



Courting the 'None' Vote

The Religiously Unaffiliated and the Future of American Politics

Jack Jenkins November 1, 2012

Introduction

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a report in early October entitled “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation.”¹ The survey included a variety of information about American religious trends, but reporters were quick to highlight the most striking statistic: The number of Americans who have no particular religious preference—sometimes called the religiously unaffiliated, the unchurched, or just “nones”—is steadily increasing within the United States, with one in five Americans now claiming to eschew organized religion.

This statistic is surprising because the United States has long been an anomaly within the developed world when it comes to religion. Unlike regions such as Western Europe, the United States has not “secularized” as it has aged. Instead, American citizens have continued to exhibit an unusually high level of religious observance over time, a phenomenon that continues to shape our country’s cultural and political milieu.

Unsurprisingly, statistics from the Pew survey and the even more recent “American Values Survey,” produced by the Public Religion Research Institute, are raising eyebrows among American faith communities,² spurring many church leaders to posit theories about the cause of the decline and offer plans on how to stem the tide.³

But the rise of the “nones” isn’t a problem just for priests and pastors—it also poses challenges for many political strategists. The “nones,” now a group of roughly 46 million people (19.6 percent of the U.S. population), have become an important voting bloc that outnumbers both white mainline Christians (15 percent) and white evangelicals (19 percent).⁴ Consequently, several writers note that the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, voters who tend to skew young and liberal (only 11 percent are Republican or Republican-leaning voters), could create a “secularism problem” for the Republican Party and its evangelical Christian base.⁵

But while much has been made of the “nones” and their impact on the right, there has been less talk about what strategies either party could use to earn their support. The issue is a pressing one for many political strategists: The Pew survey indicates that while the vast majority of Democrats still claim a faith tradition (76 percent), the religiously unaffiliated now make up 24 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters in the United States.⁶ (see Figure 1) This makes the “nones” the single-largest bloc of Democratic voters when people are broken down by religious affiliation. And the “nones” are poised to represent 16 percent of likely voters in the 2012 presidential election.⁷

This reality raises several questions about the future of American politics, particularly when it comes to campaign tactics and coalition building. How, for example, can political campaigns appeal successfully to this demographic? Furthermore, how will the increase in religiously unaffiliated voters affect the fragile network of alliances within each party? Will the demands of the unchurched rub other sections of the party faithful the wrong way?

Below we offer more information and a few suggestions for how political strategists can both engage this group and also maintain party unity.

Who exactly are the “nones”?

At the most basic level, “nones” are people who answer the question “What is your religious affiliation?” by saying that they have no particular religious attachment. But a lack of religious affiliation does not mean all “nones” deny a higher power. On the contrary, only about one-third claim to be atheists and agnostics, according to the PRRI survey.⁸ And although the PRRI report breaks the unaffiliated up into “atheists/agnostics,” “seculars,” and “unattached believers,” the latter two categories appear to be fairly similar when it comes to personal religious belief: Only 25 percent of “secular” Americans deny the existence of a higher being,⁹ and the majority of the unaffiliated overall—a full 68 percent—claim to believe in God.¹⁰

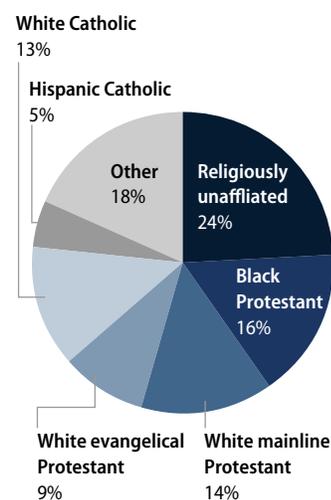
In addition, while they might not show up for church on Sunday, synagogue on Saturday, or mosque on Friday, sizable blocs of the unaffiliated express tendencies that many would consider religious: 58 percent claim a “deep connection with nature and the earth,” 37 percent claim to be “spiritual,” and more than 20 percent say they pray daily.¹¹

