

POLITICS AND MEDIA SHAPE VIEWS OF ‘WAR ON CHRISTMAS’

Over the past few years, the existence of a “War on Christmas” has been a talking point for both liberals and conservatives, with some conservative commentators claiming that there has been a concerted effort to remove religious elements from the holidays, and liberal commentators disputing these claims. Results from the most recent national survey from Fairleigh Dickinson University’s PublicMind show that the American people generally think religion should be part of the holiday, though there’s disagreement about whether politicians are trying to remove religion from Christmas. Political views play a big role in how Americans see these issues, as do media sources, with Fox News viewers being more concerned about the role of religion in the holidays, and MSNBC and ‘Daily Show’ viewers tending to favor religion-neutral celebrations.

Two-thirds of Americans (67%) say that they prefer people to say “Merry Christmas,” with only 18 percent saying that they’d rather hear “Happy Holidays.” Another 15 percent say that they’re indifferent, or would rather people not say anything. Like many of the issues around the holidays, though, Christmas greetings have become politicized -- 82 percent of Republicans prefer “Merry Christmas,” compared with only 55 percent of Democrats.

Support for “Happy Holidays” is greatest among young people: 30 percent of Americans under the age of 30 say that they’d rather hear the more neutral greeting compared with only about 15 percent of Americans in older age categories. Similarly, 71 percent of people over the age of 45 say that they prefer “Merry Christmas.”

“For some people, ‘Happy Holidays’ versus ‘Merry Christmas’ is an important symbolic issue,” said Dan Cassino, a professor of political science at Fairleigh Dickinson and an analyst for the poll. “But, as with a lot of cultural issues, it just doesn’t seem to have relevance for younger Americans.”

In the most direct measure of whether Americans think that there has been a “War on Christmas,” respondents in the poll were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “there has been a concerted effort by politicians to take ‘Christ’ out of Christmas.” Twenty-eight percent of Americans agreed, with most of those, 21 percent, agreeing with the statement

“strongly.” Republicans were much more likely to think that politicians are trying to remove ‘Christ’ from the holiday -- 40 percent agree with the statement, compared to just 16 percent of Democrats. This is also an issue on which African-Americans are at odds with Democrats. Twenty-seven percent of African-Americans say that politicians have been trying to take religion out of the holiday, 11 points higher than among Democrats, and 16 points higher than Hispanics.

“In terms of politics, people tend to think of African-Americans as just being strong Democrats,” said Cassino. “But that misses a lot of the differences between whites and African-Americans, especially on issues tinged with religion.”

Schools are another fault line in the debate over the proper role of religion in the holidays: only 26 percent of Americans say that schools should have non-religious holiday events, rather than Christmas-themed pageants and displays, a figure that includes 36 percent of Democrats, but only 16 percent of Republicans. About half of Americans (46%) strongly disagree with this statement, including 63 percent of Republicans. The biggest support for non-religious holiday pageants comes from the youngest respondents: 41 percent of Americans under the age of 30 think school events should eschew religion.

“At this point, it isn’t clear whether younger Americans are less concerned with the role of religion because of generational differences, or because they’re just less likely to have kids,” said Cassino.

Two in three Americans (66%) strongly agree with the statement that towns and cities should be able to put up manger scenes, even if it offends some people; 84 percent agree with the statement overall. Disagreement saying that towns shouldn’t be able to put up manger scenes is almost non-existent among Republicans, with only 2 percent disagreeing, compared with 23 percent of Democrats.

Media choices play a role in these views as well. For instance, 28 percent of respondents who said that they’ve watched MSNBC in the past seven days, and 33 percent of those who have watched a comedy news show, like “The Daily Show,” say that schools should have non-religious holiday events. Among Fox News viewers, the figure is only 21 percent. Similarly, 31 percent of Fox viewers agree that politicians are trying to take ‘Christ’ out of ‘Christmas,’ compared with just 25 percent of MSNBC viewers, and 23 percent of “Daily Show” watchers.

