

CHAPTER I

Religion and Demography

More than two-thirds (68%) of Hispanics are Roman Catholics. The next largest category, at 15%, is made up of born-again or evangelical Protestants. Although their numbers are increasing, the share of Latino evangelical Protestants is smaller than it is in either the white or black communities.¹

Seculars — those who do not identify with a specific religious affiliation or who say they are atheists or agnostics — make up 8% of the Latino population. The rest, about one-tenth of the total, are mostly spread among various Protestant and other Christian denominations. Only a handful of Hispanics — less than 1% of the population — identify with Judaism and other non-Christian faiths.

Among Latinos, differences in religious identification coincide with important differences in demographic characteristics, beginning with nativity. In the Hispanic foreign-born population, for example, 74% of adults identify as Catholic compared with 58% of the native born.²

Hence the demographic composition of religious congregations also differs. While about two-thirds (68%) of Hispanic Catholics are foreign born, among Latino evangelicals just a bit more than half (55%) are immigrants.

Given the differences in nativity, it is not surprising that Latino Catholics are less likely to speak English and tend to be less educated and poorer than Hispanics of other religious traditions.

Religious affiliation also varies somewhat by country of origin. For example, the share of Catholics among Latinos who trace their ancestry to Mexico is larger than among those of Puerto Rican origins, a group with a higher percentage of evangelicals.³

This chapter describes the demographic characteristics of religious affiliation among Hispanics and provides a demographic profile of the major religious traditions. It concludes with a set of demographic projections that estimate changes in Hispanic religious affiliation through 2030 and their impact on the Catholic Church.

¹ In this report, the terms “white” and “black” are applied to persons who are not of Hispanic origin, and the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably.

² The category “native born” is applied to Hispanics who were born in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. “Foreign born” consists of Hispanics born outside the U.S. and in Puerto Rico; the latter are U.S. citizens by birth but on a variety of characteristics relevant to this analysis more nearly resemble the immigrant population.

³ Country-of-origin determinations for both native- and foreign-born Latinos are based on the question: “Now I want to ask you about you and your family’s heritage. Are you Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Salvadoran or are you and your ancestors from another country?”

Determining Religious Affiliation

This study uses a two-stage process to determine the religious affiliation of survey respondents. The first produces a sorting according to denomination. It is based on a sequence of questions that asks respondents to broadly identify their religion, if any. Then non-Catholic Christians are asked to specify the denomination, if any, with which they are affiliated. In the next stage, all Christians are asked whether they would describe themselves as “a born-again or evangelical Christian.” The answers to that question are combined with the information on affiliation with denominations from the first stage to sort all respondents into six categories of religious traditions. This methodology has been used extensively in many other Pew surveys, including surveys of the general population, allowing for robust comparisons with non-Hispanics.

Denominations and religious tradition

While 68% of Hispanics identify themselves as Catholic, most other Latinos are scattered among a variety of Protestant denominations, with no one denomination capturing more than 7% of the total. Fewer than one-in-ten Latinos (8%) say that they are atheist or agnostic or that they have no specific religious affiliation; they are termed “seculars” for purposes of this study. This mix of denominations, particularly the predominance of Catholicism, sharply distinguishes Latinos from the rest of the U.S. population.

According to a survey of the entire U.S. population conducted in July 2006 by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (Pew 2006 U.S. Religion Survey), non-Hispanics are more widely distributed among various denominations. Among whites (the term is used in this study to refer to non-Hispanics) 22% are Catholic and 17% are Baptists and no other denomination captures more than 10%, although 11% of whites identify themselves as secular. Among blacks (again referring to non-Hispanics), the largest denomination is Baptist (46%). All data on non-Hispanics in this chapter are drawn from the Pew 2006 U.S. Religion Survey.

Born-again Christians

Aside from denomination, another key measure of religious identity among Latinos is whether they describe themselves as “born again” or “evangelical.” Among Latino Christians, who comprise 99% of Latinos who profess a religious faith, 39% say they use those terms to describe themselves. That includes 28% of Catholics and 70% of non-Catholic Christians.

