

# PewResearchCenter

## *Religion & Public Life*

OCTOBER 9, 2012

“NONES” ON THE RISE

## **Social and Political Views of the Unaffiliated**

The religiously unaffiliated have become one of the most reliably Democratic constituencies in recent elections. According to national exit polls, 61% of the unaffiliated voted for Al Gore over George W. Bush in 2000. In 2004, John Kerry’s share of the unaffiliated vote increased to 67%. And in 2008, Barack Obama captured fully three-quarters of the vote among the religiously unaffiliated, while 23% voted for John McCain.

The partisan and ideological leanings of the unaffiliated follow the same pattern. Compared with the general public, the religiously unaffiliated are more Democratic in their partisanship and more liberal in their political ideology. And, given their growing share among U.S. adults, the unaffiliated constitute a larger share of Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters in 2012 than they did five years ago.

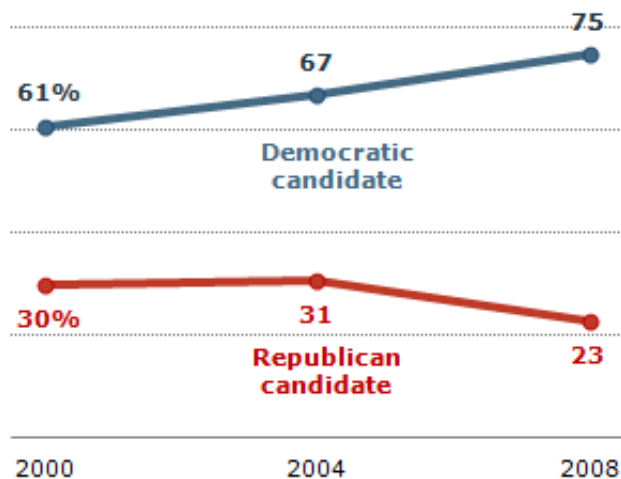
While the views of the unaffiliated on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality are distinctive from those of other religious groups, their preferences about the role of government mirror the general public’s.

The unaffiliated, and especially those who are atheist or agnostic, tend to diverge from the general public when it comes to attitudes about the role of religion in politics. The unaffiliated are more strongly opposed to the idea of church involvement in political matters and to the notion of churches endorsing political candidates than is the public as a whole. They are less likely than the general public to think it is important for a president to have strong religious beliefs, and they are more uncomfortable with political candidates discussing their faith or religious commitment.

### **Voting Patterns**

The Democratic presidential candidate has captured the lion’s share of the religiously unaffiliated vote in the past three election cycles. In the 2000 election, the religiously unaffiliated voted for Gore over Bush by a margin of two-to-one (61% to 30%). In 2008, 75% of the unaffiliated voted for Obama, while 23% voted for McCain, a 52-point gap.

## Presidential Exit Polls Among the Unaffiliated

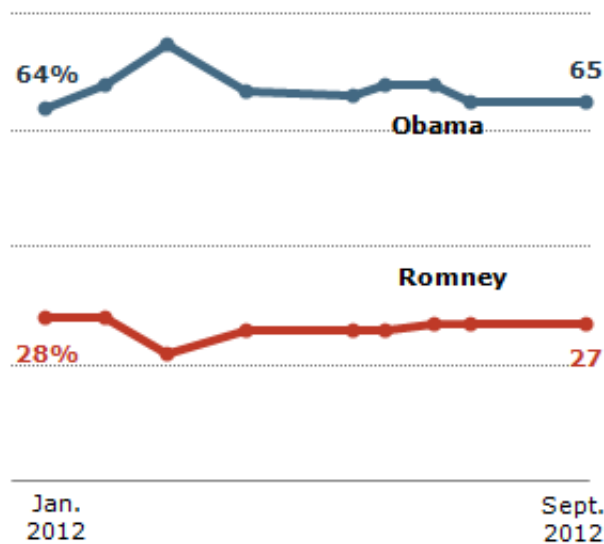


Source: Exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool, 2000, 2004, 2008. Based on those with no religion.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The 2012 presidential race is following the same pattern to date. As of mid-September, roughly two-thirds of the unaffiliated say they would vote for Obama (65%) over Republican candidate Mitt Romney (27%) if the election was held today. Obama's advantage among the religiously unaffiliated has been largely steady throughout 2012.

