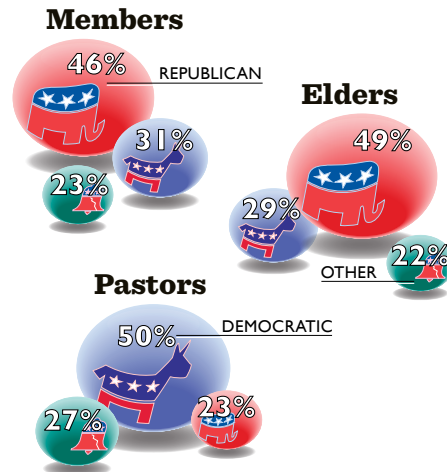


Presbyterians split politically



Presbyterian political affiliation



Research Services has asked Presbyterians to state their political preferences every three years since 1987. Here are some findings:

- **Almost half of members (46 percent) and elders (49 percent) are Republicans**, according to the most recent survey (2008), compared to only 23 percent of pastors.
- **Half of pastors (50 percent) are Democrats**, in contrast to less than a third of members (31 percent) and elders (29 percent).
- **About one in four Presbyterians, regardless of grouping, are Independents** (members, 20 percent; elders, 20 percent; pastors, 25 percent) or identify with a minor political party (3 percent; 2 percent; 1 percent).
- **Political preferences among Presbyterians have remained relatively stable** since 1987. The main trend has been a modest decline in the percentage of Republicans in the last decade, but without much corresponding increase in the percentage of Democrats.
- **Religious beliefs are strongly related to political preference.** Among members, for example, 26 percent of Democrats, but 50 percent of Republicans, agree that “only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved.”

What the research shows

Some people are bothered when our surveys ask about their political preference or other social characteristics. We’re a church, right? Why ask about something unrelated to religious belief or practice?

The answer, as these results show, is that it is impossible to separate faith from other aspects that make us who we are. Had I displayed the political preferences of elders and pastors without labeling them thus, it may have surprised readers that these two groups of people share leadership of congregations in the same religious denomination. Yet they do, and isn’t this information important for those developing session training materials, or trying to match pastors with congregations?

We may all be Presbyterians, but that is just one characteristic among many that defines each of us, and it is intertwined with political identification, age, gender and many others to make us who we are. The fact that beliefs are correlated with political preference highlights this point.

These results probably come as no surprise to most readers. My guess is that many can recall a meeting or situation where political perspectives or other non-religious considerations seemed more influential to some participants than church teachings. That’s one reason why, to understand the church, we need social scientists as well as theologians.

» Other findings

www.pcusa.org/research

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