The unchurched are not necessarily antireligious, either. According to the Pew survey, the overwhelming majority of the religiously unaffiliated (78 percent) think religious organizations bring people together and help strengthen community bonds, and roughly the same percentage (77 percent) think religion plays an important role in helping care for the world’s poor.¹²

But the “nones” differ starkly from the general populace when it comes to the role of religion in politics. Whereas two-thirds of the public thinks it is important for a president

FIGURE 1
The rise of the “nones”

Religious composition of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters in the United States*



*Numbers do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (2012), available at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf.

to have strong religious beliefs, only one-third of the unaffiliated, the majority of whom are Democrats, feel the same way. The unaffiliated are also more likely than the general public to say that churches should stay out of political matters (66 percent versus 54 percent).¹³ (see Figure 2)

And although only 38 percent of the general population is uncomfortable with a politician who talks about his or her religious beliefs, exactly half of the unaffiliated take issue with a vocally pious candidate.¹⁴

Demographically speaking, the religiously unaffiliated are simultaneously unusually diverse and strikingly homogenous. The Pew survey reported that the increase in “nones” transcends income bracket, education level, and geographic region, dispelling the stereotype that people abandon religion because of higher education, increased wealth, or urbanization.¹⁵ Yet the survey also found that the religiously unaffiliated are overwhelmingly white, with only negligible increases among African Americans in the past few years. Many are also young—roughly one in three Americans under 30 (32 percent) now claim to have no religious affiliation.¹⁶

The average unaffiliated voter can thus be understood as a young white Democrat of undetermined income and education who doesn’t necessarily dislike religion but is uncomfortable with its role in the public square.

Courting the “none vote”: Preaching to the choir?

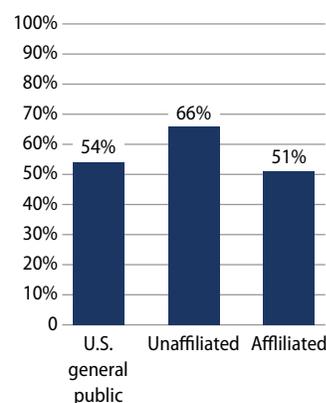
At first glance, the growth of the religiously unaffiliated would appear to be a windfall for the Democratic Party. When speaking at the Religion Newswriters Association Conference two weeks ago, John Green, professor of political science at the University of Akron in Ohio, noted that the “nones” could very well become “as important to the Democratic Party coalition as the traditionally religious are to the Republican Party coalition.”¹⁷

To be sure, the unaffiliated don’t seem to need much convincing when it comes to endorsing many ideals associated with the Democratic Party. In fact, they are twice as likely to describe themselves as political liberals than conservatives, and solid majorities support legal abortion (72 percent) and same-sex marriage (73 percent).¹⁸ (see Figure 3 on following page)

The PRRI American Values Survey, furthermore, found that the unchurched overwhelmingly support increasing taxes on the wealthy (70 percent).¹⁹ Therefore, the driving values of this group are not much different than those of most liberals: The unaffiliated appear to be more passionate than most Americans in their support for Democratic causes such as marriage equality and legal abortion.

FIGURE 2
The “nones” oppose church political activism

Percentage of Americans who believe churches should stay out of political matters



Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (2012), available at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf.

What’s more, their distance from organized religion might in and of itself signal a deeply rooted opposition to contemporary expressions of political conservatism. In their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell write that the increase in “nones” is at least partially related to the rise of the Religious Right.²⁰ More specifically, they claim that many left-leaning Americans—especially young adults—remain skittish about attaching themselves to a religious group because they associate “religion” with a specific conservative political theology.

