large among Catholics (49% vs. 26%). Among mainline Protestants the difference is 54% for weekly churchgoers versus 29% for those who attend less often.

Figure 6.2
Hispanics Stating that Their Religious Beliefs Are Very Important to Their Politics



Expressions of faith by politicians and clergy

Responses to two questions offer an indication of the importance Latinos generally place on the role of religion in public life. In the first, a plurality of Hispanics (45%) say political leaders do not express their religious faith often enough. In the second, a majority of Latinos (56%) say that religious institutions should express their opinions on the political and social issues of the day. In both cases, these sentiments are somewhat stronger among evangelicals than among Catholics or mainline Protestants, and they are more prevalent among those who attend church at least weekly than among those who attend less frequently.

The Pew 2006 U.S. Religion Survey found that 47% of non-Hispanics say that religious institutions should keep out of political matters while 50% say churches and houses of worship should express their views.

There are pronounced contrasts between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics. A majority of white Catholics (54%) say that churches should keep out of politics, compared with 36% of Latino Catholics. Latino evangelicals, on the other hand, are generally in agreement with their white counterparts on this question, with sizable majorities among both saying the church should have a say on social and political issues (65% for Latinos and 62% among white evangelicals). Overall, Hispanic views on this question more closely resemble those of blacks, who also strongly favor (67%) churches expressing views on political issues.

Figure 6.3
Political Leaders Speaking on Their Faith

Do you think there has been too much, too little or the right amount of expressions of religious faith by political leaders?

Among...	Too much	Too little	Right amount
All Hispanics	23%	45%	17%
Catholic	21	44	17
Attend church at least weekly	17	50	17
Attend less often	24	41	17
Evangelical	15	60	15
Attend church at least weekly	12	63	13
Attend less often	20	51	18
Mainline Protestant	29	40	19
Attend church at least weekly	18	44	22
Attend less often	36	38	18
Other Christian	24	37	19
Secular	46	26	16

Figure 6.4
Politics and the Pulpit

Should churches and other houses of worship keep out of political matters, or should they express their views on day-to-day social and political questions?

Among...	Express views	Keep out of political matters
All Hispanics	56%	37%
Catholic	57	36
Evangelical	65	29
Mainline Protestant	52	36
Other Christian	26	73
Secular	43	50

What Latinos hear from the pulpit

To explore what kinds of political and social issues religious leaders are addressing at churches and houses of worship attended by Latinos, the study asked a series of questions of respondents who reported attending religious services at least occasionally. Each question asked whether the clergy at their house of worship ever speak out on a specific matter of public policy or political involvement. The results varied depending on religious tradition and the specific issue in question.

Abortion and homosexuality

A majority (58%) of Latinos who attend religious services say that abortion is addressed by the clergy at their churches, and the shares are similar among evangelicals (64%) and Catholics (59%).

Overall, Latino churchgoers who say their clergy speak out on laws regarding homosexuality (41%) are surpassed by those who say the topic is not addressed from the pulpit (52%). There are sharp differences between religious traditions, however. About 58% of evangelicals say the issue is addressed from the pulpit, a much higher figure than among Catholics (37%) or among mainline Protestants (42%).

Candidates and elections

As noted above, a majority of Latinos say that churches and other houses of worship should express their views on day-to-day social and political issues. When it comes to candidates and elections, however, the survey shows that most churchgoing Latinos do not hear these subjects addressed by their clergy. By a greater than two-to-one margin (64% vs. 28%), churchgoing Latinos say that their clergy do not speak out on candidates and elections.

Catholics, evangelicals and mainline Protestants, who often differ when it comes to other measures of religion and politics, show remarkable consistency on this question. In each of these religious traditions about seven-in-ten Latinos say their clergy do not speak out about candidates and elections.

Figure 6.5

What Hispanics Are Hearing in Church

Does the clergy at your place of worship ever speak out on...

% responding yes

Among Hispanics...	Abortion	Homosexuality	Candidates & elections	Importance of voting	Immigration
All Hispanics	58%	41%	28%	56%	44%
Catholic	59	37	29	57	49
Evangelical	64	58	30	67	35
Mainline Protestant	46	42	28	56	37
Other Christian	58	46	10	25	14

Note: Based on Hispanic churchgoers

Foreign-born Latino Catholics are twice as likely to say their clergy addressed candidates and elections compared with native-born Catholics (35% vs. 16%). Indeed, Catholics stand out in this regard. In no other religious tradition is nativity such a significant factor. Among evangelicals, for example, there is very little difference on this question between the native and foreign born.

More than half of churchgoing Hispanics do say, however, that their clergy speak on the importance of voting, and the results are similar across the major religious traditions.

Immigration policy and protests

Immigration reform drew considerable attention in 2006, because of the sharp debate in Washington as well as the nationwide protests that resulted. About equal shares of Latino churchgoers say that their clergy speak out about laws on immigration (44%) as say that the issue is not addressed (48%).

Foreign-born Latinos, however, are considerably more likely to say their clergy speak out on immigration (52%) than the native born (31%). The differences according to nativity are more substantial on this issue than on any of the others in the series of questions exploring what political subjects are addressed by clergy.