“The biggest differences aren’t between Fox News and MSNBC,” said Cassino. “They’re between Fox News and ‘The Daily Show.’ Given that these sources tend to be strongly tied to age, it’s not clear if we’re seeing the effect of the media, or the just the effects of age.”

Despite all of these disagreements, there is one thing that Americans can agree on: Christmas in America today is more about consumerism than religion. Eighty-nine percent agree that, “In America today, the holiday season is more about presents and consumerism than religious beliefs.” Only eight percent of Americans disagree, with Republicans and Democrats about equally pessimistic.

The Fairleigh Dickinson University poll of 1,002 aged 18 and older who reside in the United States was conducted by telephone with both landline and cell phones from December 9 through December 15, 2013, and has a margin of error of +/-3.1 percentage points.

Methodology, questions, and tables on the web at: <http://publicmind.fdu.edu>

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Methodology

The most recent survey by Fairleigh Dickinson University’s PublicMind was conducted by telephone from December 9 through December 15, 2013 using a randomly selected sample of 1,002 individuals aged 18 and older who reside in the United States. One can be 95 percent confident that the error attributable to sampling has a range of +/- 3.1 percentage points. The margin of error for subgroups is larger and varies by the size of that subgroup. Survey results are also subject to non-sampling error. This kind of error, which cannot be measured, arises from a number of factors including, but not limited to, non-response (eligible individuals refusing to be interviewed), question wording, the order in which questions are asked, and variations among interviewers.

PublicMind interviews are conducted by Opinion America of Cedar Knolls, NJ, with professionally trained interviewers using a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. Random selection is achieved by computerized random-digit dialing. This technique gives every person with a landline phone number (including those with unlisted numbers) an equal chance of being selected.

Landline households are supplemented with a separate, randomly selected sample of cell-phone respondents interviewed in the same time frame. The total combined sample is mathematically weighted to match known demographics of age, race and gender.

Tables

Which holiday greeting do you prefer?												
		PID			Media Choice in past week				Age			
	All	Dem	Ind	Rep	Fox News	MSNBC	Daily Show	NPR	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Merry Christmas	67%	55	64	82	74	60	55	63	58	67	71	70
Happy Holidays	18%	27	16	10	13	24	22	18	30	16	14	15
Neither/both (vol)	15%	17	20	8	13	16	22	18	12	17	14	15
DK/Ref (vol)	0%	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0

There has been a concerted effort by politicians to take 'Christ' out of Christmas.												
		PID			Media Choice in past week				Age			
	All	Dem	Ind	Rep	Fox News	MSNBC	Daily Show	NPR	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Agree (net)	28%	16	35	40	31	25	23	27	24	35	28	26
Agree Somewhat	8%	6	12	7	6	8	8	8	12	10	5	4
Agree Strongly	21%	10	23	33	24	17	14	19	12	25	23	22
Disagree (net)	65%	78	56	56	64	69	70	65	69	56	67	69
Disagree Somewhat	11%	18	6	5	8	13	18	17	19	9	8	9
Disagree Strongly	54%	60	50	51	56	56	52	49	50	47	59	60
DK/Ref (vol)	7%	6	9	4	4	5	6	6	8	9	5	5

There has been a concerted effort by politicians to take 'Christ' out of Christmas.				
		Race/Ethnic Group		
	All	White	African-American	Hispanic
Agree (net)	28%	32	27	10
Agree Somewhat	8%	8	8	8
Agree Strongly	21%	25	20	1
Disagree (net)	65%	61	70	83
Disagree Somewhat	11%	12	14	7
Disagree Strongly	54%	50	56	77
DK/Ref (vol)	7%	7	3	7