But the religiously unaffiliated are not a built-in election winner for Democrats. While the political involvement of “nones” has increased in recent years,²¹ they are historically not as politically active as many of their religious counterparts, and thus less likely to turn out on Election Day.²² The PRRI survey found that only 61 percent of the unaffiliated were certain they were going to vote this year, as opposed to 73 percent of religiously affiliated Americans.²³

With the exception of atheists and agnostics, the religiously unaffiliated are also less prone to follow the election. Forty-three percent of atheists and agnostics say they are paying very close attention to the 2012 presidential campaign, whereas only 30 percent of “secular” Americans and “unattached believers” say they’re tuning in.²⁴

What’s more, while most “nones” are white, the unaffiliated are divided across income brackets and education levels.²⁵ When combined with the general lack of social participation among the “nones” (who are less likely to join community organizations²⁶), these characteristics render them a challenging group to organize politically.

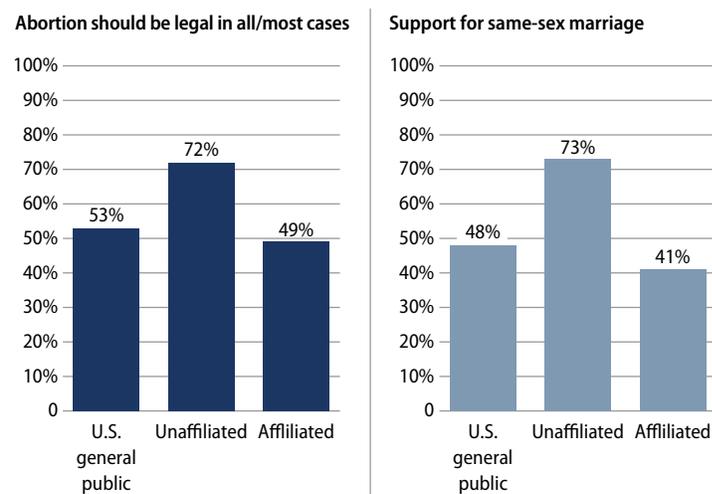
There also seems to be at least one possible opening for Republicans: Exactly half of the unaffiliated—or roughly the same as the general population—say they prefer a smaller government that provides fewer services to a larger government that provides more services.²⁷

Strategies for reaching the unaffiliated

With so many unknowns about the habits of the religiously unaffiliated, it is difficult to build a foolproof strategy for either Republicans or Democrats to court the “none vote.” And while the unaffiliated are united by their lack of religious affiliation and their higher-

FIGURE 3
The “nones” are progressive

Social and political beliefs among the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated



Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (2012), available at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf

than-average distaste for religion in politics, most don't appear to be poised to vote solely on these issues. If anything, the fervent support "nones" hold for legal abortion and marriage equality seems to drive their voting habits more than their unaffiliated status.

Some simple tactics, however, could prove effective for campaign strategists hoping to reach the unaffiliated. First, campaigns would do well to consider the "nones" an actual voting demographic, dedicating time and resources to learning more about this large constituency. Democrats in particular have much to gain from research about what drives this group, since the main barrier to bolstering their ranks with "nones" appears to be poll turnout, not persuasion.

Republicans could also gain from analyzing on this demographic. Granted, "nones" appear to lean Democratic on most issues, but it bears mentioning that research on the unchurched is still relatively thin. Deeper study on how "nones" respond to specific policies, for instance, could reveal sensitivities to certain Republican policies among the unaffiliated.

Second, politicians could benefit by not overusing explicitly religious rhetoric. As mentioned, the unaffiliated are not necessarily against religion but they are more turned off than the general public by candidates who frequently talk about their religious views. That said, this tactic isn't without its pitfalls: Sections of both the Republican and Democratic Party (evangelical Christians in both organizations, for example) will undoubtedly be uneasy with this kind of rhetorical change. Nevertheless, a shift of this nature could still bolster the ranks of both parties, as will be discussed in the next section.