Latino Catholics report that their clergy give the most exposure to immigration. Almost half (49%) of Latino Catholics say the clergy in their church speak on immigration, the highest among the religious traditions. By comparison, about a third of evangelicals (35%) and about the same share of mainline Protestants (37%) say their clergy address immigration.

Those distinctions, however, partly reflect differences in the demographic composition of the respective denominations. In all the religious traditions, foreign-born Latinos are more likely to say immigration was addressed. The difference is particularly stark among evangelicals, where 45% of the foreign born report hearing the clergy speak out on immigration, compared with only 23% among the native born. There is also a sizable difference among Catholics (56% foreign born vs. 34% native born). The differences are smaller among mainline Protestants (41% foreign born vs. 35% native born).

Figure 6.6
Churches and the Immigration Protests

In the past 12 months, did your church participate in an immigration rights protest or boycott, or not?

Among...	Yes
All Hispanics	22%
Catholic	26
Evangelical Protestant	12
Mainline Protestant	16
Other Christian	6

Note: Based on Hispanic churchgoers

Media accounts of the immigration marches in the spring of 2006 often emphasized the involvement of religious organizations. In this study, Hispanics who attend religious services were asked whether they or their churches had participated in an immigration rights protest or boycott in the past year.

About 22% of Latinos who attend religious services say their place of worship participated in an immigration protest in the year prior to the survey. There are, however, some differences depending on religious tradition.

One-in-four Catholics (26%) say their church participated in a protest or boycott, more than twice the rate among evangelicals (12%) and higher also than among mainline Protestants (16%). Compared with their native-born counterparts, foreign-born Catholics and evangelicals are more likely to attend churches that took a more active role on immigration.

Almost one-in-four (24%) Hispanics say they participated in a protest or demonstration in the past year. Foreign-born Catholics are almost twice as likely to say they took part compared with their native-born counterparts (31% vs. 16%). Indeed, regardless of religious tradition, foreign-born Latinos indicate they participated at higher rates compared with the native born. Among foreign-born evangelicals, for example, almost one-in-four (24%) say they participated, compared with 13% among the native born.

Figure 6.7
One-in-Four Hispanics Took Part in Protests

In the U.S. in the past year, have you participated in any protests or demonstrations to support immigration rights, or not?

Among...	Yes
All Hispanics	24%
Catholic	26
Evangelical	19
Mainline Protestant	21
Other Christian	13
Secular	25

Views on Immigration and Discrimination

Fully two-thirds (66%) of Latinos in the survey say that immigrants strengthen society, while a small but significant minority (23%) takes the opposite view. Catholic and mainline Protestants are in agreement on this question, with more than two-thirds of each saying immigrants strengthen society (67% and 69%, respectively). A somewhat lower proportion of evangelicals (59%) agree with this statement. Conversely, among evangelicals, one-in-three (33%) say immigrants threaten society, the highest number among all the religious traditions.

Foreign-born Hispanics are for the most part more positive on this question than the native born. The majority of both the foreign born and the native born see immigrants as strengthening the U.S., but there are significant differences on this issue among Catholics and evangelicals.

For example, almost three-quarters (72%) of foreign-born Latino Catholics hold a positive view of immigrants, compared with 58% among the native born. Conversely, almost a third (32%) of native-born Catholics, almost twice the rate of foreign-born Catholics (17%), say immigrants are a threat to traditional American customs or values.

Figure 6.8
Most See Immigrants in a Positive Light

Which comes closer to your views? The growing number of newcomers from other countries threaten traditional American customs and values, or the growing number of newcomers from other countries strengthen American society.

Among...	Threaten	Strengthen
All Hispanics	23%	66%
Catholic	22	67
Evangelical	33	59
Mainline Protestant	21	69
Other Christian	25	62
Secular	20	69

Nearly the same split is evident among evangelicals. In that case, 64% of the foreign born hold a positive view, compared with 54% among the native born. More than four-in-ten (41%) of native-born evangelicals view increased migration as a threat, considerably more than among their foreign-born counterparts (26%).

Discrimination

More than eight-in-ten (85%) Hispanics view discrimination as a problem, and more than six-in-ten (62%) describe it as a major problem facing Latinos. Indeed, a majority of Hispanics across all religious traditions say discrimination is a major problem.

Perceptions of discrimination among Latinos vary depending on nativity. Among Catholics, for example, nearly three-quarters (73%) of the foreign born see discrimination as a major problem, compared with 50% among the native born. The difference is as pronounced among evangelicals (66% vs. 40%) and mainline Protestants (68% vs. 49%). ■

Figure 6.9
Attitudes on Discrimination

In general, do you think discrimination against Hispanics/Latinos is a major problem, minor problem or not a problem in preventing Hispanics/Latinos from succeeding in America?

Among...	Major	Minor	Not a problem
All Hispanics	62%	23%	12%
Catholic	65	21	10
Evangelical	54	27	17
Mainline Protestant	55	26	17
Other Christian	56	23	17
Secular	56	28	13