

Barna Group

Knowledge to navigate a changing world

American Bible Society

State of the Bible 2016: The Bible and Politics

Research conducted among U.S. adults
February 2016

*Research commissioned by
American Bible Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

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Barna Group, Ventura, California*

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Introduction

This report contains the findings from a nationwide study commissioned by the American Bible Society and conducted by Barna Research Group. Two research methodologies were used for the study; one included 1,008 telephone interviews with adults 18 and older in the continental U.S., while the other consisted of 1,000 online surveys conducted using a nationally representative panel.

Most of the questions were asked in the telephone survey, while a set of core questions were included online. The use of two methodologies provided a larger sample size for key questions and ensured greater representation among all age groups. The telephone interviews were conducted from January 20 to January 28, 2016, and the online surveys were conducted January 27 to February 16, 2016.

This report contains key findings from the telephone and online interviews completed for this study. Following the Introduction is the Data Analysis section, which is a written explanation of the results that also includes an analysis of the data's implications. The Appendices contain the data tables, a description of the research methodology and definitions of terminology used in this report. Copies of the questionnaire and detailed, cross-tabulated data tables are provided separately.

Researcher's Notes

Data is shown with a (↑) or (↓) sign, if applicable, to indicate if the data for that segment is significantly higher or lower, statistically speaking, than the total response for all adults in the study, or to indicate significant change over time. Where these tests of significance have been performed, differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher.

Segmentation of the findings is as follows:

Generations:

Millennials: those currently ages 18 to 31

Gen-Xers: those currently ages 32 to 50

Boomers: those currently ages 51 to 69

Elders: those currently ages 70 or older

Practicing Protestant, practicing Catholic: Practicing Christians are those who identify as either Protestant or Catholic, who attend a religious service at least once a month and who say their faith is very important in their lives.

Non-Practicing Christian: Self-identified Christians who are non-practicing as defined above

No faith/Other faith: Individuals who do not consider themselves Christian (including atheists, agnostics and other faiths); Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are also included, even if they describe themselves as Christian.

Data Analysis

1. Bible Perceptions

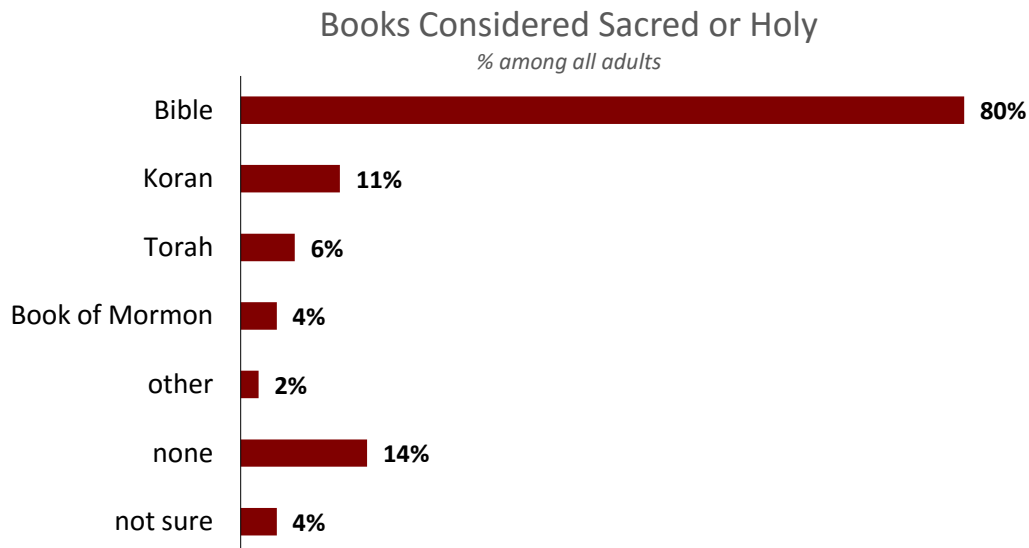
Sacred Literature

[see Table 1.1]

Americans overwhelmingly name the Bible as something they consider to be sacred literature or a holy book (80%). This has been the case consistently since 2011. Americans are almost eight times as likely to name the Bible than to name the Koran (11%), which is the next most frequently mentioned holy book. The Torah and the Book of Mormon are only mentioned by about one in twenty adults (6% and 4% respectively).