Third, the Pew survey also reports that "nones" are slightly more likely than the religiously affiliated to be living with an unmarried partner (11 percent versus 6 percent),²⁸ making them more susceptible to policies affecting dual-income households that lack a marriage certificate—lack of tax credits and hospital visitation rights for unmarried couples, for example. This connects with the fervent support that the unaffiliated have for same-sex marriage, as same-sex couples are still denied marriage licenses in most states. Thus, Republicans and Democrats alike could benefit from appealing to the issues of unmarried couples, be it through policy or through supporting candidates that represent this constituency. Such actions could operate as a catch-all overture to many "nones."

Finally, one in three Americans under 30 currently claim to be religiously unaffiliated, meaning outreach to the "youth vote" already essentially doubles as "nones" outreach. Bolstering traditional aspects of youth outreach—appealing to the power of young voices, organizing on college campuses, taking advantage of social media, and targeting television appearances, for example—would likely pay dividends for both political parties in reaching out to younger factions of the religiously unaffiliated.

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Party politics: The challenge of difference and diversity

While both parties stand to gain from courting the religiously unaffiliated, crafting a “nones”-specific message poses several challenges for maintaining inter-party harmony. Granted, the “nones” are a solidly left-leaning group and unlikely to abandon the Democratic Party without concerted effort, but ill-planned attempts to cater to the unchurched could upset other Democratic-leaning groups and create opportunities for Republicans to chip away at left-leaning voting blocs.

Although “nones” make up a sizable portion of the Democratic Party, the vast majority of likely Democratic voters—76 percent—still claim a religious home.²⁹ And unlike “nones” who are uncomfortable with a candidate who speaks openly about his or her faith, 75 percent of those who associate with a religious tradition think it is very important for a president to have strong religious beliefs.³⁰ (see Figure 4)

In fact, a 2009 Pew overview found that African Americans and white evangelicals are especially passionate about the need for religion in politics: Clear majorities of both groups (61 percent and 59 percent, respectively) say that churches should speak out on political issues.³¹ What’s more, roughly half of African-American Christians and more than 55 percent of white evangelicals say that politicians don’t say *enough* about their faith.

Similarly, an earlier Pew survey from 2007 found that Latinos—an ever-growing demographic in the United States—agree by a nearly 2-to-1 margin that there has been *too little* expression of religious faith by political leaders.³²

A number of researchers and commentators are flagging this growing tension as a potential point of conflict for both parties.³³ After all, how exactly can a party construct a platform that simultaneously trumpets the religious beliefs of candidates and also acknowledges the rhetorical aversions of the “nones”?

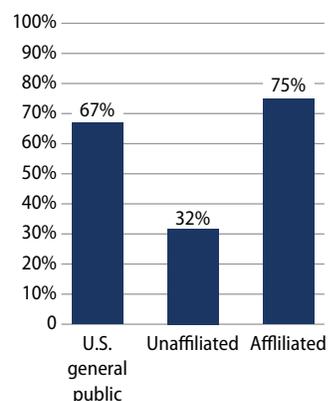
The problem, however, might be worse in theory than in practice. It’s worth repeating that the majority of the religiously unaffiliated are not inherently hostile to religion per se. Rather, it is the influence of religion within politics, and not religion in and of itself, that they find distasteful. The passionate support expressed by “nones” for many traditionally Democratic issues implies that discussions of larger progressive social values—heralding the need to care for the poor or championing society’s imperative to act on behalf of the oppressed, for example—are as important to them as they are to the religiously affiliated.

Navigating inter-party difference through inclusive rhetoric

The work of maintaining a “big tent” could thus begin with a relatively simple task: developing a more inclusive political rhetoric that, while perhaps not outrightly avoiding religion, works to focus on more general, less religiously based values language.

