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Evangelicals not locked in partisan embrace: Pew

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DALLAS (Reuters) - American evangelicals remain more Republican than Democratic but are not locked tightly in the embrace of either party, according to a new survey released on Monday by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Both Democratic presidential contender Barack Obama and his Republican rival John McCain are competing hard for the votes of this "battleground faith" in the November election. One in four U.S. adults are evangelical.

The "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" found that 50 percent of U.S. evangelical Protestants were likely to be Republican or Republican-leaning compared to 34 percent who linked themselves to the Democratic Party.

The survey draws primarily on nationwide polling of more than 35,000 U.S. adults.

These were conducted in 2007 and so do not provide the latest snapshot of party affiliation. The newest poll also used a more detailed definition of 'evangelical' -- including non-whites for instance -- than the usual which focuses exclusively on white born-again Protestants, making comparisons with previous polls difficult.

But the sheer size of the sample makes it an important and revealing indicator of trends and many of its findings dovetail with other data showing a gradual drop in the Republican affiliation of evangelicals.

For example, other Pew surveys in 2007 found 57 percent of white evangelical Protestants were in or leaning Republican compared to 32 percent who tilted Democratic.

In 2004, 62 percent of white evangelical Protestants said they leaned Republican and almost 80 percent of those who voted that year cast their ballots for re-election of President George W. Bush.

MOVING AWAY

"There appears to have been a shift away from the Republican Party even among evangelicals. This trend appears to be concentrated among younger evangelicals," said John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

"But relatively few of the evangelicals who have moved away from the Republican Party have become Democratic, most have become independents," he said.

Green, a noted expert on religion and politics who also teaches at the University of Akron in Ohio, said there were opportunities for both sides.

He saw an opportunity for Obama to woo younger evangelicals drawn by his message of change while McCain could also aim for independent and more centrist evangelicals.

McCain is regarded with suspicion by many of the more conservative evangelicals who regard him as soft on their "core issues" such as their opposition to gay marriage.

At the same time, more centrist evangelicals have warmed to him because he combines opposition to abortion rights with concern for issues such as climate change which they see as a vital part of a wider biblical agenda.

The mainline Protestant churches may not be as vocal on "culture war" issues such as abortion and gay marriage which often figure in U.S. elections but they have sharp partisan divides in their pews.

The survey found members of such denominations almost evenly divided with 41 percent lining up with the Republican Party and 43 percent with the Democratic Party.

The Pew survey also found that Mormons are the most staunchly Republican group with 65 percent of those surveyed identifying with the party.

Members of historically black churches were the most Democratic at 77 percent. Atheists and agnostics are also strongly Democratic at 65 and 62 percent respectively.

Jews are largely in the Democratic camp at 66 percent with only 24 percent indicating a Republican affiliation.

Members of the Catholic Church -- another key "battleground faith" which accounts for almost a quarter of the U.S. population -- lean Democratic but like evangelicals are not overwhelmingly in the thrall of either party.

The survey found that 48 percent of adult U.S. Catholics leaned toward or identified with the Democratic Party while 33 percent tilted Republican.

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