

Has Obama Helped Improve Race Relations in America?

Race relations in America are better than they used to be. And most Americans see diversity as a good thing.

But there's still a long way to go, according to two new surveys from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

Researchers asked 1,000 Americans and 1,000 Protestant pastors about their views on race relations. They found many Americans have mixed feelings about the state of racial diversity in the United States.

Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research, says Americans are still adapting to the nation's demographic shifts.

In 1960, 89 percent of Americans were white, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Today, America is much more diverse. Fewer than two-thirds of Americans—and just over half of schoolchildren—are Non-Hispanic whites. By 2050, no one group will be a majority.

That's a big change, says McConnell, and one Americans are still trying to sort through. The fallout from the deaths of Mike Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York have increased tension about racial relations.

"Recent high-profile cases highlight the lack of understanding, respect and trust that remain between races," he says.

Among the research findings:

Eight in 10 Americans (82 percent) say racial diversity is good for the country. One in 7 (14 percent) disagree.

Three-quarters of Americans (74 percent) agree with the statement, "We have come so far on racial relations." About a quarter disagree (23 percent).

But few are satisfied with the state of race relations. Eight in 10 (81 percent) agree with the statement, "We've got so far to go on racial relations." One in 6 (16 percent) disagree.

LifeWay Research found support across ethnic groups for the statement, "We've come so far on racial relations." Three-quarters of whites (74 percent), African-Americans (74 percent) and Hispanic-Americans (73 percent) all agree.

However, says McConnell, some African-Americans take issue with that statement. One in 6 (17 percent) strongly disagree, compared to 11 percent of whites and 5 percent of Hispanics.

There are similar differences in intensity of responses to the statement, "We've got so far to go on racial relations."

Fifty-seven percent of African-Americans strongly agree. That drops to 39 percent of whites and 42 percent of Hispanics.

"On the surface, most Americans agree that racial reconciliation matters," says Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research. "But we're divided about how important this issue is. For many white Americans, progress on issues of race is a good thing but not urgent. For many African-Americans, it's front and center."

Younger Americans—those 18 to 24—are the most optimistic about race relations. Almost 9 in 10 (88 percent) say diversity is good for the country. And most (84 percent) agree with the statement, "We've come so far on racial relations."

Older Americans are a bit more skeptical. About three-quarters (76 percent) of those over 65 say diversity is good for the country. Seven out of 10 (71 percent) of those 45 to 54 say the nation has come far on racial relations.

Whites (85 percent) are more likely to agree that diversity is good for the country than African-Americans (75 percent) or Hispanic-Americans (74 percent). Christians (80 percent) are less likely than the Nones (89 percent) to see diversity as a good thing.

As other polls have shown, LifeWay Research found few Americans believe race relations have improved since the election of President Barack Obama. About half (49 percent) say race relations have stayed the same. Three in 10 (29 percent) believe relations are more strained. About 1 of 7 (15 percent) say things have improved.

About a quarter of African-Americans (23 percent) say relations have improved since Obama's election. That drops to 1 in 7 (14 percent) for whites.

Faith Still Matters in Race Relations

Christian pastors and other religious leaders took a leading role during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Many Americans say those leaders still fill an important role today.

"Christian leaders have the opportunity to influence millions of Americans to value each and every person no matter their race," says McConnell.

Two-thirds (65 percent) of U.S. adults say religious leaders play a positive role in race relations in the United States. About 3 in 10 (30 percent) disagree, while 5 percent are not sure.

Evangelicals (74 percent) and Christians (71 percent) are most likely to say religious leaders have a positive role in race relations. Those of other faiths (56 percent) and the Nones (46 percent) are more skeptical.

Hispanic-Americans (57 percent) are less likely to agree than whites (67 percent) or African-Americans (72 percent).

For their part, Protestant senior pastors see a close connection between diversity and the central message of Christianity.

Nine of out 10 pastors (90 percent) agree with the statement: "Racial reconciliation is mandated by the gospel." Only 6 percent disagree.

Lifeway Research found this connection between the Gospel and racial reconciliation has widespread support among pastors.

Most evangelical (90 percent) and Mainline (93 percent) pastors agree. Pastors of smaller churches (83 percent) and those from larger congregations (95 percent) also agree. About 3 out of 4 (76 percent) African-American pastors and 9 in 10 (91 percent) white pastors say racial reconciliation is mandated by the Gospel.

Many pastors have hands-on experience working on diversity. About 3 out of 4 (72 percent) say their church is "personally involved at the local level in addressing racial reconciliation." A quarter disagree (23 percent). Four percent are not sure.

Pastors of larger congregations—those with more than 250 attendees—are more likely to agree (79 percent) than pastors whose churches have less than 50 in attendance (66 percent).

African-American pastors (93 percent) are more likely to agree their church is involved in racial reconciliation than white pastors (71 percent).

Previous Lifeway Research studies found most pastors say their congregations should reflect the racial makeup of their community. But few have diverse flocks.

More than 8 in 10 (86 percent) say their congregation is made up of one predominant racial or ethnic group, according to a Lifeway Research study released in January 2014. The latest

wave of the National Congregations Study found similar results.

“If pastors want to lead a movement of racial reconciliation, they need to make sure their members are following,’ says McConnell. “If church members are not inviting and welcoming people of other ethnic groups, their reconciliation efforts are not taking root.”