About half of adults who identify as other or no faith do not name any books that they consider sacred or holy (49%), and they are only twice as likely to name the Bible (36%) as to name the Koran (17%). The proportion of all adults who do not name any books as sacred has doubled since 2011 (14% vs. 7%).

Elders and Boomers are significantly more likely to consider the Bible to be sacred than Gen-Xers and Millennials (~89% vs. ~73%). Similarly, the younger generations are roughly twice as likely as the older generations to name other sacred books besides the Bible or to name no holy books. Millennials are the least likely to name the Bible (71%) and the most likely to name no sacred literature (22%). The proportion of Millennials that name the Bible as sacred is up four percentage points from 2015, however (71% vs. 67%).



Beliefs about the Bible

[Table 1.2]

Just less than half of Americans strongly agree that the Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life (45%), which is a decrease of eight percentage points since 2011 and four percentage points just since 2015 (53% and 49% respectively). Most of this shift seems to be towards those who disagree strongly.

The degree to which adults agree with this statement increases significantly and consistently with age. Only about one in four Millennials strongly agrees (27%), compared to 40% of Gen-Xers, 56% of Boomers, and 65% of Elders. Practicing Protestants are also drastically more likely than Practicing Catholics to strongly agree (84% vs. 49%). Just one in three of non-practicing Christians strongly agree that the Bible contains everything needed to know to live a meaningful life (32%).

One in six Americans agree strongly that the Bible, the Koran, and the book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths (16%), and this proportion has remained statistically unchanged since 2011 (17%). Practicing Catholics are the most likely group to agree strongly with this statement (26%), even more so than non-Practicing Christians (15%) and those of other or no faith (16%).

The Bible's Role In U.S. Society

[Table 1.3]

Nearly half of all Americans think that the Bible has too little influence in U.S. society (46%). This proportion is down five percentage points from 2015 (51%). However, this seems to just be a shift towards those who think the influence is just right or who are unsure; the proportion of those who think the Bible has too much influence remained unchanged (at 19%).

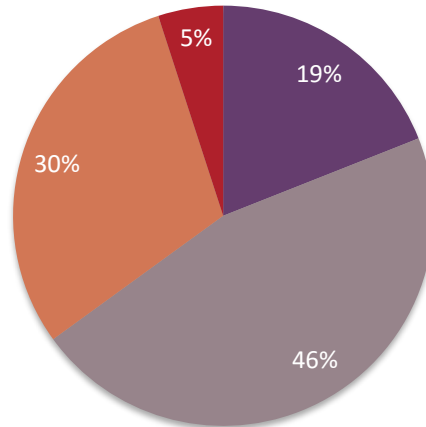
Boomers and Elders are twice as likely as Millennials to believe the Bible has too little influence (~59% vs. 30%). Millennials are split roughly in thirds about whether they think the Bible has too little (30%), just the right amount (30%), or too much influence (34%). They are significantly more likely than all of their older counterparts to believe it has too much influence (34% vs. ~14%).

Half of those with no faith or other faith think the Bible has too much influence on society (51%), while nearly three-quarters of Practicing Protestants say it has too little (72%).

