

PewResearchCenter

Religion & Public Life

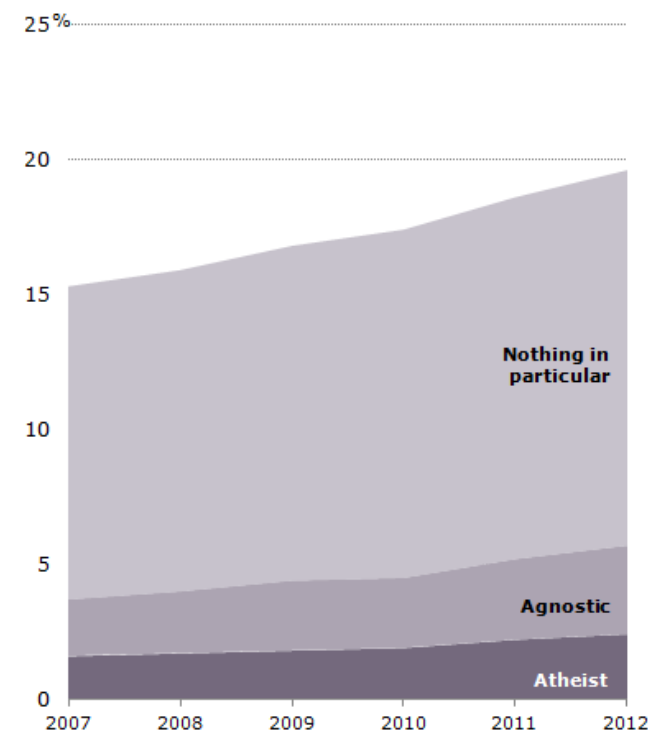
OCTOBER 9, 2012

“Nones” on the Rise

The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.

In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%).³ (#_ftn3)

Growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-July 2012.

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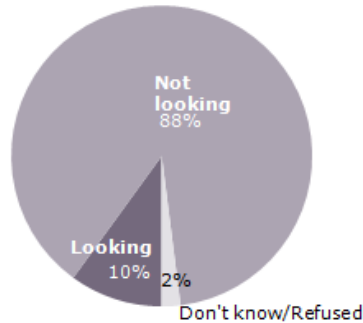
This large and growing group of Americans is less religious than the public at large on many conventional measures, including frequency of attendance at religious services and the degree of importance they attach to religion in their lives.

However, a new survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, finds that many of the country’s 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.

With few exceptions, though, the unaffiliated say they are *not* looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.

Are You Looking For a Religion that Would be Right for You?

Among those who identify their religion as “nothing in particular,” % who say they are ...

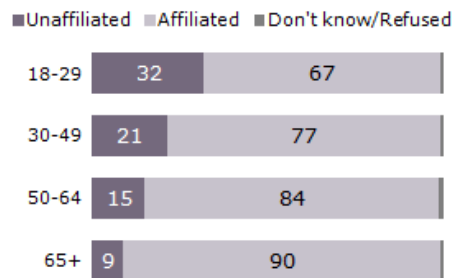


Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q72. Based on those who say their religion is “nothing in particular.”

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The growth in the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans – sometimes called the rise of the “nones” – is largely driven by generational replacement, the gradual supplanting of older generations by newer ones.⁴ (#_ftn4) A third of adults under 30 have no religious affiliation (32%), compared with just one-in-ten who are 65 and older (9%). And young adults today are much more likely to be unaffiliated than previous generations were at a similar stage in their lives.

Religious Affiliation by Age



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012.

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These generational differences are consistent with other signs of a gradual softening of religious commitment among some (though by no means all) Americans in recent decades. Pew Research Center surveys conducted over the last 10 years, for example, find modest growth in the number of people who say they seldom or never attend religious services, as well as a declining number who say they never doubt the existence of God.

In addition to religious behavior, the way that Americans talk about their connection to religion seems to be changing. Increasingly, Americans describe their religious affiliation in terms that more closely match their level of involvement in churches and other religious organizations. In 2007, 60% of those who said they seldom or never attend religious services nevertheless described themselves as belonging to a particular religious tradition. In 2012, just 50% of those who say they seldom or never attend religious services still retain a religious affiliation

– a 10-point drop in five years. These trends suggest that the ranks of the unaffiliated are swelling in surveys partly because Americans who rarely go to services are more willing than in the past to drop their religious attachments altogether.

Share of Infrequent Churchgoers Who Describe Themselves as Unaffiliated Has Been Growing

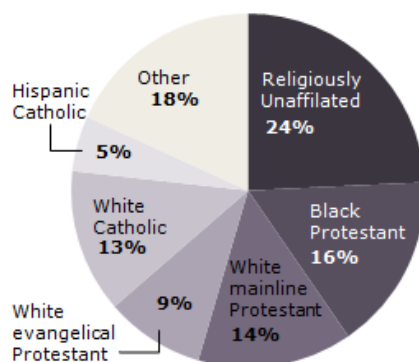
	<i>Among those who attend religious services...</i>			
	Seldom/ never		At least yearly	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
% who say they are...	%	%	%	%
Religiously Unaffiliated	38	49	7	8
Affiliated	60	50	92	91
Don't know	3	1	1	1
	100	100	100	100
<i>Share of total pop.</i>	27%	29%	71%	70%

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007 and 2012.

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With their rising numbers, the religiously unaffiliated are an increasingly important segment of the electorate. In the 2008 presidential election, they voted as heavily for Barack Obama as white evangelical Protestants did for John McCain. More than six-in-ten religiously unaffiliated registered voters are Democrats (39%) or lean toward the Democratic Party (24%). They are about twice as likely to describe themselves as political liberals than as conservatives, and solid majorities support legal abortion (72%) and same-sex marriage (73%). In the last five years, the unaffiliated have risen from 17% to 24% of all registered voters who are Democrats or lean Democratic. (See religious groupings in pie chart below.)

