



Does religion moderate politics?

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With the [Value Voters Summit](#) under way in Washington this weekend, let's ponder recent evidence that the hard core of President Trump's does not consist of America's most religious people.

That was the message delivered by the Cato Institute's polling director, Emily Ekins, in a *New York Times* [op-ed](#) this week. According to [survey data](#) from the Democracy Fund Study Group, churchgoing Trump voters were significantly more moderate than non-churchgoing Trump voters on a host of issues, ranging from religious tolerance and acceptance of immigrants to the death penalty and international trade.

After the 2016 election, just 49 percent of Trump's churchgoers regarded him favorably, compared to 63 percent of his secular voters.

This analysis is consistent with Pew's findings in its [new typology](#) of religiosity, which maps Americans onto a seven-item scale from "Sunday Stalwarts" to "Solidly Secular." The Stalwarts are a good deal more religiously observant than the second most religious group, the "God-and-Country Believers." They attend worship much more often, they participate in church groups, and they are significantly more likely to say that they rely on religion to make life decisions and that religious faith is the most important source of meaning in their lives.

But curiously, although both groups overwhelmingly profess a belief in God, only 62 percent of the Stalwarts claim that a belief in God is necessary to be moral, compared to 93 percent of the G-and-C Believers. This suggests that the latter see themselves much more as culture warriors manning the barricades against encroaching secularism—even as almost one in ten say they have no religion. Notably, they are less likely than the Stalwarts to have positive views on immigration and race and gender equality, and to believe in global warming.

When it comes to politics, both the Stalwarts and the God-and-Countries are, at 59 percent, equally Republican. But while the former just barely approve of Trump's performance, 50 percent to 48 percent, the latter solidly (and alone among all seven groupings) approve of it, 58

percent to 41 percent. By contrast, it's the least religious who are most liberal on the issues and most anti-Trump, with the moderately religious somewhere in the middle.

The lesson that Cato's Ekins draws from her findings is that, rather than condemn religion as a force for Trumpism in the world, liberals should acknowledge its liberalizing effect on conservative Americans. One could, on the basis of Pew's findings, similarly take the view that religion brings liberal Americans towards the center.

The problem, for those concerned about polarization in American politics, is that religiosity is in decline across the entire political spectrum. Indeed, where PRRI found that just seven percent of Mitt Romney's 2012 vote came from those without religion, according to the Democracy Fund Study Group, they supplied 24 percent of Trump's support in 2016.

In other words, the non-religious are bifurcating between a large majority who are very much to the left and a significant minority who are very much to the right. And as their numbers increase, the political polarization is only going to increase.