Influence of the Bible on U.S. Society

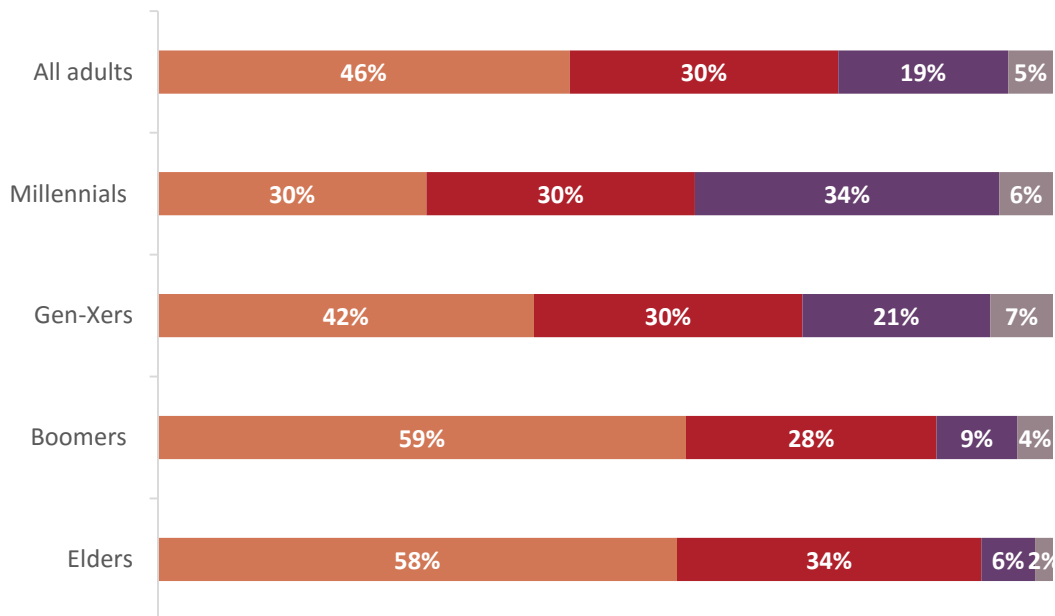
% among all adults

■ too much influence ■ too little influence ■ just right ■ not sure



Influence of the Bible on U.S. Society, by Generation

■ too little ■ just right ■ too much ■ not sure



The Bible's Effect on Politics and Politicians

[Tables 1.4 and 1.5]

About half of Americans believe that politics would be *more civil* if politicians read the Bible on a regular basis (51%) and that American politicians would be *more effective* if they read regularly (53%). These proportions are both down five percentage points from 2015. Just under half of Americans say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who reads the Bible on a regular basis (46%).

In all three cases, Gen-Xers are most on par with the national average (although slightly below), whereas Millennials are significantly lower than average and Boomer and Elders are significantly higher than average. As one might expect, eight in 10 of those with other or no faith disagree that increased Bible-reading would make politics more civil or politicians more effective (79% and 80% respectively).

The vast majority of practicing Protestants think regular Bible-reading among politicians would make politics more civil and politicians more effective (86% for both).

Appendix I

1. Bible Perceptions

Table 1.1 | Sacred Literature

To start with, what books, if any, do you consider sacred literature or holy books? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)

	All	Generation				Practicing Faith		Non-Practicing Faith	
		Millennials 18-31	Gen-Xers 32-50	Boomers 51-69	Elders 70+	Protestant	Catholic	Christian	Other faith / no faith
Bible	80%	71%↓	75%	88%↑	91%↑	96%↑	96%↑	90%↑	36%↓
Koran	11	16↑	13	8	6	4↓	13	14	17↑
Torah	6	7	10↑	3↓	1↓	2↓	12↑	7	9
Book of Mormon	4	4	6	2	2	1↓	5	5	7↑
other	2	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	5↑
none	14	22↑	18	8↓	7↓	2↓	4↓	6↓	49↑
not sure	4	4	5	3	2	2	0	3	8↑
<i>n</i> =	1,008	273	296	295	110	272	88	364	228

* indicates less than one-half of one percent

Note: A (↑) or (↓) sign indicates that data for that segment is statistically significantly higher or lower than the total response for all adults. Differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Bible	86%	82%	80%	79%	79%	80%
Koran	10	10	8	12	10	11
Torah	4	6	4	7	7	6
Book of Mormon	4	5	3	5	4	4
other	3	3	4	5	5	2
none	7	11	12	13	13	14
not sure	3	3	6	4	4	4
<i>n</i> =	1,011	1,020	1,005	1,012	1,010	1,008

Table 1.2 | Beliefs about the Bible

I would like to read some statements about sacred literature and would like to know whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

% agree strongly	All	Generation				Practicing Faith		Non-Practicing Faith	
		Millennials 18-31	Gen-Xers 32-50	Boomers 51-69	Elders 70+	Protestant	Catholic	Christian	Other faith / no faith
The Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life	45%	27%↓	40%↓	56%↑	65%↑	84%↑	49%	32%↓	11%↓
The Bible, the Koran, and the book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths*	16	15	19	14	13	12↓	26↑	15	16
<i>*online and telephone sample size=</i>	2,008	530	581	635	220	475	151	756	544
<i>telephone sample size=</i>	1,008	273	296	295	110	272	88	364	228