Religious Composition of Democratic/Democratic-Leaning Registered Voters



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012. Based on registered voters. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. "Other" includes Protestants and Catholics of a race or ethnic group not shown and those affiliated with other religions.

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This report includes findings from a nationwide survey by the Pew Research Center, conducted June 28-July 9, 2012, using both landlines and cell phones, among a representative sample of 2,973 adults. In partnership with Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, the Pew Forum conducted an additional 511 interviews with religiously

unaffiliated adults between June 28 and July 10, producing a total sample of 958 religiously unaffiliated respondents in the new survey.

To help paint a full portrait of religiously unaffiliated Americans, the Pew Forum also aggregated and analyzed data on this large and growing population from prior Pew Research Center surveys.

In addition, this report contains capsule summaries of some leading theories put forward by scholars in an attempt to explain the root causes of the rise of the “nones.” These theories run the gamut from a backlash against the entanglement of religion and politics to a global relationship between economic development and secularization. While Pew Research Center surveys are unlikely to settle the debate, they may help to rule out some misconceptions about the unaffiliated. For example, the surveys show that religious affiliation is declining among Americans who do not have college degrees, as well as among college graduates, which suggests that the trend is not solely a result of attitudes toward religion on college campuses. Nor, as the new Pew Research Center/Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly survey shows, are the unaffiliated composed largely of religious “seekers” who are looking for a spiritual home and have not found it yet.

Ranks of the Religiously Unaffiliated Continue To Grow

In 2007 Pew Research Center surveys, 15.3% of U.S. adults answered a question about their current religion by saying they were atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular.” The number of religiously unaffiliated respondents has ticked up each year since, and now stands at 19.6%.

Trends in Religious Affiliation, 2007-2012

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	07-12 Change
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Christian	78	77	77	76	75	73	-5
Protestant	53	52	51	51	50	48	-5
White evang.	21	19	20	19	18	19	-2
White mainline	18	18	17	17	17	15	-3
Black Protestant	8	8	9	9	9	8	--
Other minority Prot.	6	6	6	6	6	6	--
Catholic	23	22	23	23	23	22	-1
Mormon	2	2	2	2	2	2	--
Orthodox	1	1	1	1	1	1	--
Other faith	4	5	5	5	5	6	+2
Unaffiliated	15.3	16.0	16.8	17.4	18.6	19.6	+4.3
Atheist	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	2.2	2.4	+0.8
Agnostic	2.1	2.3	2.6	2.6	3.0	3.3	+1.2
Nothing in particular	11.6	11.9	12.4	12.9	13.4	13.9	+2.3
Don't know	2	2	2	2	1	2	--
	100	100	100	100	100	100	

N 9,443 29,035 22,159 24,764 19,377 17,010

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-2012. In the change column, figures that are statistically significant are shown in bold. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Question wording: What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?

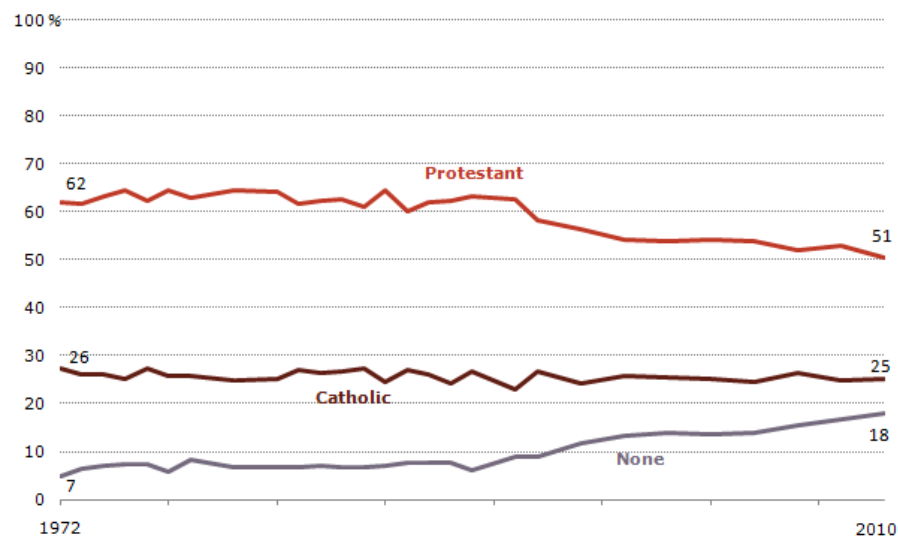
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While the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown significantly over the past five years, the Protestant share of the population has shrunk. In 2007, 53% of adults in Pew Research Center surveys described themselves as Protestants. In surveys conducted in the first half of 2012, fewer than half of American adults say they are Protestant (48%). This marks the first time in Pew Research Center surveys that the Protestant share of the population has dipped significantly below 50%.

The decline is concentrated among white Protestants, both evangelical and mainline. Currently, 19% of U.S. adults identify themselves as white, born-again or evangelical Protestants, down slightly from 21% in 2007. And 15% of adults describe themselves as white Protestants but say they are not born-again or evangelical Christians,

down from 18% in 2007.⁵ (#_ftn5) There has been no change in minority Protestants’ share of the population over the past five years.

Long-Term Trends in Religious Affiliation



Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-2010. Other religious affiliations and those who did not give an answer are not shown.
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These findings represent a continuation of long-term trends.⁶ (#_ftn6) The General Social Surveys (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for roughly four decades, show that the number of religiously unaffiliated adults remained below 10% from the 1970s through the early 1990s. The percentage of religiously unaffiliated respondents began to rise noticeably in the 1990s and stood at 18% in the 2010 GSS.

