

OMGUS Survey on Attitudes toward Religion and the Church (March 8, 1946)

Abstract

After the war, traditional confessional bonds in Germany began to dissolve slowly. The resettlement of refugees and expellees altered the ratio of Catholics and Protestants in many regions. This poll was conducted in the American zone in March 1946; it shows that Germans rejected both direct church involvement in political questions and church endorsements of candidates or parties in elections – two things that had once been customary. Regular churchgoing Catholics exhibited a clear preference for the newly founded CDU/CSU, whereas regular churchgoing Protestants supported the SPD and the CDU/CSU in roughly equal numbers.

Source

Attitudes toward Religion and the Church as Political Factors in German Life

Sample: 996 persons in the American Zone.

Interviewing dates: 8 March 1946. (11 pp.)

The survey focuses upon the attitudes of four major groups in the AMZON population: regular churchgoing Catholics and Protestants, and irregular churchgoing Catholics and Protestants. Some of the characteristics of these groups are important in that they shed light on the attitudinal patterns of their representatives. Among Catholics, 65 per cent said they attended church regularly. Fifty per cent of the Protestants claimed regular attendance. Seventy-one per cent of the regular churchgoing Catholics preferred the CSU or the CDU. Among regular churchgoing Protestants, 38 per cent supported the SPD; 40 per cent, the two Christian parties (CDU and CSU). The irregular churchgoing members of both faiths were predominately SPD supporters. Sixty-three per cent of the LDP supporters were irregular churchgoers. More of those who regularly attended church (74%) took part in the previous elections than nonchurchgoers (59%).

Former Nazis tended to be nonchurchgoers. Of the regular churchgoers interviewed, 12 per cent formerly belonged to the NSDAP; 17 per cent of the nonchurchgoers were former members. Hence, former NSDAP members, who were not allowed to vote, increased disproportionately the size of the nonvoting groups reported. Forty-nine per cent of regular churchgoing Catholics had seven or less years of education. About one-fourth of the other groups were similarly educated. Twenty per cent of the regular churchgoers of both faiths had attended nine or more years of school, while 28 per cent of the irregular churchgoers had been similarly educated.

Members of each of the two major religious faiths generally refrained from criticism of the other church's lack of opposition to the Nazis. Criticism that did develop stemmed mostly from irregular churchgoers of both faiths. While 70 per cent of the regular churchgoing Catholics stated that the Church had done its utmost to offer resistance to the National Socialists during their regime, only 47 per cent of regular churchgoing Protestants made a similar claim. Only among regular churchgoing Catholics did a majority believe that the clergy had warned them of the dangers of voting for National Socialism. Among irregular churchgoing Catholics a plurality (35%) stated that there were still Nazis among the clergy. Most members of the other three groups denied this fact. It appears that a fairly large percentage of respondents replied in a prejudiced fashion in an attempt to stem criticism of their own church.

Important groups in the population felt that religion was a real force in the reconstruction of Germany. But support of religion as a moral force in life was distinguished from support of the church when it plays a political role. A plurality (43%) of the entire population believed that the church was taking part in political affairs at that time. Seventy per cent, however, felt that the church should be less interested in political affairs. Major opposition was also expressed to instruction by the clergy in regard to voting in an election or support for particular political parties. Support for the reconstitution of another *Zentrum* party was found among 32 per cent of regular churchgoing Catholics. As many Catholic women favored as opposed the suggested move. But all other characteristic groups expressed strong opposition. Underscoring the minimal interchurch rivalry found, more members of all groups studied thought that Catholics and Protestants would be able to cooperate successfully in a "Christian" political party than denied this possibility.

A large majority of the general population felt that the military government had given sufficient and appropriate support to the church.

Source: A. J. and R. L. Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany. The OMGUS Surveys*. Urbana, IL, 1970, pp. 81–83.

Recommended Citation: OMGUS Survey on Attitudes toward Religion and the Church (March 8, 1946), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-3876>> [April 29, 2025].