Figure 1.1
Denominational Distribution by Race/Ethnicity

	% who are...		
	Hispanics	Non-Hispanic Whites [†]	Non-Hispanic Blacks [†]
Catholic	67.6%	22.4%	4.2%
Protestant	19.6	57.1	82.9
Pentecostal	6.9	3.2	10.3
Baptist	3.1	16.7	46.2
Independent/ Nondenominational	3	6.2	6.1
Congregational/ Church of Christ	0.7	2.2	3.1
Presbyterian	0.3	3.4	2.8
Methodist	0.3	9.2	5.4
Lutheran	0.2	6.3	0
Episcopalian	0.2	1.7	0.4
Reformed	0	0.6	0
Something else	2.3	3.8	5.4
Nothing in particular	1.5	3.7	3.2
DK/Refused	1.1	0.1	0
Other Christians[‡]	2.7	2.3	0
Jehovah's Witness [‡]	1.9	N/A	N/A
Mormon	0.7	1.7	0
Orthodox	0.1	0.6	0
Other Faiths	0.9	4.8	3.7
Secular	7.8	11.4	7.7
DK/Refused	1.1	2.1	1.4

[†]Source: Pew 2006 U.S. Religion Survey

[‡]For non-Hispanics, Jehovah's Witnesses included in Protestant/Something else

Figure 1.1a
Hispanics Who Are Born Again or Evangelical Christians

Among...	% born again or evangelical
All Hispanic Christians	39%
Native-born	37
Foreign-born	40
Catholic	28
Native-born	24
Foreign-born	31
Non-Catholic Christian	70
Native-born	64
Foreign-born	77

Tracking Denominational Distribution

The surveys undertaken for this study, previous surveys conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center and the work of other researchers all point to the same basic distribution of adult Latinos by religious denomination. The consistent finding is that about two-thirds of Latinos are Catholic, about a fifth practice some form of Protestantism and slightly less than a tenth identify as secular.

A 2005 Gallup Poll, for instance, found that 63% of Hispanic adults identified as Catholics, 16% considered themselves some other type of Christian and 6% had no religious affiliation. In 2003, The National Survey of Hispanic Adults, sponsored by The Latino Coalition, determined that 61% of respondents were affiliated with Catholicism. The 2002 General Social Survey identified 63% of Hispanics as Catholic and 20% as Protestant or some other Christian denomination. That survey also identified a relatively high proportion of seculars: 15%.

In 2005, The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University published an analysis of 11 national surveys conducted since 1990, including two Pew surveys, and produced an estimate of 70% for the share of the adult Hispanic population that is Catholic and 20% that is Protestant or other Christian. (The full report, *How Many Hispanics are Catholic? A Review of Survey Data and Methodology*, is available at <http://cara.georgetown.edu/Hispanic%20Catholics.pdf>.)

All of these measures present snapshots of an ongoing, dynamic process marked by population growth and changes in religious affiliation. Simply put, immigration, particularly from Mexico, has added steadily to the number of Latino Catholics. Meanwhile, conversion to other religions, particularly to evangelical Protestantism, has drawn down the number of Catholics. About one-in-ten Latinos was once a Catholic but is no longer holding that affiliation.

Six major religious traditions

For purposes of analysis, the report sorts Latinos into the following six religious traditions. The groupings are based on how respondents identify themselves by denomination and by whether they say they were born again or evangelical:

- **Roman Catholics:** Those who identify themselves as Catholic, regardless of whether they consider themselves born again or evangelical.
- **Evangelical Protestants:** Those who identify themselves as Protestants and say they consider themselves born again or evangelical.
- **Mainline Protestants:** Those who identify themselves as Protestants but do not say they are born again or evangelical.
- **Other Christians:** Those who identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons or Orthodox Christians.

- **Other Faiths:** Those who identify themselves as members of Jewish, Muslim or other non-Christian faiths.
- **Seculars:** Those who say they have no specific religious affiliation or say that they are agnostic or atheist.

Demographic portrait of the major religious traditions

Among Latinos, each of the major religious traditions has a distinct demographic profile. What follows are the highlights; full details can be found in tables at the end of this section.

Catholics

About two-thirds (68%) of Latinos identify as Catholics. More than half of Latino Catholics say Spanish is their primary language, and more than two-thirds are immigrants. The socioeconomic status of Hispanic Catholics is lower than that of other religious traditions.

- More than two-thirds (68%) are foreign born.
- A majority (55%) say Spanish is their primary language.
- A substantial minority (42%) did not graduate from high school.
- Roughly five-in-ten (46%) have a household income of less than \$30,000 per year.⁴

Evangelicals

Nearly one-in-six (15%) Hispanics identify themselves as evangelicals. Hispanic evangelicals are a more native-born population compared with Catholics (46% vs. 32%). Latino evangelicals have a somewhat higher socioeconomic status than Latino Catholics.

- More than half (55%) are foreign born.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) say English is their primary language or that they are bilingual.
- Roughly two-thirds (64%) have at least a high school diploma.
- About 39% have a household income of less than \$30,000 per year.

Mainline Protestants

About one-in-twenty (5%) Hispanics identify themselves as mainline Protestants. As a group, they are more native born and English-speaking than the other religious traditions.

- Almost two-thirds (65%) were born in the U.S.
- Nearly half (45%) say English is their primary language.
- About seven-in-ten (68%) have at least a high school diploma.
- About three-in-ten (29%) have a household income of less than \$30,000 per year.