The Protestant share of the population, by contrast, has been declining since the early 1990s. In the GSS, about six-in-ten adults identified as Protestants in the 1970s and 1980s. By 2000, however, 54% of GSS respondents were Protestant. And in the 2010 GSS, 51% of respondents identified themselves as Protestants.

The Catholic share of the population has been roughly steady over this period, in part because of immigration from Latin America.⁷ (#_ftn7)

What Is Behind the Growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated?

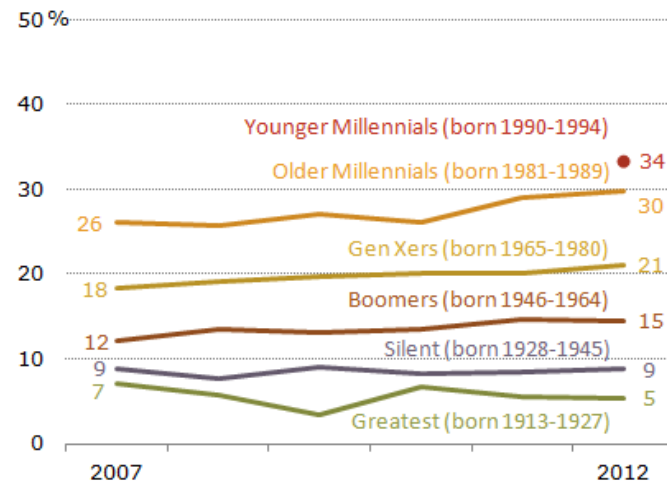
Generational Replacement

One important factor behind the growth of the religiously unaffiliated is generational replacement, the gradual supplanting of older generations by newer ones. Among the youngest Millennials (those ages 18-22, who were minors in 2007 and thus not eligible to be interviewed in Pew Research Center surveys conducted that year), fully one-third (34%) are religiously unaffiliated, compared with about one-in-ten members of the Silent Generation (9%) and one-in-twenty members of the World War II-era Greatest Generation (5%). Older Millennials (ages 23-30) also are substantially less likely than prior generations to be religiously affiliated.

But generational replacement is not the only factor at play. Generation Xers and Baby Boomers also have become more religiously unaffiliated in recent years. In 2012, 21% of Gen Xers and 15% of Baby Boomers describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up slightly (but by statistically significant margins) from 18% and 12%, respectively, since 2007. The trend lines for earlier generations are essentially flat. Not only are young adults less likely to be affiliated than their elders, but the GSS shows that the percentage of Americans who were raised without an affiliation has been rising gradually, from about 3% in the early 1970s to about 8% in the past decade. However, the overwhelming majority of the “nones” were brought up in a religious tradition. The new Pew Research Center/Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly survey finds that about three-quarters of unaffiliated adults were raised with some affiliation (74%).

Recent Trends in Affiliation, by Generation

% of each age cohort that is unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-2012.

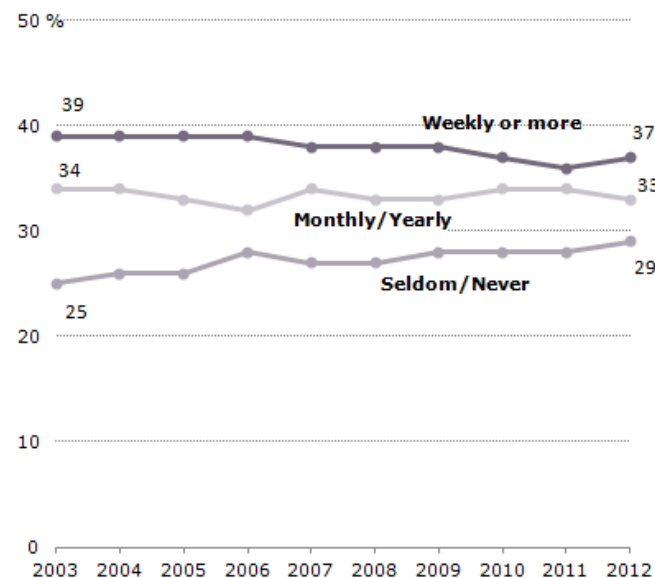
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Some Evidence of Decline in Religious Commitment in the U.S. Public

The continued growth of the religiously unaffiliated is one of several indicators suggesting that the U.S. public gradually may be growing less religious. To be sure, the United States remains a highly religious country – particularly by comparison with other advanced industrial democracies – and some measures of religious commitment in America have held remarkably steady over the years. The number of Americans who currently say religion is very important in their lives (58%), for instance, is little changed since 2007 (61%) and is far higher than in Britain (17%), France (13%), Germany (21%) or Spain (22%).⁸ (#_ftn8) And over the longer term, Pew Research surveys find no change in the percentage of Americans who say that prayer is an important part of their daily life; it is 76% in 2012, the same as it was 25 years ago, in 1987.

But on some other key measures, there is evidence of a gradual decline in religious commitment. In 2003, for instance, 25% of U.S. adults indicated they seldom or never attend religious services. By 2012, that number had ticked up 4 points, to 29%.

Religious Attendance of U.S. Adults, 2003-2012

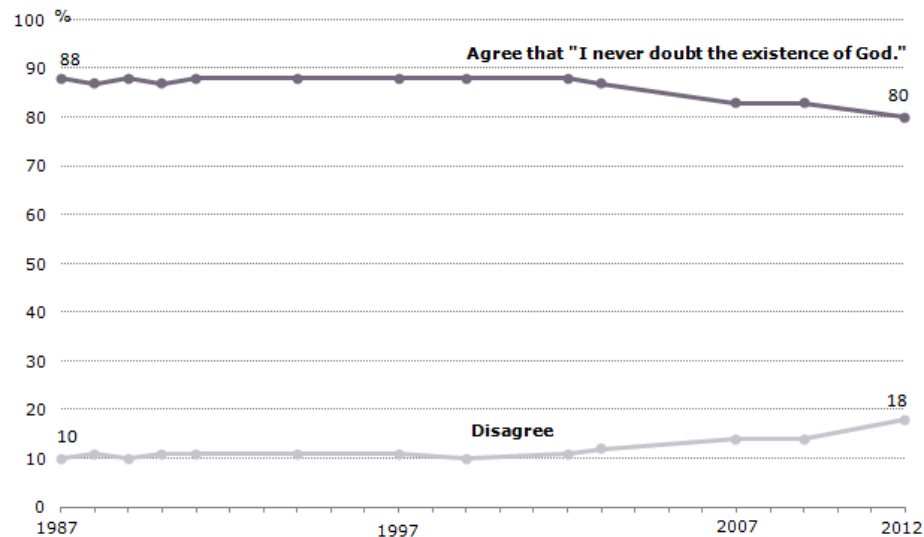


Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2003-2012.

