

# Religious Activity and Political Affiliation in Tom Green County

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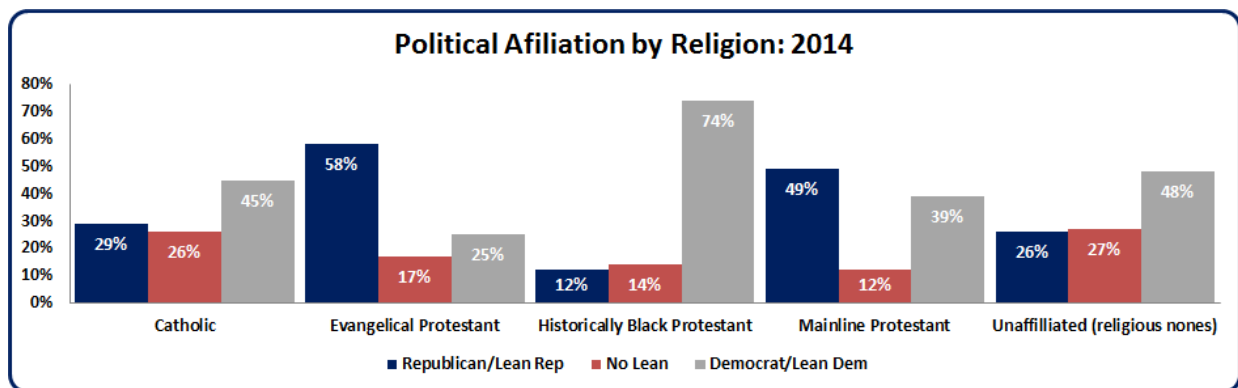
Local Democratic Party chair David Currie recently shared a view on the deteriorating separation of church and state in the Standard Times. “Remember when,” Currie beckoned to local voters, “You felt the Democratic Party left you by abandoning the sensible center and going too far left, so you became Republicans.” “Well, pay attention,” he continued, “the Republican Party has now left you by also abandoning the sensible center and going so far right it’s gone off the deep end.” “Tea Party/religious right ‘Republicans’ are leading the way off the deep end according to Currie.

It was such an intriguing rant because it highlighted the relevance of our efforts this month to examine evidence of relationships between religious affiliations and political activity in Tom Green County. At first, the search for data that could reveal relationships at the local county level proved challenging.

Accurate data on local voting results is no problem, but finding quality data on religious characteristics of local populations is challenging. Despite Thomas Jefferson’s advocacy of the wall of separation between church and state, census takers started asking questions on religion in the 1850s and continued for the next century. Amidst rising concerns about overstepping the Constitution’s boundaries separating church and state, the topic was dropped in the 1960 Census, and Congress wrote a prohibition into law during the 1970s.

National polls often collect data about religious affiliation, beliefs, and attitudes, but most polls do not provide details about religious features of states or local areas. One exception is the Pew Research Center’s (PRC) Religious Landscape survey in 2014.

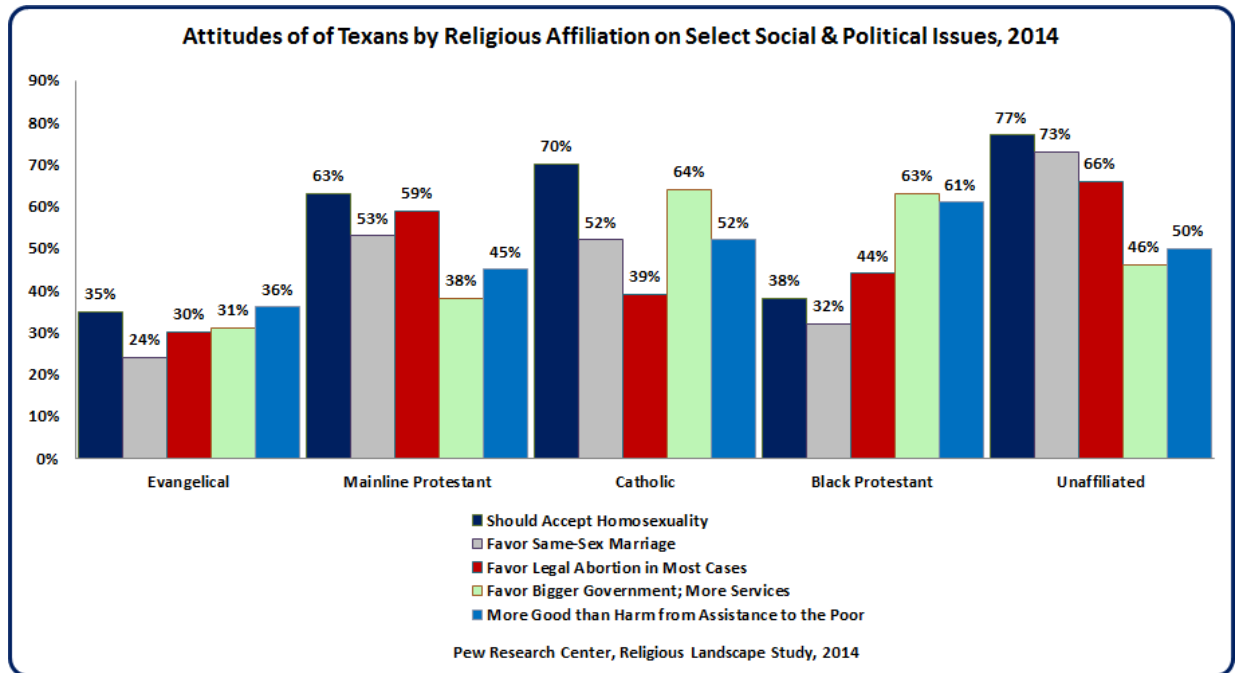
The 35,071 respondents to this survey included 2,535 Texans, and these state-level results are informative about about Texas communities in general. The study asked Texans about their religious beliefs and practices, as well as their social and political views. PRC also included Unaffiliated folks who answer “none” when asked about their religion.