Note: A (↑) or (↓) sign indicates that data for that segment is statistically significantly higher or lower than the total response for all adults. Differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
The Bible contains everything a person needs to know to live a meaningful life						
agree strongly	53%	48%	47%	50%	49%	45%
agree somewhat	22	21	19	19	20	21
disagree somewhat	11	15	14	16	16	15
disagree strongly	12	12	17	14	14	18
not sure	2	5	3	2	2	2
The Bible, the Koran, and the book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths*						
agree strongly	17	15	16	18	16	16
agree somewhat	33	31	31	29	32	29
disagree somewhat	17	18	19	15	16	16
disagree strongly	28	28	28	29	28	30
not sure	6	8	7	9	9	9
<i>*online and telephone sample size=</i>	1,982	1,969	2,030	2,008	1,976	2008
<i>telephone sample size=</i>	1,011	1,020	1,005	1,012	1,010	1,008

Table 1.3 | The Bible's Role in U.S. Society

Some people believe that the Bible should have a greater role in US society today, while others believe that the Bible should have less influence. Do you think the Bible has too much, too little, or just the right amount of influence in U.S. society today?

	All	Generation				Practicing Faith		Non-Practicing Faith	
		Millennials 18-31	Gen-Xers 32-50	Boomers 51-69	Elders 70+	Protestant	Catholic	Christian	Other faith / no faith
too little influence	46%	30%↓	42%	59%↑	58%↑	72%↑	58%↑	40%↓	17%↓
just right	30	30	30	28	34	24	32	40↑	20↓
too much influence	19	34↑	21	9↓	6↓	3↓	7↓	16	51↑
not sure	5	6	7	4	2	2↓	2	4	11↑
<i>n=</i>	1,008	273	296	295	110	272	88	364	228

Note: A (↑) or (↓) sign indicates that data for that segment is statistically significantly higher or lower than the total response for all adults. Differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
too little influence	54%	47%	56%	50%	51%	46%
just right	28	29	26	30	27	30
too much influence	13	16	13	16	19	19
not sure	5	7	6	6	3	5
<i>n=</i>	1,011	1,020	1,005	1,012	1,010	1,008

Table 1.4 | Belief that Regular Bible Reading Would Make Politics More Civil

Do you think politics would be more civil if politicians read the Bible on a regular basis?

	All	Generation				Practicing Faith		Non-Practicing Faith	
		Millennials 18-31	Gen-Xers 32-50	Boomers 51-69	Elders 70+	Protestant	Catholic	Christian	Other faith / no faith
yes	51%	31%↓	47%	66%↑	71%↑	86%↑	63%↑	43%↓	16%↓
no	44	63↑	50	31↓	25↓	12↓	32↓	52↑	79↑
not sure	5	7	4	4	4	2↓	6	6	5
<i>n</i> =	1,008	273	296	295	110	272	88	364	228

Note: A (↑) or (↓) sign indicates that data for that segment is statistically significantly higher or lower than the total response for all adults. Differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher.

	2015	2016
yes	56%	51%
no	40	44
not sure	4	5
<i>n</i> =	1,010	1,008

Table 1.5 | Belief that Regular Bible Reading Would Make Politicians More Effective

Do you think America's politicians would be more effective if they read the Bible on a regular basis?

	All	Generation				Practicing Faith		Non-Practicing Faith	
		Millennials 18-31	Gen-Xers 32-50	Boomers 51-69	Elders 70+	Prot- estant	Cath- olic	Christ- ian	Other faith / no faith
yes	53%	34%↓	49%	66%↑	76%↑	86%↑	59%	47%↓	16%↓
no	43	62↑	49	30↓	19↓	9↓	36	49↑	80↑
not sure	4	4	3	5	5	5	5	4	4
<i>n</i> =	1,008	273	296	295	110	272	88	364	228

Note: A (↑) or (↓) sign indicates that data for that segment is statistically significantly higher or lower than the total response for all adults. Differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher.

	2015	2016
yes	58%	53%
no	40	43
not sure	2	4
<i>n</i> =	1,010	1,008

Appendix II

Methodology

Two methods of data collection, telephone interviews and online surveys, were used for this study.

Telephone

The telephone survey included 1,008 interviews conducted among a representative sample of adults 18 and older from all 50 of the United States. The survey was conducted from January 20 through January 28, 2016. The sampling error for this study is +/-3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The research included 400 interviews conducted by contacting respondents on their cell phone.

Survey calls were made at various times during the day and evening so that every individual selected for inclusion was contacted up to five separate days, at different times of the day, to maximize the possibility of contact. This is a quality-control procedure that ensures those in the sampling frame have an equivalent probability of inclusion within the survey, thereby increasing the survey reliability. All of the interviews were conducted by experienced, trained interviewers; interviewers were supervised at all times; and every interviewer was monitored during the course of their work on this project. The telephone survey was conducted through the use of a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. This process ensures that question skip patterns are properly administered by interviewers and that survey data are recorded accurately.