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Similarly, the percentage of Americans who say they never doubt the existence of God has fallen modestly but noticeably over the past 25 years. In 1987, 88% of adults said they never doubt the existence of God. As of 2012, this figure was down 8 percentage points to 80%.

Declining Share Say They “Never Doubt” the Existence of God



Source: Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 1987-2012.

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In addition, the percentage of Americans who say the Bible should be taken literally has fallen in Gallup polls from an average of about 38% of the public in the late 1970s and early 1980s to an average of 31% since.⁹ (#_ftn9) And based on analysis of GSS data, Mark Chaves of Duke University has found that Americans born in recent

decades are much less likely than their elders to report having attended religious services weekly at age 12. Young adults are also less likely than older adults to report that when they were growing up, their parents attended religious services regularly.

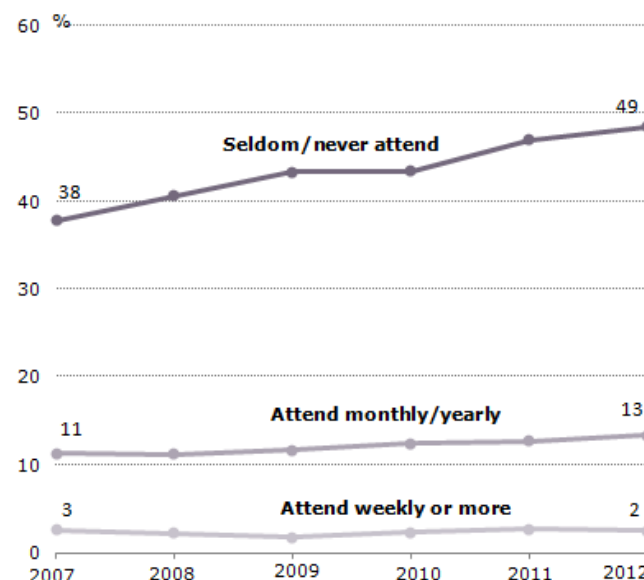
Chaves recently summarized trends in American religion by asserting that “... there is much continuity, and there is some decline, but no traditional religious belief or practice has increased in recent decades.”¹⁰ (#_ftn10)

Less Religious Americans Increasingly Say They Have No Affiliation

Part of the reason that the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown in recent years is that Americans who are not particularly religious – at least by conventional measures, such as self-reported rates of attendance at religious services – increasingly describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular.”

Trends in Disaffiliation, by Religious Attendance

% of each attendance category that is unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-2012.

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In 2007, 38% of people who said they seldom or never attend religious services described themselves as religiously unaffiliated. In 2012, 49% of infrequent attenders eschew any religious affiliation. By comparison, the percentage describing themselves as unaffiliated has been flat among those who attend religious services once a week or more often.

Over this same period (2007-2012), change in self-reported levels of religious attendance has been relatively modest. In 2007, 38% of U.S. adults reported attending religious services weekly. Today, the figure is 37%. And although there has been a four-point uptick over the past decade in the number saying they seldom or never attend services, the change over the past five years has been more modest (from 27% saying they seldom or never attend in 2007 to 29% in 2012).

Summarizing these trends from another angle, the religiously unaffiliated population is increasingly composed of people who rarely or never attend religious services. In 2007, 68% of religiously unaffiliated Americans said they seldom or never attend religious services. As of 2012, this figure has risen slightly but significantly to 72%. Over the same period, the share of religiously affiliated adults who seldom or never attend religious services has declined slightly.¹¹ (#_ftn11)

Worship Attendance Among the Unaffiliated and Affiliated

	Unaffiliated		Affiliated	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
<i>Attends worship services...</i>	%	%	%	%
Weekly or more	7	5	44	45
Monthly/Yearly	25	22	35	36
Seldom/Never	68	72	20	18
Don't know	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
	100	100	100	100
N	1,304	2,942	7,933	13,821

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007 and 2012. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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Who Are the Unaffiliated?

Demographically Broad-Based

The growth of the unaffiliated has taken place across a wide variety of demographic groups. The percentage of unaffiliated respondents has ticked up among men and women, college graduates and those without a college degree, people earning \$75,000 or more and those making less than \$30,000 annually, and residents of all major regions of the country.

Trends in Religious Disaffiliation, by Demographic Groups

% who describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated among ...

	2007	2012	Change
	%	%	
U.S. general public	15.3	19.6	+4.3
Men	18	23	+5
Women	13	17	+4
White	15	20	+5
Black	13	15	+2
Hispanic	16	16	--
College grad+	17	21	+4
College grad	15	22	+7
Post-grad	19	20	+1
Some college or less	15	19	+4
\$75,000+	16	21	+5
\$30,000-\$74,999	15	20	+5
<\$30,000	17	20	+3
Married	14	14	--
Not married	20	24	+4
Northeast	15	21	+6
Midwest	15	19	+4
South	12	15	+3
West	21	26	+5

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007 and 2012. Hispanic figures based only on surveys that included Spanish interviewing. Changes that are statistically significant are shown in bold.

