

The Religiously Unaffiliated in America

The Growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated

No religious group has experienced more explosive growth over the last few decades than the religiously unaffiliated. In 1991, only six percent of Americans identified their religious affiliation as “none,” and that figure had not moved much since the early 1970s. By the end of the 1990s, 14 percent of the public claimed no religious affiliation. The rate of religious change accelerated further during the late 2000s and early 2010s, reaching 20 percent by 2012. Today, one-quarter (25 percent) of Americans claim no formal religious identity, making this group the single largest “religious group” in the U.S.¹

Today, four in ten (40 percent) young adults (ages 18-29) are religiously unaffiliated—more than three times the rate of seniors (ages 65 and older). While previous generations were also more likely to be religiously unaffiliated in their late teens and twenties, young adults today are four times as likely as young adults a generation ago to identify as religiously unaffiliated. In 1986, for example, only 10 percent of young adults claimed no religious affiliation.²

A Demographic & Regional Profile of the Unaffiliated

The states with the largest religiously unaffiliated populations tend to be concentrated in the West and Northeast. No state has a larger population of unaffiliated residents than Vermont. More than four in ten (43 percent) Vermont residents are religiously unaffiliated, as are 38 percent of New Hampshire residents. In the West, more than one in three Americans living in Montana (39 percent), Washington State (36 percent), and Oregon (35 percent) are also unaffiliated. Among major metro areas in the U.S., three share the highest concentration of unaffiliated residents: San Francisco (43 percent), Seattle (40 percent), and Portland (36 percent).³

The racial and ethnic profile of religiously unaffiliated largely mirrors the public overall. More than six in ten (63 percent) religiously unaffiliated Americans are white, non-Hispanic; 10 percent are black; 14 percent are Hispanic; four percent are Asian or Pacific Islander; and seven percent identify as Native American, mixed race, or some other race.⁴

Unaffiliated Americans are much younger than religious Americans, particularly white Christians. The median age of unaffiliated Americans is substantially lower than that among the U.S. population overall (36 vs. 47). White Christians are even older, with a median age of 55.

¹ PRRI 2017 American Values Atlas.

² General Social Survey, 1986.

³ PRRI 2017 American Values Atlas.

⁴ Ibid.

More than one-third (34 percent) of unaffiliated Americans are under the age of 30, while less than three in ten (29 percent) are 50 years of age or older. In contrast, only 12 percent of white Christians are under 30 years of age, while six in ten (60 percent) are at least 50 years old.⁵

The educational profile of unaffiliated Americans largely mirrors the public overall.

A Political Profile of the Unaffiliated

The religiously unaffiliated are less likely than Americans overall to identify with either political party. Nearly half (49 percent) of unaffiliated Americans say they are politically independent, but Democratic affiliation outnumbers Republican by about three to one (31 percent vs. 11 percent).⁶

Importantly, despite eschewing partisan labels, the unaffiliated lean liberal in their politics. In fact, the unaffiliated are nearly twice as likely to identify as liberal than conservative (42 percent vs. 22 percent). Twenty-eight percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans identify as politically moderate.⁷

The unaffiliated are also much more likely to support Democratic candidates in presidential elections. In 2016, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of unaffiliated voters cast a ballot for Hillary Clinton, while roughly one in four (26 percent) voted for Donald Trump.⁸

Social Issues: Same-sex Marriage & Abortion

The religiously unaffiliated express much more liberal attitudes on important social issues than Americans overall. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of religiously unaffiliated Americans say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, compared to 24 percent who say it should be illegal in all or most cases. Support for legal abortion is significantly lower among Americans overall—54 percent say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 43 percent say it should be illegal in all or most cases.⁹

Support for same-sex marriage is also substantially higher among the religiously unaffiliated. Eight in ten (80 percent) unaffiliated Americans say they favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry legally, compared to only 14 percent who are opposed. Among Americans overall, 61 percent support same-sex marriage.¹⁰

The Unique Worldview of the Religiously Unaffiliated

⁵ PRRI 2017 American Values Atlas.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 2016 National Election Exit Poll.

⁹ PRRI March 2018 Survey.

¹⁰ PRRI 2017 American Values Atlas.

Religiously unaffiliated and affiliated Americans hold significantly different views about the merits of organized religion, both for themselves and for society as a whole. About two-thirds (66 percent) of unaffiliated Americans agree “religion causes more problems in society than it solves.” Only 37 percent of Americans overall agree with this statement.¹¹

Americans who are unaffiliated also reject the notion that religion plays a crucial role in providing a moral foundation for children. Approximately two-thirds (66 percent) of unaffiliated Americans believe it is *not* important for children to be brought up in a religion to learn good values. Few Americans agree: only 28 percent of the public says that it is *not* important for children to be brought up in religion.

Few unaffiliated Americans are actively looking to join a religious community. Only seven percent of the unaffiliated report they are searching for a religion that would be right for them, compared to 93 percent who say they are not.

Relatively few unaffiliated Americans report they regularly devote much time to thinking about God or religion. More than seven in ten (72 percent) unaffiliated Americans say that in their day-to-day life, they do not spend much time thinking about God or religion.

Who Are the Unaffiliated: Rejectionists, Apatheists, and Unattached Believers

Religiously unaffiliated Americans are distinct from religious Americans in important ways, but there is also considerable diversity among this group. Using two separate questions that measure the personal relevance of religion and the perceived social benefit of religion, we identified three distinct groups among the unaffiliated: Rejectionists, Apatheists, and Unattached Believers.

Rejectionists, who account for the majority (58 percent) of all unaffiliated Americans, say religion is not personally important in their lives and believe religion as a whole does more harm than good in society. Apatheists, who make up 22 percent of the unaffiliated, say religion is not personally important to them, but believe it generally is more socially helpful than harmful. Unattached believers, who make up only 18 percent of the unaffiliated, say religion is important to them personally.

The approach and attitude towards religion varies substantially among the unaffiliated. Rejectionists and Apatheists report similar patterns of worship attendance—more than three-quarters say they seldom or never attend formal religious services (83 percent and 76 percent, respectively). Fewer than four in ten (39 percent) Unattached Believers say they seldom or never attend religious services. More than six in ten (61 percent) say they attend at least a few times a year.

¹¹ The remaining figures are based on the following source: Jones, Robert P., Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch. “Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back.” *PRRI*. 2016.

Rejectionists are unique among the unaffiliated for the degree to which they report a personally negative experience at a place of worship. More than one-quarter (27 percent) of Rejectionists say they had a mostly negative experience the last time they attended a worship service, while a majority (57 percent) say their last experience was primarily a positive one. At least eight in ten Apatheists (80 percent) and Unattached Believers (89 percent) say their last experience at a worship service was primarily positive.

Despite a generally positive view about the role of religion in society, few Apatheists are actively looking to join a religious congregation. In fact, Apatheists and Rejectionists are about equally as likely to say they are looking to join a religion (3 percent vs. 4 percent). Notably, even relatively few Unattached Believers (22 percent) say they are currently seeking to join a religious community or congregation.

Both Apatheists and Rejectionists show considerable disinterest in religion. Eighty-six percent of Apatheists and 79% of Rejectionists report they do not spend much time in their daily life thinking about God or religion. Only one-third (33 percent) of Unattached Believers say they do *not* contemplate God or religion regularly.