FIGURE 4
God still matters
in U.S. politics

Most religiously affiliated Americans believe a president should have strong religious beliefs



Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (2012), available at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf

This rhetorical changeover is probably easier for Democrats than for Republicans. Indeed, a close reading of the more value-based speeches of the 2012 party conventions hints that many younger Democrats have already started to make this transition. When speaking to the Democratic National Convention this year about marriage equality, Zach Wahls, a college student from Iowa who was raised by lesbian parents, mentioned that his family went to church but rooted his support for same-sex marriage in the language of general family values.

“I think every child deserves a family as loving and as committed as mine,” Wahls said. “Because the sense of family comes from the commitment we make to each other. ... it comes from the love that binds us. That’s what makes a family.”³⁴

Similarly, Sandra Fluke, a law student at Georgetown University who was famously called a “slut” by conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh for speaking out in favor of the contraception mandate, appealed to general values in her speech to the Democratic National Convention. She spoke of the right to personal freedom, saying, “[Voters have a choice between] a country where we mean it when we talk about personal freedom, or one where that freedom doesn’t apply to our bodies and our voices.”³⁵

To be sure, the use of this kind of language doesn’t mean the eradication of political rhetoric plainly rooted in faith. Rather the development of more general values-based language is meant to *go alongside faith-centered language*. And party officials worried about cutting down the explicitly religious rhetoric can take solace in knowing that religion, while obviously important to many Americans, is increasingly unlikely to be the deciding factor in how people cast their final vote. A recent Rasmussen poll found that a little less than half of Americans think a candidate’s religious preference is important, and only 19 percent think it’s “very important,” a 16-point drop from the 35 percent who said the same in 2006.³⁶

There is also something to be said for the argument that changing the perception of religion could alter the perspectives of many unaffiliated people. After all, if many “nones” refuse to claim a tradition because they associate “religion” with the Religious Right, then it stands to reason that shifting perceptions of what religion *means*—religion equals fighting *for* marriage equality instead of against it, for example—could dampen sensitivity to religious rhetoric.

CNN recently argued that President Obama’s careful use of his faith while in office is evidence of this kind of shift,³⁷ and NPR even suggested that *both* presidential candidates in the 2012 presidential election are using faith in a distinctively different way than in elections past.³⁸ Of course, the task of remaking America’s perception of religion requires far more time, resources, and effort than a simple rhetorical shift, but it could ultimately pay dividends for religious Democrats over time.

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The interests of the religiously unaffiliated should be taken seriously, albeit carefully. Religion might not be a deal breaker for many “nones,” or even for religious Americans, but in a political environment where coalitions are often delicate, one poorly handled issue might be enough to fracture an already fragile alliance. Thus, both parties should, at the very least, explore the possibility of using new ways to talk about issues and the role faith plays in them.

Conclusion

There is no question that the rise of the “none vote” signals a shift that will impact American politics for years to come. The fact that many unchurched are still in some way “religious” makes it inaccurate to claim that America is becoming truly “secularized,” but their opinions on the separation of church and state—especially their aversion to the use of religious rhetoric in political campaigns—will inevitably affect the way politicians and parties talk about faith and American values.

The real question, then, is *how* politicians and political parties react to this shift. True, the rise of the “nones” presents potential challenges for both parties, but their presence is also an undeniable opportunity for growing either party. Republicans admittedly face a larger challenge than Democrats in this regard, but both parties could bolster their numbers on Election Day by showing rhetorical sensitivity to the “nones” and attempting to reach them where they are. And although inter-party tensions are real and building bridges amid difference is always difficult, neither party is unschooled when it comes to growing coalitions.

Indeed, the hard work of cooperation and compromise is precisely how American political parties are crafted in the first place.

While the rise of the “nones” might be unsettling for some, it should not be feared by political strategists—or, for that matter, the vast majority of Americans who still claim a religious affiliation. Most “nones” are not antifaith or even unreligious, but are instead a growing part of the American electorate who, while perhaps uncomfortable with overtly religious rhetoric in the public sphere, are nonetheless willing to partner with the religiously affiliated over issues they care about. Both parties would do well to extend a hand in partnership.

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