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When it comes to race, however, the recent change has been concentrated in one group: whites. One-fifth of (non-Hispanic) whites now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up five percentage points since 2007. By contrast, the share of blacks and Hispanics who are religiously unaffiliated has not changed by a statistically significant margin in recent years.

Beliefs and Practices

In terms of their religious beliefs and practices, the unaffiliated are a diverse group, and far from uniformly secular. Just 5% say they attend worship services on a weekly basis. But one-third of the unaffiliated say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. Two-thirds believe in God (though less than half say they are absolutely certain of God’s existence). And although a substantial minority of the unaffiliated consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual (42%), the majority describe themselves either as a religious person (18%) or as spiritual but not religious (37%).

Unaffiliated, But Not Uniformly Secular

	U.S. general public	Unaffiliated	Affiliated
<i>How important is religion in your life?</i>	%	%	%
Very important	58	14	67
Somewhat	22	19	24
Not too/not at all	18	65	8
Don't know/refused	1	1	*
	100	100	100
<i>Believe in God or universal spirit?</i>			
Yes, absolutely certain	69	30	77
Yes, but less certain	23	38	20
No	7	27	2
Other/don't know	2	5	1
	100	100	100
<i>Frequency of prayer</i>			
Daily	58	21	66
Weekly/monthly	21	20	22
Seldom/never	19	58	11
Don't know	2	1	1
	100	100	100
<i>Think of self as...</i>			
Religious person	65	18	75
Spiritual but not religious	18	37	15
Neither spiritual nor religious	15	42	8
Don't know	2	2	1
	100	100	100

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q50, Q53-54, Q52, Q97a-b. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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The unaffiliated also are not uniformly hostile toward religious institutions. They are much more likely than the public overall to say that churches and other religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules, and too involved in politics. But at the same time, a majority of the religiously unaffiliated clearly think that religion can be a force for good in society, with three-quarters saying religious organizations bring people together and help strengthen community bonds (78%) and a similar number saying religious organizations play an important role in helping the poor and needy (77%).

Views of Religious Institutions

% who agree that churches and other religious organizations ...

	U.S. general public	Unaffiliated	Affiliated
	%	%	%
Are too concerned w/money and power	51	70	47
Focus too much on rules	51	67	47
Are too involved w/politics	46	67	41
Bring people together/strengthen community bonds	88	78	90
Play important role in helping poor and needy	87	77	90
Protect and strengthen morality	76	52	81

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q73a-g. Responses of disagree and those who did not give an answer are not shown.

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The religiously unaffiliated population is less convinced that religious institutions help protect morality; just half say this, considerably lower than the share of the general public that views churches and other religious organizations as defenders of morality (52% vs. 76%).

Two-thirds of Americans, including 63% of the religiously unaffiliated, say religion as a whole is losing its influence on American life. A large majority of those who think religion's influence is on the decline see this as a bad thing. But those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” are less inclined to view religion's declining influence as a bad thing. And atheists and agnostics overwhelmingly view religion's declining influence as a good thing for society.

Differing Views over the Impact of Religion's Influence on Society

Is religion increasing or losing its influence on American life? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

	U.S. general public	Unaffiliated	Atheist/ Agnostic	Nothing in particular
	%	%	%	%
Increasing	25	27	34	24
Losing	66	63	59	65
Good thing	12	28	43	22
Bad thing	49	26	10	32
Other/DK	5	9	6	11
Same (VOL.)	2	2	2	2
Don't know	7	7	5	8
	100	100	100	100

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q42/42b. Figures may not add to 100% – and nested figures may not add to total – due to rounding.

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The vast majority of religiously unaffiliated Americans are not actively seeking to find a church or other religious group to join. Leaving aside atheists or agnostics, just 10% of those who describe their current religion as “nothing in particular” say they are looking for a religion that is right for them; 88% say they are not.¹² (#_ftn12)

Neither “Seekers” Nor More Inclined Toward New Age Beliefs Than the General Public

% of “nothing in particulars” who are...	U.S. general public	Unaffiliated
	%	%
Looking for religion that is right for them	n/a	10
Not doing this	n/a	88
Don’t know	n/a	2
		100
% who believe in...		
Spiritual energy in physical things like mountains, trees, crystals	26	30
Astrology	25	25
Reincarnation	24	25
Yoga as spiritual practice	23	28
% who often...		
Think about meaning and purpose of life	67	53
Feel deep connection w/nature and the earth	58	58
% who say it is very important...		
To belong to community w/shared values and beliefs	49	28
% who have ever...		
Had religious or mystical experience	49	30
Been in touch w/someone who has died	29	31
Seen or been in presence of ghost	18	19
Consulted psychic	15	15

Sources: Data on looking for a religion, thinking about meaning of life, connection with nature, and importance of community from Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q72, Q21a-b, Q22. See topline in Appendix 2 for details. All other data from August 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Q290, Q291a,b,c,f,Q292a-c.

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Nor are the ranks of the unaffiliated predominantly composed of practitioners of New Age spirituality or alternative forms of religion. Generally speaking, the unaffiliated are no more likely than members of the public as a whole to have such beliefs and practices.

For example, roughly three-in-ten religiously unaffiliated adults say they believe in spiritual energy in physical objects and in yoga as a spiritual practice. About a quarter believe in astrology and reincarnation. In addition, nearly six-in-ten of the religiously unaffiliated say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth; about three-in-ten say they have felt in touch with someone who is dead; and 15% have consulted a psychic. All of these figures closely resemble the survey’s findings among the public as a whole.

On the other hand, the religiously unaffiliated are less inclined than Americans overall to say they often think about the meaning and purpose of life (53% vs. 67%). They also attach much less importance to belonging to a community of people with shared values and beliefs; 28% of the unaffiliated say this is very important to them, compared with 49% of all adults.