## 2012 Presidential Candidate Preference Among Unaffiliated Voters



Source: Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-September 2012. Based on registered voters who are religiously unaffiliated.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Partisanship and Ideology

Registered voters in the general public tend to identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party over the Republican Party by a margin of 48% to 43%. Religiously unaffiliated voters tilt strongly toward the Democrats over the Republicans, however. About six-in-ten unaffiliated voters (63%) say they are Democrats or lean toward the Democrats, while a quarter (26%) identify with or lean toward the GOP. This pattern is especially pronounced among atheists and agnostics.

## Party Identification Among Registered Voters

	Rep/ Lean Rep	Dem/ Lean Dem	N
	%	%	
<b>All registered voters</b>	43	48	13,429
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	26	63	2,139
Atheist/Agnostic	18	73	710
Nothing in particular	30	58	1,429
<b>Affiliated</b>	48	45	11,104
Christian	49	43	10,378
Protestant	50	42	7,221
White evangelical	71	22	2,965
White mainline	52	40	2,571
Black Protestant	7	89	1,071
Catholic	44	47	2,839
White Catholic	50	41	2,235

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012. Based on registered voters. Those with no party preference (who refused to lean) are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In contrast with the unaffiliated, voters who are affiliated with a religious group are more likely to identify with or lean toward the Republicans (48%) than the Democrats (45%).

Voters who are unaffiliated with a religion also are more likely than the general public to describe themselves as liberal (38% to 21%), and less likely to identify as conservative (20% to 39%).

Within the unaffiliated, about half of those who call themselves atheist or agnostic identify as liberal (51%), compared with 13% who identify as conservative. The margin is narrower among those who identify their religion as "nothing in particular," with 31% of that group calling themselves liberal and 23% conservative.

Compared with the unaffiliated, voters who are affiliated with a particular religion are more than 20 points more likely to be conservative (44% vs. 20% among the unaffiliated) and about half as likely to identify as liberal (17% vs. 38% among the unaffiliated). In fact, each affiliated religious group is significantly more conservative than they are liberal – a direct contrast with the unaffiliated.

## Ideology Among Registered Voters

	Conser- vative %	Mod- erate %	Lib- eral %	N
<b>All registered voters</b>	39	36	21	13,429
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	20	38	38	2,139
Atheist/Agnostic	13	32	51	710
Nothing in particular	23	41	31	1,429
<b>Affiliated</b>	44	36	17	11,104
Christian	46	35	15	10,378
Protestant	48	33	15	7,221
White evangelical	65	25	7	2,965
White mainline	39	39	20	2,571
Black Protestant	33	39	23	1,071
Catholic	39	42	17	2,839
White Catholic	41	42	15	2,235

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012. Based on registered voters. Those who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Two-thirds of the unaffiliated are registered to vote (67%), which is slightly less than the 72% of the general population and 73% of those with a religious affiliation who are registered to vote. However, among younger adults (ages 18 to 29) there is no difference between the affiliated (50%) and unaffiliated (51%) in likelihood of being registered to vote.

## Views on Social Issues

Overall, the religiously unaffiliated are significantly more likely than the general public to say that abortion should be legal in most or all cases. About seven-in-ten of the unaffiliated (72%) hold this view, compared with about half of the general public (53%). Among atheists and agnostics, fully 84% say abortion should be legal in most or all cases, while just 14% say it should be mostly or entirely illegal.

## Opinion on Abortion

% saying abortion should be ...

