

The Shifting Sands of Belief: Religiously Unaffiliated and Atheist Populations in the United States

I. Introduction: The Shifting Religious Landscape of the United States

The religious composition of the United States is undergoing a period of significant transformation, characterized by a notable increase in the proportion of the population that does not identify with any specific religious tradition. This trend represents a considerable departure from earlier periods in American history, where religious affiliation was more widespread and often a central component of individual and community identity.

A. The Rise of Religious Unaffiliation

Over the past several decades, data from numerous sociological and demographic studies have consistently pointed to a decline in formal religious adherence and a corresponding rise in religious non-affiliation. The Pew Research Center's comprehensive Religious Landscape Studies (RLS) have documented this shift meticulously. In 2007, 16% of U.S. adults were religiously unaffiliated; this figure rose to 23% by 2014.¹ The most recent 2023-2024 RLS indicates that approximately 29% of American adults now identify as religiously unaffiliated.² While this marks a substantial long-term increase, some recent data suggest that the rapid pace of this growth may have begun to slow or plateau since around 2019-2020, with the percentage of unaffiliated individuals remaining relatively stable in the 28% to 31% range in surveys conducted during this period.¹ This demographic evolution carries profound implications for various aspects of American society, including social cohesion, political dynamics, and the role of religious institutions in public life.

The very categorization of “nones” emerges from how individuals respond to survey questions about their religious identity. This means the term is an analytical construct used by researchers to group individuals who select “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular,” rather than a self-chosen collective identity embraced by all within this diverse demographic.³ Recognizing this distinction is vital to avoid oversimplifying the beliefs and behaviours of this population segment. Furthermore, the recent stabilization in the growth of the “nones,” if it proves to be a lasting trend, could herald a new phase in the religious demography of the U.S. It might suggest that the segment of the population with weak religious ties, and thus most susceptible to disaffiliation, has largely transitioned. Alternatively, it could reflect evolving strategies by religious organizations to retain members or attract new ones, potentially leading

to a different equilibrium in the nation's religious makeup.

B. Defining Key Populations: “Religiously Unaffiliated (Nones)” and “Atheists”

To accurately analyse this evolving landscape, precise definitions of the key populations are essential.

1. Religiously Unaffiliated (“Nones”)

The term “religiously unaffiliated,” often colloquially referred to as “nones,” encompasses individuals who, when asked about their present religion, identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”.³ Pew Research Center, a leading authority in this area of study, categorizes respondents as “nones” if they select one of these three options in response to questions such as, “What is your present religion, if any?”.³ This group is not monolithic; rather, it comprises a diverse array of individuals whose only commonality, by definition, is their lack of formal connection to an established religious tradition.

2. Atheists

“Atheists” represent a specific subgroup within the broader category of the religiously unaffiliated. They are defined as individuals who explicitly state that they do not believe in God or any other higher power.³ In the typology used by Pew Research Center, atheists are one of the three constituent groups forming the “nones”.³ It is crucial to understand that while all individuals who identify as atheists in these survey contexts are considered “nones,” the reverse is not true; many “nones” are not atheists, instead identifying as agnostic or simply “nothing in particular.”

C. Purpose and Structure of the Report

This report aims to provide an expert-level analysis of the religiously unaffiliated population in the United States, with a particular focus on identifying the states with the highest concentrations of these individuals. It will begin by outlining the national profile of the “nones,” including their prevalence, composition, and regional distribution. Subsequently, it will present data on the top U.S. states by the percentage of their population identifying as religiously unaffiliated. The report will then address the specific query regarding states with high atheist populations, discussing the availability and limitations of state-level data for this distinct subgroup. Finally, it will explore the broader characteristics of the unaffiliated, including their demographic profiles, beliefs, and patterns of civic engagement, before offering concluding observations on the evolving nature of religious identity in America.

II. National Profile of the Religiously Unaffiliated (“Nones”)

Understanding the national landscape of religious non-affiliation provides essential context for interpreting state-level variations and the overall societal impact of this

demographic trend.