Social and Political Views

The religiously unaffiliated are heavily Democratic in their partisanship and liberal in their political ideology. More than six-in-ten describe themselves as Democrats or say they lean toward the Democratic Party (compared with 48% of all registered voters). And there are roughly twice as many self-described liberals (38%) as conservatives (20%) among the religiously unaffiliated. Among voters overall, this balance is reversed.

Partisanship and Ideology

% among registered voters

	All registered voters	Un- affiliated
<i>Party identification</i>	%	%
Dem/lean Dem	48	63
Rep/lean Rep	43	26
Independent/other – no lean	9	11
	100	100
<i>Ideology</i>		
Conservative	39	20
Moderate	36	38
Liberal	21	38
Don't know	4	4
	100	100

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January–July 2012. Based on registered voters.

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The liberalism of the unaffiliated extends to social issues, though not necessarily to attitudes about the size of government. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of religiously unaffiliated Americans say abortion should be legal in most or all cases, compared with 53% of the public overall. And 73% of the religiously unaffiliated express support for same-sex marriage, compared with 48% of the public at large. But the portion of the unaffiliated who say they would prefer a smaller government providing fewer services to a larger government providing more services is similar to the share of the general public who take the same view (50% and 52%, respectively).

Social and Political Issues

	U.S. general public	Unaffil- iated	Affil- iated
<i>Abortion should be...</i>	%	%	%
Legal in all/most cases	53	72	49
Illegal in all/most cases	41	24	46
Don't know	6	4	6
	100	100	100
<i>Same-sex marriage...</i>			
Favor	48	73	41
Oppose	44	20	50
Don't know	9	7	9
	100	100	100
<i>Prefer...</i>			
Bigger gov't, more services	39	42	38
Smaller gov't, fewer services	52	50	52
Depends/don't know	9	8	10
	100	100	100

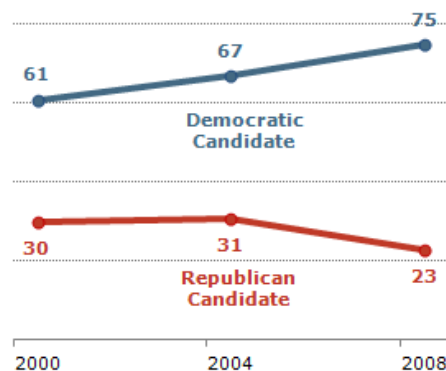
Sources: Abortion figures from aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2011–2012. Same-sex marriage figures from aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012. Views on role of government from Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey, January 2012. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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In recent elections, the religiously unaffiliated have become one of the most reliably Democratic segments of the electorate. Exit polls conducted by a consortium of news organizations indicate that in 2000, 61% of the unaffiliated voted for Al Gore over George W. Bush. By 2004, John Kerry's share of the unaffiliated vote had increased to 67%. And in 2008, fully three-quarters of the religiously unaffiliated voted for Barack Obama over

John McCain. In 2008, religiously unaffiliated voters were as strongly Democratic in their vote choice as white evangelicals were Republican. Obama’s margin of victory among the religiously unaffiliated was 52 points; McCain’s margin of victory among white evangelical voters was 47 points.

Presidential Vote of the Religiously Unaffiliated, 2000-2008



Source: Exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool, 2000, 2004, 2008. Based on those with no religion.

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The religiously unaffiliated constitute a growing share of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters. In 2007, there were about as many religiously unaffiliated Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters as white mainline and white Catholic Democratic voters. And the religiously unaffiliated were only slightly more numerous among Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters than were black Protestants (17% vs. 14%).

Trends in Religious Affiliation, by Party

	Rep/Rep leaning RVs		Dem/Dem leaning RVs	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
	%	%	%	%
Protestant	63	60	49	45
White evangelical	34	34	13	9
White mainline	23	20	17	14
Black Protestant	2	1	14	16
Other Protestant	4	5	5	5
Catholic	23	22	24	21
White Catholic	19	18	17	13
Hispanic Catholic	3	3	5	5
Other Catholic	1	1	2	2
Other Faith	5	7	8	9
Unaffiliated	9	11	17	24
Don't know/refused	1	1	2	1
	100	100	100	100

N 3,198 6,083 3,752 6,251

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007 and January-July 2012. Based on registered voters. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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Today, the religiously unaffiliated are clearly more numerous than any of these groups within the Democratic coalition (24% unaffiliated, 16% black Protestant, 14% white mainline Protestant, 13% white Catholic). By contrast, Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters are only slightly more likely to be religiously

unaffiliated today than they were in 2007 (11% vs. 9%).

Sidebar: Some Theories About Root Causes of the Rise of the Unaffiliated

Theory No. 1: Political Backlash

Several leading scholars contend that young adults, in particular, have turned away from organized religion because they perceive it as deeply entangled with conservative politics and do not want to have any association with it. University of California, Berkeley, sociologists Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer first suggested in 2002 that “part of the increase in ‘nones’ can be viewed as a symbolic statement against the Religious Right.”¹³ (#_ftn13) And in their recent book, “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,” Robert Putnam of Harvard University and David Campbell of Notre Dame marshal evidence from various surveys that supports this thesis. From the 1970s through the 1990s, they argue, “[r]eligiosity and conservative politics became increasingly aligned, and abortion and gay rights became emblematic of the emergent culture wars.” The result, they write, was that many young Americans came to view religion as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.”¹⁴ (#_ftn14)

The new Pew Research Center/Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly survey contains some data that can be seen as consistent with this hypothesis. The survey finds that the unaffiliated are concentrated among younger adults, political liberals and people who take liberal positions on same-sex marriage. In addition, two-thirds or more of the unaffiliated say that churches and other religious institutions are too concerned with money and power (70%) and too involved in politics (67%); these views are significantly more common among the unaffiliated than they are in the general public. Analysis of previous Pew Research Center surveys also shows that the unaffiliated are less likely than the affiliated to believe it is important to have a president with strong religious beliefs, and the unaffiliated are more likely than those with a religious affiliation to say that churches and other houses of worship should stay out of political matters.¹⁵ (#_ftn15) On the other hand, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated people has risen among Republican voters as well as among Democratic voters (though the increase is greater among Democrats).