	Legal in all/ most cases %	Illegal in all/ most cases %	N
<b>U.S. general public</b>	53	41	7,409
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	72	24	1,275
Atheist/Agnostic	84	14	403
Nothing in particular	67	28	872
<b>Affiliated</b>	49	46	6,018
Christian	47	47	5,627
Protestant	46	48	3,833
White evangelical	31	64	1,468
White mainline	64	31	1,397
Black Protestant	54	39	518
Catholic	50	45	1,619
White Catholic	54	41	1,133

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2011-2012. Those who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

By contrast, the margin among those who are affiliated with a religion is narrower – 49% say abortion should be legal in most cases, and 46% say it should be illegal. White evangelical Protestants lean heavily toward saying abortion should be illegal (64%), while white mainline Protestants lean toward saying it should be legal (64%). Catholics as a whole are more evenly split (50% legal, 45% illegal), but 54% of white, non-Hispanic Catholics say abortion should be legal (vs. 41% who say illegal).

Similarly, the unaffiliated stand out from the general public in their views about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The unaffiliated are more likely than those with a religious affiliation to say that homosexuality should be accepted by society (76% vs. 52% among the affiliated).

## Homosexuality in Society

*% saying homosexuality should be ... by society*

	Accepted	Discour- aged	N
	%	%	
<b>U.S. general public</b>	56	32	1,507
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	76	14	269
<b>Affiliated</b>	52	37	1,214
Christian	50	38	1,130
Protestant	44	45	763
White evangelical	29	61	284
White mainline	61	29	281
Black Protestant	44	48	109
Catholic	63	23	334
White Catholic	67	20	241

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey, January 2012. Q17b. Those who volunteered neither/both equally and those who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The same pattern occurs on views about same-sex marriage; the religiously unaffiliated stand out among religious groups for their support of it. Nearly three-quarters of the unaffiliated (73%) favor same-sex marriage, while 20% oppose it. Among those who identify as atheist or agnostic, support for same-sex marriage is even higher (89%). Two-thirds of those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” (67%) also favor same-sex marriage.

By contrast, among those who are affiliated with a religious group, fully half (50%) say that they oppose same-sex marriage, while four-in-ten (41%) favor it.

## Opinion on Same-Sex Marriage

	Favor	Oppose	N
	%	%	
<b>U.S. general public</b>	48	44	6,500
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	73	20	1,064
Atheist/Agnostic	89	7	338
Nothing in particular	67	25	726
<b>Affiliated</b>	41	50	5,348
Christian	39	52	4,972
Protestant	33	58	3,406
White evangelical	19	76	1,351
White mainline	52	37	1,145
Black Protestant	35	55	556
Catholic	53	37	1,391
White Catholic	53	38	940

Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January-July 2012. Those who volunteered some other response and those who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Role of Government

The unaffiliated closely mirror the general public in their views about the role of government. Half of the unaffiliated say they would rather have a smaller government with fewer services, while 42% would rather have a bigger government providing more services. The views of those with a religious affiliation are roughly the same: 52% of this group prefers a smaller government with fewer services, while 38% would rather have a larger, more activist government.



## Role of Government

*Which do you prefer?*

	Smaller gov't, fewer services	Bigger gov't, more services	N
	%	%	
<b>U.S. general public</b>	52	39	1,507
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	50	42	269
<b>Affiliated</b>	52	38	1,214
Christian	53	38	1,130
Protestant	54	36	763
White evangelical	67	23	284
White mainline	60	30	281
Black Protestant	25	64	109
Catholic	48	42	334
White Catholic	64	28	241

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey, January 2012. Q19. Those who volunteered "depends" or did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Religion in Politics

About one-third of the unaffiliated (32%) say it is important for the president to have strong religious beliefs, while 65% say it is not important. Among those who identify as atheist or agnostic, the split is even greater. Only one-in-ten (11%) agree that a president should have strong religious beliefs, compared with 86% who disagree.