A. Current National Prevalence and Historical Growth

As of the 2023-2024 Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, 29% of U.S. adults identify as religiously unaffiliated.² This figure represents a significant increase from 16% in 2007 and 23% in 2014, underscoring a rapid and transformative shift in American religious identity over a relatively short period.¹ While the growth has been substantial, recent surveys conducted between 2020 and 2024 suggest a potential stabilization, with the unaffiliated share fluctuating between 28% and 31%.¹ This stabilization, if it persists, could indicate a new phase in U.S. religious demographics. It might imply that the pool of individuals with tenuous connections to religious institutions, who were most likely to disaffiliate, has largely done so. Concurrently, the stabilization in daily prayer and monthly religious service attendance observed since 2020-2021² among the religiously affiliated could propose that a core of more committed religious individuals remains, potentially marking a new, albeit different, religious equilibrium.

B. Composition of “Nones”: Atheists, Agnostics, and “Nothing in Particular”

The 29% of U.S. adults who are religiously unaffiliated are not a homogenous group. This category is primarily composed of three distinct subgroups:

- **Atheists:** Those who state they do not believe in God. According to the 2023-2024 Pew RLS, atheists constitute 5% of the total U.S. adult population.⁵
- **Agnostics:** Those who state they are unsure whether God exists or believe the existence of God cannot be known. Agnostics make up 6% of the U.S. adult population.⁵
- **“Nothing in particular”:** Those who respond to questions about their religious affiliation by saying they have no particular religion. This is the largest segment, accounting for 19% of U.S. adults.⁵

The “nothing in particular” segment, by its very nature, is the most amorphous. Its considerable size suggests that a large portion of the religiously unaffiliated do not adhere to a defined non-belief system like atheism or agnosticism, but rather exist in a space of religious disengagement or undefined personal spirituality. This internal diversity within the “nones” category is critical, as it implies a wide spectrum of beliefs, attitudes towards religion, and levels of engagement with spiritual or philosophical questions. It cautions against treating the “nones” as a unified bloc with a singular worldview.

C. Regional Distribution of “Nones” Nationally

The prevalence of religiously unaffiliated individuals varies geographically across the United States. National data from Pew Research Center indicates that, in terms of absolute numbers, 33% of “nones” reside in the South, 28% in the West, 21% in the Midwest, and 18% in the Northeast.⁷ However, when considering the *proportion* of the population within each region that is unaffiliated, a different pattern emerges. Gallup polling has found that individuals with no formal religious identity are most likely to be found in the Western states and in New England.⁸ PRRI research also notes that there are 20 states, often clustered in the West and parts of the Northeast, where the religiously unaffiliated comprise a larger share of residents than any single religious group.⁹ Conversely, the South, while home to many “nones” in absolute terms due to its overall population size, generally has a lower *percentage* of its population identifying as unaffiliated compared to other regions.⁸

This regional variation is not arbitrary. It frequently correlates with broader sociocultural indicators, such as political orientation and historical settlement patterns. The West and New England, for instance, tend to exhibit more liberal social values and have different historical religious compositions than the traditionally more conservative and religiously homogenous “Bible Belt” in the South.⁸ This suggests that the phenomenon of religious non-affiliation is interwoven with, and reflective of, distinct regional cultures and value systems, potentially contributing to diverging social and political paths for different parts of the country.

III. Leading States in Religious Unaffiliation: The “Nones”

While national and regional trends provide a broad overview, examining state-level data reveals more granular differences in the landscape of religious non-affiliation across the United States.

A. Methodology for Ranking States

Identifying the states with the highest percentages of religiously unaffiliated individuals requires careful consideration of data from various reputable sources. Primary sources for such data include the Pew Research Center and the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), both of which conduct large-scale surveys on religious affiliation. It is important to acknowledge that percentages can vary slightly between studies due to differences in survey methodologies, the specific wording of questions, sampling techniques, and the timeframe of data collection. This report prioritizes the most recent available data, primarily drawing from Pew Research Center's 2023–2024 findings (as reported in secondary sources for specific states)

and supplementing with recent PRRI and Gallup data where necessary. The primary metric for ranking is the percentage of the adult population in each state that identifies as religiously unaffiliated (“nones”).

The dynamic nature of religious affiliation means that these rankings are snapshots in time. For example, data for New Hampshire shows 36% “nones” in Pew's 2014 study ¹¹, 33% in PRRI's 2017 report ⁹, and a striking 48% in Pew's 2024 data reported by Newsweek.¹² Such fluctuations underscore both the ongoing shifts in religious identity and the influence of survey timing and methodology on reported figures. This necessitates transparency regarding data sources and an understanding that these figures are estimates.

B. Table 1: Top U.S. States by Percentage of Religiously Unaffiliated (“Nones”)

The following table presents a synthesized list of U.S. states with the highest reported percentages of religiously unaffiliated adults, based on the most current available data from the reviewed sources.