Theory No. 2: Delays in Marriage

If there has been a political backlash, it may not be the *only* cause of the rise of the “nones.” As previously noted, the increase in the unaffiliated has taken place almost entirely among the segment of the population that seldom or never attends religious services. Some sociologists, such as Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University, have charted an overall decline in church attendance since the 1970s and attribute it to broader social and demographic trends, including the postponement of marriage and parenthood by growing numbers of young adults.¹⁶ (#_ftn16)

Aggregated data from Pew Research Center polls also are consistent with this argument, showing that among adults under 30, married people are more likely to have a religious affiliation than are unmarried people. On the other hand, an analysis of religious affiliation patterns by generation (<http://www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx#introduction>), previously published by the Pew Forum, suggests that Americans *do not* generally become more affiliated as they move through the life cycle from young adulthood through marriage, parenting, middle age and retirement.¹⁷ (#_ftn17) Rather, the percentage of people in each generation who are religiously affiliated has remained stable, or decreased slightly, as that generation has aged.

Theory No. 3: Broad Social Disengagement

Yet another hypothesis loosely links the rise of the unaffiliated to what some observers contend has been a general decline in “social capital” – a tendency among Americans to live more separate lives and engage in fewer communal activities, famously summed up by Harvard’s Putnam as “bowling alone.”¹⁸ (#_ftn18) In this view, the growth of the religious “nones” is just one manifestation of much broader social disengagement.

Pew Research Center surveys offer limited evidence along these lines. For example, a survey by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project found that the 40% of Americans who describe themselves as “active” in religious organizations – a higher bar than affiliation with a religious group – are more likely than other Americans to be involved in all types of volunteer and community groups, from sports leagues to arts groups, hobby clubs and alumni associations.¹⁹ (#_ftn19) The new Pew Research Center/Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly survey also finds that religiously unaffiliated Americans are less inclined than Americans as a whole to feel that it is very important to belong to “a community of people who share your values and beliefs” (28% of the unaffiliated say this is very important to them, compared with 49% of the general public).

Theory No. 4: Secularization

The rise of the unaffiliated in the U.S. also has helped to breathe new life into theories that link economic development with secularization around the globe. Back in the 1960s, when secularization theories first achieved high visibility, they were sometimes accompanied by predictions that religion would wither away in the United States by the 21st century.²⁰ (#_ftn20) The theories propounded by social scientists today tend to be more subtle – contending, for example, that societies in which people feel constant threats to their health and well-being are more religious, while religious beliefs and practices tend to be less strong in places where “existential security” is greater.²¹ (#_ftn21) In this view, gradual secularization is to be expected in a generally healthy, wealthy, orderly society.

Surveys conducted by the Pew Forum and the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project have asked people in many countries about the importance of religion in their lives, how often they pray and whether they think it is necessary to believe in God to be a moral person. Throughout much of the world, there is an association (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04/chapter-4-values-and-american-exceptionalism/>) between these measures of religiosity and a country’s national wealth: Publics in countries with a high gross domestic product (per capita) tend to be less religious, while publics in countries with a low GDP tend to be more religious. But as Pew Global Attitudes noted in a 2007 report, Americans are a major exception to the rule, because the U.S. has both high GDP per capita and high levels of religious commitment.²² (#_ftn22) Nonetheless, some theorists view the rise of the unaffiliated as a sign that secularization is advancing in America.²³ (#_ftn23)

Footnotes:

3 Pew Research Center calculations based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s August 2012 Current Population Survey, which estimates there are 234,787,000 adults in the U.S. (return to text) (#_ftnref3)

4 The term “nones” is often used to describe people who indicate in surveys that they have no religion or do not belong to any particular religion. See, for example, Kosmin, Barry A. and Ariela Keysar, with Ryan Cragun and Juhem Navarro-Rivera. 2009. “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population, A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008.” Trinity College, http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_o8.pdf (http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_o8.pdf). See also Smith, Tom W. 2007. “Counting Religious Nones and Other Religious Measurement Issues: A Comparison of the Baylor Religion Survey and General Social Survey.” GSS Methodological Report No. 110. <http://publicdata.norc.umd.edu/gss/documents/MTRT/MR110-Counting-Religious-Nones-and-Other-Religious-Measurement-Issues.pdf> (<http://publicdata.norc.umd.edu/gss/documents/MTRT/MR110%20Counting%20Religious%20Nones%20and%20Other%20Religious%20Measurement-Issues.pdf>). (return to text) (#_ftnref4)

5 Evangelical Protestants are defined here as Protestants who say yes when asked, “Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian, or not?” Protestants who do not answer this question affirmatively are categorized here as mainline Protestants. Other research that sorts Protestants into evangelical and mainline categories based on denominational affiliation (e.g., Southern Baptist, United Methodist, etc.) finds that the long-term decline in American Protestantism is concentrated primarily among the Protestant mainline. See, for example, Chaves, Mark. 2011. “American Religion: Contemporary Trends.” Princeton University Press, pages 81-93. (return to text) (#_ftnref5)

6 Notwithstanding the rise of the “nones,” some historical studies find that the portion of the U.S. population that is “churched” – i.e., that belongs to a parish or congregation – has increased dramatically over the nation’s history. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have estimated, for example, that just 17% of Americans belonged to religious congregations in 1776, compared with about 62% in 1980. However, the historical figures pre-date the modern era of polling and are based instead on various kinds of church records; they are estimates of congregational membership, not self-identification or affiliation with a religious group. See Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark. 1992. “The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy.” Rutgers University Press, pages 15-16. (return to text) (#_ftnref6)