⁴ Results for household income are based on the 79% of respondents in the survey who supplied that information.

Other Christians

About one-in-thirty (3%) Hispanics identify themselves as belonging to other Christian denominations.

- A majority (57%) are foreign born.
- Three-in-five (61%) say English is their primary language or that they are bilingual.
- Six-in-ten (61%) have at least a high school diploma.
- Less than half (45%) have a household income of less than \$30,000 per year.

Other faiths

Latinos who belong to non-Christian faiths are such a small group, less than 1% of the adult population, that it is difficult to generate meaningful tabulations of their demographic characteristics, beliefs or behaviors.

Seculars

Nearly one-in-ten (8%) Hispanics identify themselves as seculars. Latino seculars are predominantly male and younger compared with Hispanics who identify with a religion.

- Almost half (49%) were born in the U.S.
- A majority (63%) say English is their primary language or that they are bilingual.
- Two-thirds (66%) are high school graduates.
- Four-in-ten (41%) have a household income of less than \$30,000 per year.

Figure 1.2
Religious Traditions Among Hispanics and Non-Hispanics

Among...	% who are...					
	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline Protestant	Other Christian	Secular	DK/Refused
All Hispanics	68%	15%	5%	3%	8%	1%
Native-Born	58	18	8	3	10	1
Foreign-Born	74	13	3	2	6	1
Non-Hispanics[†]	20	35	24	3	11	2

[†]Source: Pew 2006 U.S. Religion Survey

Figure 1.3
Religious Tradition among Hispanics by Nativity and Generation

	Among Hispanics...					
	All Hispanics	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline Protestant	Other Christian	Secular
Nativity						
Native-Born	38%	32%	46%	65%	43%	49%
Foreign-Born	62	68	55	35	57	51
Generation						
1st Generation	62	68	55	35	57	51
2nd Generation	22	19	23	37	26	32
3rd Generation	15	12	21	28	17	16

Figure 1.4
Religious Tradition among Hispanics by Language

	Among Hispanics...					
	All Hispanics	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline Protestant	Other Christian	Secular
English dominant	21%	16%	31%	45%	23%	30%
Bilingual	30	29	32	28	38	33
Spanish dominant	49	55	38	26	39	38

Figure 1.5
Religious Tradition among Hispanics by Country of Origin

	Among Hispanics...					
	All Hispanics	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline Protestant	Other Christian	Secular
Puerto Rico	9%	6%	16%	16%	12%	10%
Mexico	63	69	50	56	65	52
Cuba	4	4	4	6	2	8
Dominican Republic	2	2	1	3	2	3
Central America	9	8	14	6	7	14
South America	8	8	6	4	5	8
Other	4	2	8	8	3	5

Table 1.6

Religious Tradition among Hispanics by Education and Household Income[†]

	Among Hispanics...					
	All Hispanics	Catholic	Evangelical	Mainline Protestant	Other Christian	Secular
Education						
Less than high school degree	39%	42%	34%	30%	37%	33%
High school degree	47	44	54	56	52	49
Four-year college degree	10	9	10	12	9	17
Household Income						
Less than \$30,000	43	46	39	29	45	41
\$30,000-\$49,999	19	18	24	21	26	21
\$50,000 or more	17	14	21	24	11	25

[†]21% of respondents did not provide information on their household income

Differences by country of origin

Some differences in religious traditions are apparent among Latinos — both native born and foreign born — based on country of origin. Mexicans, for example, are more likely to be Catholic than are Puerto Ricans, who in turn are more likely to be evangelical than Latinos from any other country. Larger shares of Cubans are seculars than Latinos as a whole.

Data on religious affiliation by country of origin suggest that these characteristics, at least to some extent, trace back to Latin America. But in the U.S., differences based on country of origin are statistically significant regardless of nativity.

For example, the tendency to identify as Catholic is significantly higher for both Mexicans born in the U.S. and those born in Mexico. Similarly, the share of Puerto Ricans who identify as evangelicals is higher regardless of whether they were born on the U.S. mainland or on the island.

Looking to the future

An estimated one-third (33%) of all Catholics in the United States are now Hispanics, and, given long-term demographic trends, the Hispanic presence in the nation’s largest single religious denomination is certain to grow. Meanwhile, Latinos comprise about 6% of the evangelical Protestant population. As will be explored in later chapters, these Latinos are distinctive in two important dimensions: their tendency toward Christian renewalist beliefs and practices and the extent to which they cluster in ethnic churches. These characteristics, combined with the potential for continued rapid growth, ensure that Hispanics will have an increasing impact on the nation’s religious landscape.