Nearly six in ten Evangelical protestants and 49% of the Mainline Protestants in Texas identified with the Republican Party. Other traditional religious groups in the PRC study, including the

Unaffiliated, identified as Democrat.

Still, the degree of similarity between Texas Evangelicals and Black Protestants on the hot-button social issues concerning homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and legal abortion jumps out of the PRC study. Significant majorities, ranging from 65% to 76% of these groups, expressed negative views on these issues.



Religiously Unaffiliated Texans stand in sharp contrast with 66% or more holding favorable attitudes toward homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and legal abortion. Significant majorities of Mainline Protestants were similarly favorable, and the majority of Catholics also accepted homosexuality and same-sex marriage. On the abortion issue, however, most Catholics mirrored the opposing views of Evangelicals and Black Protestants.

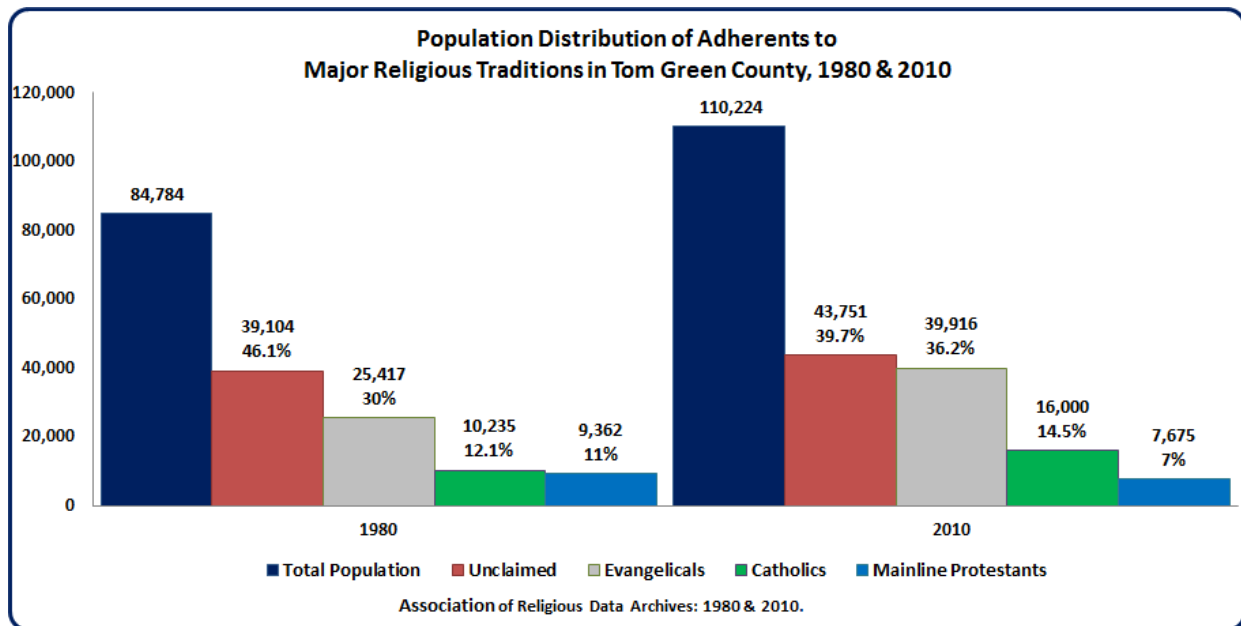
Interestingly, the PRC study reveals a completely different set of alignments on attitudes about the role of government. One view, often associated with Democrats and liberals, is that our nation has many social and economic problems that require a large government providing many services. The opposite idea that we need a smaller government with fewer services often receives Republican and conservative support.