The cooperation rate for the telephone survey was 78%. A high cooperation rate significantly raises the confidence we may place in the resulting statistics. In every survey there are a variety of ways in which the accuracy of the data may be affected. The cooperation rate is one such potential cause of error in measurement; the lower the cooperation rate, the less representative the respondents interviewed may be of the population from which they were drawn, thereby reducing the accuracy of the results. Other sources of error include question-design bias, question-order bias, interviewer mistakes, sampling error and respondent deception. Many of these types of errors cannot be accurately estimated. However, having a high cooperation rate enhances the reliability of the information procured.

Based on U.S. Census data sources, regional and ethnic quotas were designed to ensure that the final group of adults interviewed reflected the distribution of

adults nationwide and adequately represented the three primary ethnic groups within the U.S. (those groups which comprise at least 10% of the population: white, black and Hispanic).

Online

The online portion of the study covered a subset of core questions that were also used in the telephone questionnaire. This study included 1,000 surveys conducted among a representative random sample of adults 18 and older within all 50 states and was conducted January 28 through February 16, 2016. The sampling error for a sample of this size is +/-3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The response rate for the online study was 55%.

The online survey was conducted using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel® based on probability sampling that covers both the online and offline populations in the U.S. The panel members are randomly recruited by telephone and by self-administered mail and web surveys. Households are provided with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. Unlike other Internet research that covers only individuals with Internet access who volunteer for research, this process uses a dual sampling frame that includes both listed and unlisted phone numbers, telephone and non-telephone households, and cell-phone-only households. The panel is not limited to current Web users or computer owners. All potential panelists are randomly selected to join the KnowledgePanel; unselected volunteers are not able to join.

Aggregated Data

Data for core questions included in both the telephone and online studies was aggregated. The sampling error for the combined data (n=2,008) is +/-2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Guide to Survey Data

Do you remember reading the results of a survey and noticing the fine print that says the results are accurate within plus or minus three percentage points (or some similar number)? That figure refers to the “range of sampling error.” The range of sampling error indicates the accuracy of the results, and it is dependent on two factors: 1) the sample size and 2) the degree to which the result you are examining is close to 50 percent or to the extremes, 0 percent and 100 percent.

You can estimate the accuracy of your survey results using the table below. First, find the column heading that is closest to your sample size. Next, find the row whose label is closest to the response percentages for a particular question from your survey. The intersection of the row and column displays the number of percentage points that need to be added to, and subtracted from, the result to obtain the range of error. There is a 95 percent chance that the true percentage of the group being sampled is in that range.

Result	100	200	300	400	500	600	800	1,000	1,200	1,500	2,000	2,500
05% or 95%	4.4	3.1	2.5	2.2	2.0	1.8	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.1	.96	.87
10% or 90%	6.0	4.3	3.5	3.0	2.7	2.5	2.1	2.0	1.7	1.6	1.3	1.2
15% or 85%	7.1	5.1	4.1	3.6	3.2	2.9	2.5	2.3	2.1	1.9	1.6	1.4
20% or 80%	8.0	5.7	4.6	4.0	3.6	3.3	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.1	1.8	1.6
25% or 75%	8.7	6.1	5.0	4.3	3.9	3.6	3.0	2.8	2.5	2.3	1.9	1.7
30% or 70%	9.2	6.5	5.3	4.6	4.1	3.8	3.2	2.8	2.7	2.4	2.0	1.8
35% or 65%	9.5	6.8	5.5	4.8	4.3	3.9	3.3	3.1	2.8	2.5	2.1	1.9
40% or 60%	9.8	7.0	5.7	4.9	4.4	4.0	3.4	3.1	2.8	2.5	2.2	2.0
45% or 55%	9.9	7.0	5.8	5.0	4.5	4.1	3.5	3.2	2.9	2.6	2.2	2.0
50%	10.0	7.1	5.8	5.0	4.5	4.1	3.5	3.2	2.9	2.6	2.2	2.0

Note that the above statistics only relate to the sampling accuracy of survey results. When comparing the results of two subgroups (e.g., men versus women), a different procedure is followed and usually requires a greater sample size. Further, there is a range of other errors that may influence survey results (e.g., biased question wording, inaccurate data tabulation)—errors whose influence cannot be statistically estimated.