

## Religiously unaffiliated voters are leading U.S. politics into uncharted waters

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Though most Democrats identify as some type of Christian, the narrative about religion and Christianity in the United States has long been dominated by a powerful, well-organized religious right. But in 2019, the religious left is making its own bid for power and relevance.

Sens. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and other Democratic candidates, including Pete Buttigieg, have been talking about their faith on the campaign trail. Figures such as the Rev. William J. Barber II are preaching the social gospel and earning glossy magazine profiles. And the evangelical right still supports a president who lacks a basic comprehension of his professed faith, giving Christians on the left an opportunity to try to grab the moral high ground.

But in the background, a growing number of Democrats — and Republicans — have decided not to associate with a specific church or traditional faith. As of 2017, religiously unaffiliated voters made up a third of all Democrats and 13 percent of all Republicans. Last year, religious “nones” became as numerous as evangelical Christians in the broader population. Catholics, evangelicals and those with no religion each made up 23 percent of the overall U.S. adult population, according to the General Social Survey.

These voters are increasingly powerful and often misunderstood. They’re a mostly Democratic group, and they’re likely to stay that way for some time. But beneath the numbers, unaffiliated voters have real political and spiritual disagreements — and they’re leading both major parties (and our politics in general) into uncharted territory.

The basic numbers suggest that stereotypes about godless — or at least, not-church-synagogue-or-mosque-attending — liberals flocking to the Democratic Party are, on some level, accurate. The Pew Research Center found that in the 2016 election, 65 percent of religiously unaffiliated voters cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton and 24 percent voted for Donald Trump. That’s a significant margin: It’s in the neighborhood of the winning Democratic margin among Hispanic voters (66 to 28 percent) and the winning GOP margin among non-college-educated white voters (64 to 28 percent).

This solid Democratic margin isn't surprising. The GOP is the party of white evangelicals: They make up a third of registered Republican voters and have used their votes and influence to put candidates such as George W. Bush and Mike Pence on national tickets. So many unaffiliated voters, some of whom weren't raised with a religion or left some form organized religion, probably feel more at home in the Democratic Party, where no single religious tradition holds such sway.

The Democrats are also in step with religious nones on some key issues. Religiously unaffiliated voters are generally pro choice: Seventy-four percent think abortion should be legal in "all/most" cases, according to Pew. Seventy-two percent of unaffiliated voters oppose "allowing a small business owner in [their] state to refuse to provide products or services to gay or lesbian people if doing so violates their religious beliefs," according to the Public Religion Research Institute, and 79 percent favor same-sex marriage, Pew reports. Nearly 8 in 10 unaffiliated adults oppose expanding the border wall with Mexico. It shouldn't be surprising that a pro-LGBT, pro-choice, anti-wall group has mostly gravitated toward the Democrats. As long as Republicans stay to the right on social and cultural issues, nonreligious voters will probably stick with Democrats.

But the religious nones aren't a monolithic block of progressive secular humanists. More than a fifth dissented from the nonreligious consensus on the border wall, abortion and religious liberty/LGBT discrimination.

And they disagree about God. Daniel A. Cox of the American Enterprise Institute recently used a novel survey question to find that, on a scale from 1 (total certainty God doesn't exist) to 10 (total certainty God exists), atheists were on average at 1.6, agnostics at 3.8 and the unaffiliated at an 5.1.

Pew also found subdivisions among the nonreligious — 29 percent of their sample was nonreligious, but that group was divided roughly 60 to 40 percent between those who eschewed a variety of supernatural beliefs and those who mostly dislike organized religion but hold some new age spiritual beliefs, such as the idea that there's spiritual energy in physical things like mountains and crystals. An earlier Pew study showed that 17 percent of the unaffiliated believe in the God described in the Bible.

There's no one spiritual doctrine or political belief that's common to all religious nones — they have a variety of religious dispositions and aren't unanimously Democratic. And they're pulling both parties in different directions.

Religiously unaffiliated Democrats seem to be pulling their party to the left. According to the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (a large-sample academic poll), 91 percent of not-formally-religious Clinton voters (those who identified as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular) supported "always allowing a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice," while 77 percent of religiously affiliated Clinton voters agreed.

Almost a quarter of religious Clinton voters opposed giving marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples, the CCES said; only 6 percent of none Clinton voters were opposed. These voters also split on immigration along lines of belief — a quarter of nonreligious Clinton voters want to increase the number of patrols on the southern border, and 37 percent of religious Clinton backers said the same. Fifty-eight percent of unaffiliated Clintonites and 48 percent of religious

Clinton backers strongly agreed that “white people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.”

By contrast, less religiously observant Republicans seem to be more Trumpian than more practicing members of the GOP. Emily Ekins, polling director for the libertarian Cato Institute, recently used Voter Study Group data to show that voters who attended church more frequently were less likely to support a border wall, less likely to approve of strict immigration policies and more likely to have warm feelings toward black people, Hispanics, Asians and Jewish people. This relationship — more frequent church attendance paired with somewhat warmer feelings toward nonwhite people and those of other religious faiths — held up after controlling for other demographic factors, including age and income.

This data doesn't mean that everyone who has stopped going to church has traded their Bible for a MAGA hat and that all religious Trump voters really belong in the Democratic Party. Almost half of these never-attending Trumpian Republicans (40 percent) say they're some form of Christian. And frequent church-attending Republicans still strongly approve of the president and are well to the right of Clinton voters on issues such as immigration, economics and race. But this data does suggest that traditional Christian practice tends to sand off Trumpism a bit on the right.

Trying to interpret what this data means for the future of politics is like taking a Rorschach test. Secular humanists are probably excited about a future in which religion is less politically powerful and secular voters permanently win fights over LGBT issues, abortion and immigration. People who are more sympathetic to religion might be wary of a more polarized future in which a less believing Democratic Party moves further left and religious Republicans cede even more power to secular members of their party who have made a new religion out of provoking liberals. And if religious polarization happens, through Democrats trying to cater more to the growing nonreligious vote and Republicans doubling down on traditional Christianity in an effort to peel off faithful Democrats, politics might become even more bitter and difficult.

But religion is, like politics, unpredictable. The United States has experienced periods of disaffiliation, revival and people identifying as “spiritual but not religious.” So don't prematurely shout hallelujah — or wail and tear your garments — about the the end of religion and its influence on politics. The things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's have long been mixed up in this country, and the rise of the nones will probably change, not eliminate, the relationship between church and politics.