Schools should have non-religious holiday events, rather than Christmas-themed pageants and displays.												
		PID			Media Choice in past week				Age			
	All	Dem	Ind	Rep	Fox News	MSNBC	Daily Show	NPR	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Agree (net)	26%	36	23	16	21	28	33	30	41	24	20	23
Agree Somewhat	13%	21	9	7	9	17	17	14	28	10	8	9
Agree Strongly	13%	15	14	9	12	11	16	16	13	14	12	13
Disagree (net)	65%	55	67	78	71	63	57	61	50	65	74	70
Disagree Somewhat	19%	20	24	15	15	15	24	19	22	19	20	14
Disagree Strongly	46%	35	43	63	56	48	33	42	27	46	54	56
DK/Ref (vol)	9%	8	10	6	8	8	9	8	9	11	6	8

Towns and cities should be able to put up manger scenes, even if it offends some people.												
	All	PID			Media Choice in past week				Age			
		Dem	Ind	Rep	Fox News	MSNBC	Daily Show	NPR	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Agree (net)	84%	74	84	97	90	81	73	80	82	87	82	88
Agree Somewhat	19%	24	17	13	16	17	29	24	30	18	14	14
Agree Strongly	66%	50	67	84	74	63	44	56	52	69	69	74
Disagree (net)	13%	23	12	2	9	16	25	18	13	11	17	10
Disagree Somewhat	6%	11	8	2	5	8	11	8	8	6	7	5
Disagree Strongly	7%	13	4	1	5	8	14	10	5	5	10	6
DK/Ref(vol)	3%	3	4	1	1	3	2	1	5	2	1	2

In America today, the holiday season is much more about presents and consumerism than religious belief												
	All	PID			Media Choice in past week				Age			
		Dem	Ind	Rep	Fox News	MSNBC	Daily Show	NPR	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Agree (net)	89%	89	91	89	89	91	93	89	92	90	89	86
Agree Somewhat	16%	13	16	20	15	17	11	13	15	17	14	19
Agree Strongly	73%	76	75	69	74	74	82	76	76	73	75	67
Disagree (net)	8%	8	5	10	8	7	6	8	7	5	8	11
Disagree Somewhat	3%	2	4	3	2	1	2	3	3	2	3	2
Disagree Strongly	5%	5	2	7	6	6	4	5	4	3	5	9
DK/Ref(vol)	3%	3	4	1	2	2	1	2	1	5	3	3

Exact Question Wording and Order

US1 through US5 released December 18, 2013

M1 We're very interested in how people are getting their news about national politics and elections.

Which of the following news sources have you watched, listened to, or read in the past seven days...

[Rotate Order of items]

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 DK

M1A CNN

M1B MSNBC

M1C Fox News Channel

M1D A Sunday morning talk show

M1E National Public Radio

M1F A network evening news program

M1G A comedy news show, such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

M1H Talk radio

MII A national or local newspaper

USS1 through USS4 held for future release

NFL1 through NFL6 held for future release

MMA1 through MMA6 held for future release

We'd like to ask you a few questions about how we celebrate Christmas and the holiday season in America today. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

Note to programmer: If respondent says s/he doesn't celebrate Christmas or any holiday, please say "That's okay. You may still have opinions that we'd like to hear"

- 1 Agree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Unsure (vol)
- 8 DK/Refused (vol)

Would that be somewhat or strongly?

- 1 Somewhat
- 2 Strongly
- 8 DK/Refused (vol)

X1. Schools should have non-religious holiday events, rather than Christmas-themed pageants and displays.

X2. There has been a concerted effort by politicians to take "Christ" out of Christmas.

X3. Towns and cities should be able to put up manger scenes, even if it offends some people.

X4. In America today, the holiday season is much more about presents and consumerism than religious beliefs.

X5 Which holiday greeting do you prefer? [Rotate Merry Xmas and Happy Holidays]

- 1 Merry Christmas
- 2 Happy Holidays
- 3 Both/neither (vol)
- 8 DK/Refused (vol)

Sample characteristics

Gender

Male	49
Female	51

Age

18-29	22
30-44	26
45-59	28
60+	24
Refused	1

Race/Ethnicity

White	70
Black/African-American	12
Latino or Hispanic	12
Asian	2
Other/refused	4

Party identification

Democrat/Lean Democrat	41
Independent/DK/refused	25
Republican/Lean Republican	34