Table 1.7
Hispanic Religion Tradition by County of Origin

% who are...	Among Hispanics....						
	All Hispanics	Puerto Rico	Mexico	Cuba	Dominican Republic	Central America	South America
Catholic	68%	49%	74%	60%	68%	60%	71%
Evangelical	15	27	12	14	9	22	11
Mainline Protestant	5	9	4	7	6	3	3
Other Christian	3	4	3	1	2	2	2
Secular	8	9	7	14	9	12	8

Over the last quarter century, the overall religious makeup of the U.S. Hispanic population has been broadly shaped by two contemporaneous processes. First, the number of Catholic Latinos has steadily grown through the arrival of new immigrants, especially those from Mexico, and through relatively high fertility rates among immigrants. Second, some Latinos leave the Catholic Church as they choose to practice another religion or stop practicing a religious faith altogether. These are not the only processes at work, but the study shows they involve large numbers of Latinos and thus have a great impact on the distribution of the Hispanic population across religious traditions. The study also affords a detailed look at the key demographic factors (such as age and nativity) that are associated with these processes among Latinos. Meanwhile, the non-Hispanic population also is changing due to the aging of the baby boom generation, declining birth rates and other long-term demographic trends.

What will the Hispanic population look like in the future as these processes play out and how will this population change U.S. religious institutions in the long term? Approximate answers can be developed with projections that are based on standard demographic estimates for the growth of the Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations and on unique assumptions about the pace of conversions among Latinos based on the results of this study.

Assuming that the rate of conversion over the past 25 years holds constant for the next 25 years, the share of Latinos who are Catholic would decline from 68% in 2006 to 61% in 2030. Meanwhile, the proportion of U.S. Catholics who are Hispanic would increase over that period from 33% to 41%. In other words, conversions would continue to erode the share of Latinos who are Catholics, although Catholicism would clearly remain the dominant faith among Hispanics. But, meanwhile, Latino population growth through immigration and fertility combined with the demographic decline of the non-Hispanic population would ensure that Latinos become an ever greater share of U.S. Catholics overall.

An alternative scenario shows that Latinos will remain a predominantly Catholic population even if the rate of conversions to secularism and other religious faiths increases by 50% over the next 25 years. In that case, 57% of Hispanics would be Catholics in 2030. And, even with increasing conversions, Hispanics would still comprise a sizeable share of the U.S. Catholic population, reaching 40% of total Catholics in 2030 compared with 33% in 2006.

In sum, demographic trends already in place ensure that Latinos will be a growing presence in the Catholic Church in the U.S. Meanwhile, the pace of conversions will help shape the contours of religious affiliation in the Hispanic population and Latinos' impact on evangelical and pentecostal churches in the U.S.

Religion in Latin America

Religious affiliation in Latin America is very relevant to any examination of Hispanics in the U.S. The majority of Hispanic adults in the U.S. are foreign born and most migrated after childhood, so their religious formation usually can be traced to their country of origin.

Surveys conducted by Latinobarometro, a nonprofit polling firm that has tracked opinion and attitudes in Latin America since 1995, show that Catholicism remains dominant in the region but that evangelicalism has gained a significant following. The surveys also reveal important distinctions in religious affiliation depending on the country.

Mexico, the primary country of origin for immigrants in the U.S., is among the most Catholic countries in Latin America. Almost eight-in-ten Mexicans described themselves as Catholic in 2004. Unlike the situation in many other countries, the Catholic Church in Mexico has not lost followers since 1995 and, in fact, has experienced a modest gain. Of the 18 Latin American countries surveyed in 2004, Mexico and Guatemala were the only ones in which the share of Catholics increased. Perhaps more importantly, the evangelical movement in Mexico made virtually no gains over the same period.

Compare Mexico's experience with that of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, which also are sources of immigrants to the U.S. Between 1995 and 2004, the number of people identifying themselves as Catholic in those three countries decreased by an average of 15 percentage points. Meanwhile, the share of evangelicals increased by an average of 16 percentage points.

The same pattern is seen in two other Central American countries — Costa Rica and Panama — that have been part of the survey since 1996, although in both countries the losses by the Catholic Church and the gains by evangelicals are somewhat smaller. Guatemala experienced small gains since 1995 in the shares of both Catholics, about 5 percentage points, and evangelicals, about seven percentage points.

The difference between Catholic losses and evangelical gains is not nearly as pronounced in the 10 countries surveyed in South America: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador. In all but Colombia, the share of people identifying themselves as Catholic decreased by an average of 8 percentage points, while the share of evangelicals increased by an average of 5 percentage points. In Colombia, where the share of Catholics decreased by about 7 percentage points, the share of evangelicals also decreased, by about 2 percentage points. ■

Note: Latinobarometro has asked about religion in its annual Latin American survey since 1995 (no data for 1999). The survey is now conducted in 18 countries (between 1,000 and 1,200 interviews in each) and has a margin of error of about 3% per country.