The Pew findings show majorities of Texas Black Protestants and Catholics supporting the idea that society needs a bigger government providing more services. Similarly, the majority of these groups shared the view that assistance to the poor does more good than harm. Again, Evangelicals were at the forefront of the opposition, followed by Mainline Protestants. A small majority of Unaffiliated Texans opposed the idea of big government, while they were evenly split about poverty assistance.

So far, so good! The Pew study is enormously informative for understanding how major Texas faith traditions oppose and align with one another on various issues. These insights, however, do not allow examination of changes over time in the religious affiliations of Tom Green County residents. For this, we turned to the unique dataset available from the Association of Religious

Data Archives (ARDA).

ARDA tracks individuals who affiliate with 236 faith groups at the county level. The timing for ARDA data parallels the U.S. censuses from 1980 through 2010. In addition, ARDA combines specific church groups into faith traditions that correspond to the Evangelicals, Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Black Protestants represented in the Pew survey. Matching the Pew study's Unaffiliated group, ARDA applies the term "Unclaimed" to individuals that are not followers of one of its faith traditions.



As Tom Green County grew from 84,784 residents in 1980 to 110,224 in 2010, ARDA statistics indicate that the Unclaimed group, people not aligned with any of the faith traditions, remained most numerous. Yet, they increased at a slower pace than overall population growth, a fact that resulted in a declining percentage of the Unclaimed from 46.1% of residents in 1980 to 39.7% in 2010.

Evangelicals and Catholics surged between 1980 and 2010. Evangelical congregations, the largest of the local faith traditions, increased from 55 in 1980 to 92 in 2010 as the number of followers swelled by 59% from 25,417 to 39,916. The local Catholic population jumped by 56% from 10,235 in 1980 to 16,000 in 2010. Together, Evangelicals and Catholics combined to form 50.7% of the 2010 population of Tom Green County. This increased from 42.1% in 1980.

Smaller faith groups also flourished between 1980 and 2010. Leading these were Black Protestants and Latter Day Saints. Although few in numbers, these groups are the most rapidly growing religious traditions according to ARDA. Black Protestant congregations garnered 848 followers in 2010, up nearly six-fold from 1980. Latter Day Saints were up nearly four-fold claiming approximately 1,912 adherents in 2010. Various non-denominational congregations also established roots in the local community.

In the wake of these waves of growth, Mainline Protestants diminished. Followers of Mainline congregations fell from 9,362 (11% of the population) in 1980 to 7,675 (7% of the population) in 2010.

These changes in the religious landscape of Tom Green County took place when voters solidified their support for the Republican Party. The local history of voting in presidential elections is one way to tell the story. Overall, Tom Green County elections for US president have favored Republican candidates by an average of 65.4% since 1980.

Starting in 1980, local voters supported Ronald Reagan by 60.7%. Then, in 1984, voters went all-in favoring the Republican President with 72.5% of the vote. Votes for George H.W. Bush softened to 63.1% in 1988, and later abandoned the Republican in 1992 with only 40.8%. The turn away from Bush was not for a Democrat, but for the third-party candidacy of Ross Perot.

A 55.2% majority of local voters returned to support the Republican Bob Dole in 1996. After that, support for Republican presidential candidates scaled up to 71.4% for George W. Bush's first term in 2000, and has not fallen below 70% of Tom Green County voters since.

Of course, the obvious correlation between our changing religious landscape and voting cannot prove that "Tea Party/religious right 'Republicans'" are leading things "off the deep end," as Currie says. His claim must be left to the political judgment of the people at election times, and as political scientists know too well, that judgement is subject to a host of causes.

Still, the fact that strong growth of Evangelicals and Catholics in the local population correlates with hardening voter support for Republicans means that the beliefs, attitudes, and issues shared within and between followers of these faiths reinforces the local voting trend. We think there is a deeper meaning of the correlation between religious change and politics.

Father Pat Conroy is the Jesuit priest who has served as U.S. House of Representatives Chaplain since 2011. He surrendered a resignation letter to House Speaker Paul Ryan in mid-April, and Ryan later told House colleagues his dismissal had nothing to do with religion or politics.

Weeks later, buoyed by a bipartisan backlash from more than 140 Catholics in the House, Father Conroy rescinded, claiming he had been pressured by the Speaker's staff when he agreed to resign. Ryan swore Father Conroy back in as the Chaplain on May 8.

A turn-of-events like these hardly rise to a level of controversy in today's grotesque political climate. Indeed, its nonchalant acceptance as commonplace business-as-usual illustrates how Jefferson's wall of separation between church and state is crumbling in Washington DC.

The hardening of local voter support for Republican Party politics in the local community, in part via its correlation to local religious change shows that the crumbling wall is not limited to Washington.

The iconic science fiction writer Robert Heinlein commented, "Almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so." To this, it is difficult to say, amen.