## Important for a President to Have Strong Religious Beliefs?

	Agree	Dis-	DK	N
	%	agree	%	
<b>U.S. general public</b>	67	29	4 = 100	2,973
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	32	65	3 = 100	958
Atheist/Agnostic	11	86	3 = 100	327
Nothing in particular	40	57	3 = 100	631
<b>Affiliated</b>	75	21	3 = 100	2,475
Christian	77	19	3 = 100	2,317
Protestant	79	17	3 = 100	1,614
White evangelical	88	9	3 = 100	659
White mainline	68	30	2 = 100	514
Black Protestant	78	17	5 = 100	270
Catholic	73	23	3 = 100	619
White Catholic	71	25	4 = 100	397

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012.  
Q45. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Among the general public, that opinion is reversed. About two-thirds of the general public say having strong religious beliefs is important for the president (67%), compared with less than one-third (29%) who disagree.

A slim majority of the general public says that churches and other houses of worship should keep out of political matters. This point of view is even more common among the religiously unaffiliated (66%) than among the public as a whole (54%).

## Should Churches Keep Out of Political Matters?

	Keep out of political matters	Express their views	DK	N
	%	%	%	
<b>U.S. general public</b>	54	40	6 = 100	1,503
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	66	27	7 = 100	269
Atheist/Agnostic	75	23	2 = 100	95
Nothing in particular	62	29	9 = 100	174
<b>Affiliated</b>	51	44	5 = 100	1,216
Christian	51	44	5 = 100	1,120
Protestant	47	49	5 = 100	771
White evangelical	36	60	4 = 100	305
White mainline	60	35	5 = 100	290
Black Protestant	43	51	6 = 100	109
Catholic	60	36	5 = 100	302
White Catholic	59	37	5 = 100	219

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey, March 2012. Q58. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

When it comes to endorsing political candidates, there is somewhat greater consensus between the affiliated and the unaffiliated. Fully three-quarters of the unaffiliated are opposed to churches endorsing political candidates. Similarly, two-thirds of the general public is opposed to churches and other houses of worship coming out in favor of political candidates. Majorities of most religious groups hold the same position, with white Catholics and white mainline Protestants most strongly opposed to churches endorsing political candidates (74% and 73%, respectively). White evangelicals and black Protestants are more divided over this issue, with 56% of white evangelicals and 52% of black Protestants saying that churches should not come out in favor of political candidates.

## Should Churches Endorse Candidates?

*Should churches, synagogues and other houses of worship come out in favor of political candidates?*

	Should NOT	Should	DK	N
	%	%	%	
<b>U.S. general public</b>	66	27	7 = 100	2,973
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	75	18	7 = 100	958
Atheist/Agnostic	75	17	8 = 100	327
Nothing in particular	75	18	7 = 100	631
<b>Affiliated</b>	64	30	6 = 100	2,475
Christian	63	30	6 = 100	2,317
Protestant	60	32	7 = 100	1,614
White evangelical	56	37	7 = 100	659
White mainline	73	20	7 = 100	514
Black Protestant	52	42	6 = 100	270
Catholic	69	27	4 = 100	619
White Catholic	74	22	4 = 100	397
Hispanic Catholic	62	34	4 = 100	172

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q41. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The unaffiliated also tend to be less comfortable than others in the general public when political leaders talk about religion. About half of the unaffiliated (54%) are uncomfortable when politicians talk about their religious commitment. Among those with a religious affiliation, 41% say the same. Atheists and agnostics are particularly likely to say such talk makes them uncomfortable (67%). Similarly, half of the unaffiliated say they are uncomfortable when political leaders discuss their faith and beliefs. By comparison, fewer in the general public (38%) are uncomfortable with this.

## Discomfort With Candidate's Religious Talk?

*% saying they agree that "it makes me uncomfortable when politicians talk about ..."*

	How religious they are	Their religious faith and beliefs
	%	%
<b>U.S. general public</b>	43	38
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	54	50
Atheist/Agnostic	67	59
Nothing in particular	48	46
<b>Affiliated</b>	41	35
Christian	39	34
Protestant	36	35
White evangelical	36	32
White mainline	37	37
Black Protestant	31	37
Catholic	44	33
White Catholic	40	30

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q43F1, Q44F2. Those saying "disagree" and those who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER