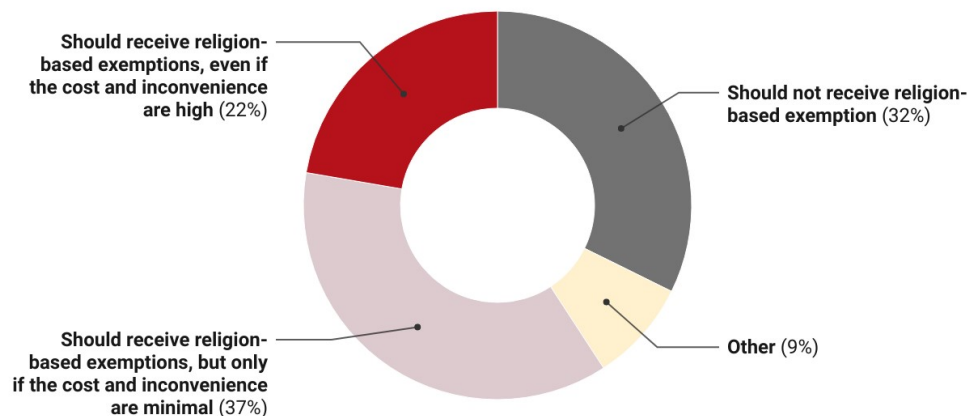


Mood of the Nation: What Americans think about religious work exemptions

June 7, 2023

A plurality of Americans think government employees should be allowed to miss work without penalty to observe religious holidays, but only if costs are minimal

"The Supreme Court is considering expanding the rights of employees to request work exemptions based on their sincere religious belief or practice. Thinking of employees who work for the federal, state or a local government, which of the following policies would you prefer?"



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N = 1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points.

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Summary and key findings

Many members of the Baby Boom generation can remember a time when nearly every state had “Sunday Laws” which restricted both retail sales and the ability to work for pay on Sundays. In the 1960s, these laws were under attack for restricting freedom because they *prevented people from working on Sundays*.

In the next two weeks, the Supreme Court is expected to turn the tables, determining when employers can make work on Sunday, as well as other religiously significant days, a non-negotiable part of someone’s job description. This case, *Groff v. Dejoy* was brought by an employee of the U.S. Postal Service, so it is possible that the imminent Supreme Court Decision will only apply to governments, and not private employers.

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy’s latest Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted with 1,000 American adults May 12 through 18, 2023, included a question aimed at understanding the opinions that American adults have about this issue. Key findings include:

- A plurality of 37% felt that religious-based work exemptions should be granted, but only when doing so would result in minimal inconvenience and costs to the employing government.
- Thirty-two percent oppose work exemptions under all circumstances.
- Only one in five Americans believe that religious work exemptions should be granted when doing so would impose major costs on the government.
- This issue is unusual in that, as a group, both Democrats and Republicans hold nearly identical views.
- Opinions do not vary dramatically by either demographic characteristic or even by religious grouping, but the survey does reveal:
 - Somewhat higher levels of support for even costly religious work exemptions among Generation Z (31%) and Americans whose highest educational attainment is “some college” (also 31%).
 - Somewhat higher opposition to any form of work restriction among those in the Baby Boom and Silent generations (37%), those with at least a college degree (40%), and those who say that religion is “not at all important” to their lives (39%).

Who supports religious work exemptions for government employees?

A plurality of Americans, 37%, think government employees should be allowed to miss work without penalty to observe religious holidays, but only if costs are minimal. Nearly as many, 32%, indicate that government employees should not receive religious-based work exemptions. Twenty-two percent believe that government employees should receive religious work exemptions, even if they result in high costs and inconveniences.

According to judicial scholar Michael Nelson, Director of Penn State’s Center for American Political Responsiveness, “A big trend in the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence in recent years has been an increase in the protections religious Americans should receive. It’s surprising to see such a gap between the attitudes of the people the Court’s rulings are protecting and the direction of the Court’s rulings.”

This could have important implications according to Nelson: “If the Supreme Court should take the position that workers are entitled to work exemptions even when the employer or co-workers have to endure additional cost and inconvenience, it may further erode public support for the Court.”

Opinions on this topic do not vary dramatically along demographic lines, although there are some differences in support for religious work exemptions:

- By generation, a higher proportion of those in the Baby Boom Generation (age 59 to 77) and Silent Generation (age 78 or older) oppose religious work exemptions than is the case among Generation Z (age 18 to 26; 37% compared to 25%).
- A higher proportion of those with at least a college degree are opposed to religious work exemptions (40%), as compared to those with a high school degree or less (31%) and especially those with some college (26%).

Differences by gender, race and ethnicity, and income are generally within the survey’s margin of error, suggesting no notable differences in the patterns of support for religious work exemptions.

Opinions are even similar across political lines, with about one-in-five Democrats and Republicans each supporting religious work exemptions even when costs to government are high.

When Americans are grouped by expressly religious categories, some differences emerge. Surprisingly, however, support for unlimited religious-based work exemptions did not receive majority support from any religious demographic. Only 29% of Protestants expressed support for exemptions “even if the cost and inconvenience are high,” as did only 25% of those who identify

as born-again or evangelical Christians, 27% of those who say religion is “very important” in their lives, and 27% of those who report praying several times per day.

While this survey cannot claim to represent the opinions of smaller religious groups, it does capture the opinions of 128 people who identify with religions other than the largest Christian denominations. Even among this amalgam of people, many of whom may celebrate holidays that fall outside of the Christian holidays often reflected as official work holidays, only about one-quarter support unfettered access to religious work exemptions.

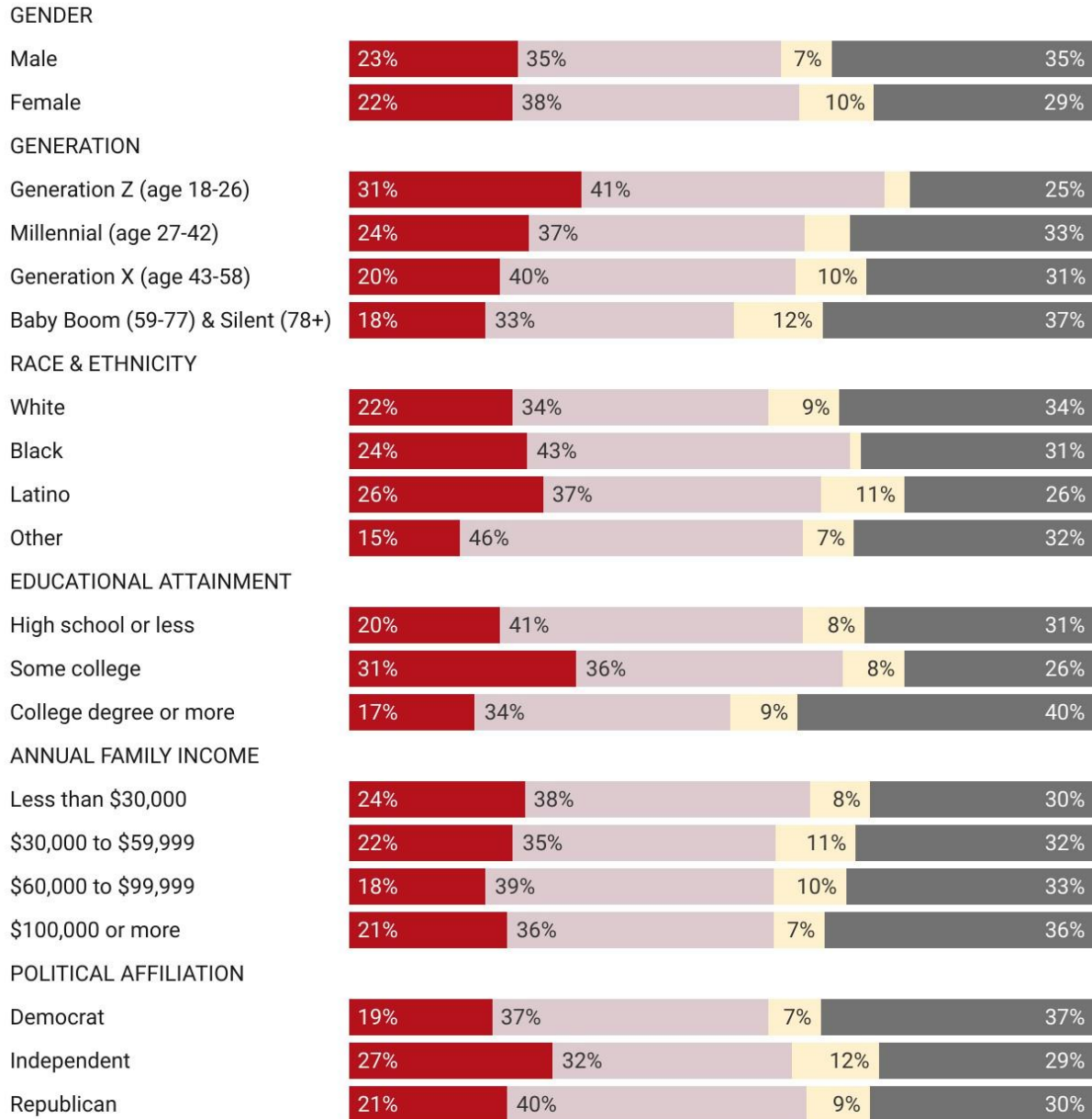
Penn State’s Nelson noted, “It’s surprising how consistent Americans’ stances on this issue are regardless of their religiosity. I would have expected to see that people for whom religion is an important part of their life to be much more likely to think that government should accommodate them even when those accommodations are costly.”

That said, religious work exemptions receive somewhat less support among less religious groups. For example, 39% of those who say religion is “not at all” important to their lives and 39% of those who pray only seldom or never indicate that government workers should not receive religion-based work exemptions.

Opinions on religious work exemptions by demographic groupings

"The Supreme Court is considering expanding the rights of employees to request work exemptions based on their sincere religious belief or practice. Thinking of employees who work for the federal, state or a local government, which of the following policies would you prefer?"