7 For more information on recent changes within American Catholicism, including the impact of religious switching and immigration, see the Pew Forum’s “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” conducted in 2007 and published in 2008, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports> (<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>). See also the Pew Forum’s April 2007 report “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion,”

<http://www.pewforum.org/Changing-Faiths-Latinos-and-the-Transformation-of-American-Religion.aspx>
(<http://www.pewforum.org/Changing-Faiths-Latinos-and-the-Transformation-of-American-Religion.aspx>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref7)

8 See the November 2007 report by the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project “The American-Western European Values Gap: American Exceptionalism Subsides,” <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/> (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref8)

9 See Gallup. July 8, 2011. “In U.S., 3 in 10 Say They Take the Bible Literally.” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148427/say-bible-literally.aspx> (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/148427/say-bible-literally.aspx>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref9)

10 See Chaves, Mark. 2011. “American Religion: Contemporary Trends.” Princeton University Press, pages 14, 50-51. (return to text) (#_ftnref10)

11 Studies have found that some survey respondents switch back and forth between describing themselves as affiliated and unaffiliated. Researchers call such people “liminals” because they seem to straddle the threshold of a religious tradition, partly in and partly out. In a 2006 survey and follow-up interviews in 2007, Robert Putnam and David Campbell found that roughly 10% of the members of each major religious tradition can be considered liminals. Moreover, they found that although the liminals’ nominal affiliation changed (in either direction) from one year to the next, their self-reported religious beliefs and practices remained largely the same. This may be seen as further evidence that the rise in the number of unaffiliated Americans is not just a reflection of changes in religious behavior. The way that some people think about and describe their religious identity also is in flux. See Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell. 2010. “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,” Simon & Schuster, pages 135-136. See also Lim, Chaeyoon, Carol Ann MacGregor and Robert D. Putnam. 2010. “Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 49, no. 4: 596-618. (return to text) (#_ftnref11)

12 Nevertheless, there is substantial switching from unaffiliated to affiliated. In the current survey, four-in-ten adults who say they were raised unaffiliated now identify themselves as religiously affiliated. For a comprehensive analysis of patterns in religious switching and the reasons people give for switching, see the Pew Forum’s “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” conducted in 2007 and published in 2008, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports> (<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>) . Also see the Pew Forum’s April 2009 report “Faith in Flux,” <http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx> (<http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref12)

13 Hout, Michael and Claude S. Fischer. 2002. “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations.” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 67: 165-190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3088891> (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3088891>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref13)

14 Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell. 2010. “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us.” Simon & Schuster, pages 120-121. (return to text) (#_ftnref14)

15 See the Pew Research Center’s July 2012 report “Little Voter Discomfort with Romney’s Mormon Religion: Only About Half Identify Obama as Christian (/2012/07/26/2012-romney-mormonism-obamas-religion/).” Also see the Pew Research Center’s March 2012 report “More See ‘Too Much’ Religious Talk by Politicians: Santorum Voters Disagree,” <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/more-see-too-much-religious-talk-by-politicians.aspx> (<http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/more-see-too-much-religious-talk-by-politicians.aspx>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref15)

16 Wuthnow, Robert. 2007. “After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion.” Princeton University Press, pages 51-70. (return to text) (#_ftnref16)

17 By contrast, some measures of religious commitment – such as frequency of prayer and the degree of importance that people assign to religion in their lives – do tend to rise with age. See the Pew Forum’s February 2010 report “Religion Among the Millennials,” <http://www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx> (<http://www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref17)

18 Putnam, Robert D. 2000. “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.” Simon & Schuster. In “American Grace,” Putnam and Campbell also consider changing moral and social beliefs to be part of the mix. “American Grace,” page 127. (return to text) (#_ftnref18)

19 See the December 2011 report by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project “The civic and community engagement of religiously active Americans,” <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-side-of-religious/Overview.aspx> (<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-side-of-religious/Overview.aspx>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref19)

20 See, for example, The New York Times. 1968. “A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion.” Feb. 25, page 3. The article quotes sociologist Peter L. Berger predicting that by the 21st century, traditional religions would survive only in “small enclaves and pockets.” Berger has since renounced his earlier position. (return to text) (#_ftnref20)

21 See Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart. 2004. “Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide.” Cambridge University Press, pages 216-217. They argue that “Societies where people’s daily lives are shaped by the threat of poverty, disease and premature death remain as religious today as centuries earlier. These same societies are also experiencing rapid population growth. In rich nations, by contrast, the evidence demonstrates that secularization has been proceeding since at least the mid-twentieth century (and probably earlier) – but at the same time fertility rates have fallen sharply, so that in recent years population growth has stagnated and their total population is starting to shrink. The result of these combined trends is that *rich societies are becoming more secular but the world as a whole is becoming more religious.*” Italics in original. Ibid, pages 216-217. (return to text) (#_ftnref21)

22 See the 2007 report by the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project “World Publics Welcome Global Trade — But Not Immigration,” <http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04/world-publics-welcome-global-trade-but-not-immigration/> (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04/world-publics-welcome-global-trade-but-not-immigration/>) . (return to text) (#_ftnref22)

23 Norris and Inglehart, Ibid, pages 89-95. They offer a number of possible explanations for America’s exceptional religiosity – asserting, in particular, that economic inequality and the perception of a porous social welfare net leave Americans feeling “greater anxieties” than citizens in other advanced industrial countries. They also mention “the fact that the United States was founded by religious refugees” and the continuing arrival of new immigrants who bring “relatively strong religiosity with them.” Ibid, pages 107-108 and 225-226. (return to text) (#_ftnref23)