■ Should, even if high cost & inconvenience
 ■ Should, but only if minimal cost & inconvenience
 ■ Other
 ■ Should NOT receive religion-based exemption



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023. N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

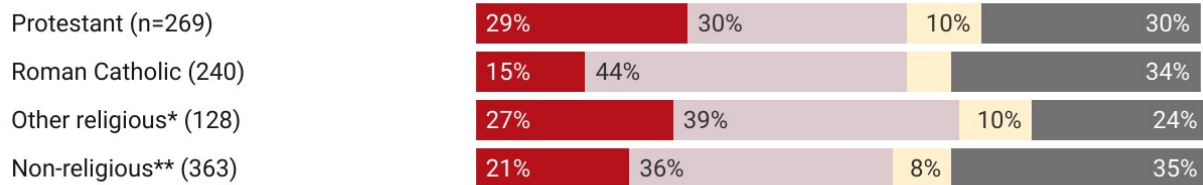
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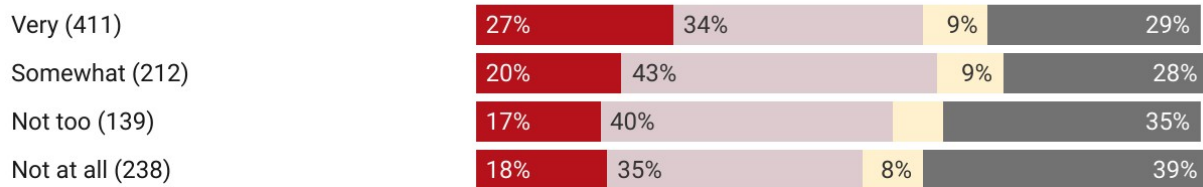
RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION



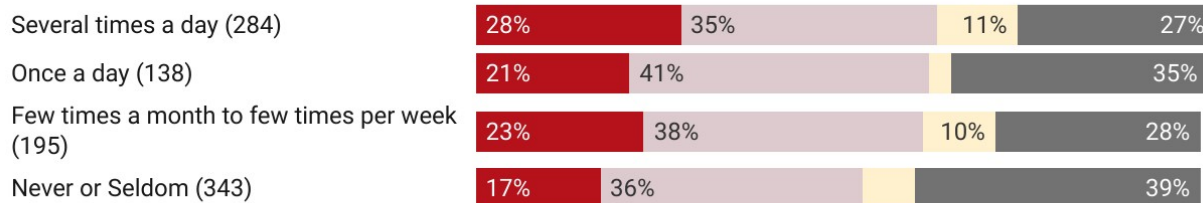
BORN-AGAIN STATUS



IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION



FREQUENCY OF PRAYER



*Includes: Jewish (17), Muslim (17), Mormon (12), Buddhist (7), Eastern or Greek Orthodox (7), Hindu (1), and "something else" (67).

**Includes: Atheist (83), Agnostic (70), and "nothing in particular" (210).

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, May 12-18, 2023.

N=1,000 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ±3.6 percentage points; larger for subgroups.

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About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,000 individuals who completed the May 2023 Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

Survey questions used in this report

Penn State's nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative Mood of the Nation Poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.¹

To assess American adults' opinions about religious work exemptions, survey respondents were asked to respond to the following question in May 2023:

- The Supreme Court is considering expanding the rights of employees to request work exemptions based on their sincere religious belief or practice. Thinking of employees who work for the federal, state or a local government, which of the following policies would you prefer?
 - Government employees should not receive religion-based exemptions.
 - Government employees should receive religion-based exemptions, but only if the cost and inconvenience are minimal to the government.
 - Government employees should receive religion-based exemptions, even if the cost and inconvenience are high for the local government.
 - Other

Note that the order in which the answer options were presented was rotated to avoid possible order effects. Also note that the survey included other questions, some of which will be reported separately.

¹ For additional information about the Mood of the Nation Poll see the appendix to this brief. For additional details about this survey's methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/mood-of-the-nation-poll-motn>

To see whether Americans’ opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), generation (Silent or Boomer; X; Millennial; Z), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Other), educational attainment (three categories), family income (four categories), religiosity (born-again, not born-again) and political affiliation (self-identified Republican, Independent, Democrat, as derived from self-placement on a seven-category scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” to “Strong Republican”).²

The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

² As a nationally-representative sample with no oversamples this survey is unable to adequately represent the experiences and opinions of smaller groups such as those identifying as LGBTQ, Indigenous Americans, or those affiliating with smaller political parties. The opinions of people from these and other small groups are represented in the findings, but we generally do not separate out the responses from groups with fewer than 100 respondents since the margin of error associated with small samples is so large as to render the associated findings (point estimates) potentially misleading.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within the American Public Media Group that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan. Our tagline is *bringing facts into focus*.

The Lab is a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abides by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

Contact: info@apmresearchlab.org | apmresearchlab.org

About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

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Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab and Mood of the Nation Poll Director Eric Plutzer who also designed the questions.

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