Rank	State	Percentage of “Nones”	Data Source and Year
1	New Hampshire	48%	Pew 2024 (via Newsweek ¹²)
2	Vermont	41%	PRRI 2017 ⁹
3	Montana	39%	Pew 2024 (via Newsweek ¹²)
4	Massachusetts	37%	Pew 2024 (via Newsweek ¹²)
5	Oregon	36%	PRRI 2017 ⁹
6	Washington	35%	PRRI 2017 ⁹
7	Utah	34%	Pew 2024 (via Newsweek ¹²)

8	Wisconsin	34%	Pew 2024 (via Newsweek ¹²)
9	Missouri	33%	Pew 2024 (via Newsweek ¹²)
10	Colorado	33%	PRRI 2017 ⁹

Note: Other states with high percentages of “nones” include Hawaii (34% PRRI 2017 ⁹), Alaska (33% Gallup 2017 ⁸), and Maine (31% Gallup 2017 ⁸; 31% Pew 2014 ¹¹). Pennsylvania also showed 30% “nones” in the Pew 2024 data via Newsweek.¹² The table prioritizes the most recent figures and aims for distinct state representation.

C. Detailed Profile of Top States

The states appearing in the top tier for religious affiliation are predominantly located in New England and the Western United States, regions historically characterized by different patterns of religious settlement and cultural development compared to other parts of the country.

- **New Hampshire** leads with 48% of its adult population identifying as religiously unaffiliated, according to 2024 Pew data reported by Newsweek.¹² This represents a substantial increase from its 2014 figure of 36% ¹¹ and 2007 figure of 27%.¹²
- **Vermont** consistently ranks very high, with PRRI reporting 41% “nones” in 2017.⁹ Pew data from 2014 placed it at 37%.¹¹
- **Montana** shows a high level of affiliation at 39% in 2024 Pew data ¹², also a significant increase from 16% in 2007.¹²
- **Massachusetts** is reported at 37% “nones” in 2024 Pew data ¹², a notable jump from 17% in 2007.¹²
- **Oregon** and **Washington** in the Pacific Northwest are also prominent, with PRRI (2017) reporting 36% and 35% “nones” respectively.⁹ Gallup (2017) figures were 31% for Oregon and 32% for Washington.⁸
- States like **Utah** (34%), **Wisconsin** (34%), and **Missouri** (33%) have also shown high and significantly growing percentages of “nones” in the 2024 Pew data.¹² The increases in these states are particularly noteworthy, as they may not have been traditionally viewed as epicentres of secularity to the same extent as some New England or Pacific Northwestern states. For instance, Utah's “nones” population grew from 16% in 2007 to 34% in 2024.¹²
- **Colorado** (33% PRRI 2017 ⁹) and **Maine** (31% Gallup 2017 ⁸, 31% Pew 2014 ¹¹) also feature prominently.

The cultural ethos of many of these leading states—often characterized by individualism, independence, or a “pioneer spirit”—may contribute to a social environment where formal religious affiliation is less of a prevailing norm. This cultural backdrop, potentially combined with weaker historical dominance by single religious institutions in some Western states, could foster greater latitude in personal religious belief and practice, leading to higher rates of non-affiliation.

D. Analysis of Regional Patterns and Growth

As indicated, the highest concentrations of religiously unaffiliated individuals are typically found in New England (Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine) and the Western U.S. (Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Utah, Alaska, Hawaii).⁸ This pattern has been consistent across multiple studies over several years.

Beyond the states with the absolute highest percentages, it is also crucial to note states that have experienced substantial *growth* in their “nones” population. Newsweek, citing Pew Research, highlighted New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Utah, Wisconsin, Missouri, Montana, and Pennsylvania as having some of the largest proportional increases in religiously unaffiliated people between 2007 and 2024.¹² The rapid growth in states not traditionally considered highly secular, such as Missouri and Pennsylvania, is particularly telling. It suggests that the trend of disaffiliation is not confined to its historical strongholds but is becoming a more diffused national phenomenon. This diffusion into diverse sociocultural environments could herald significant shifts in the social and political landscapes of these “transitional” states, potentially leading to new community dynamics and altered political alignments, especially if religious affiliation continues to correlate with political viewpoints.

IV. Characteristics of the Unaffiliated: Beliefs, Demographics, and Civic Engagement

Understanding the broader characteristics of the religiously unaffiliated, including their demographic makeup, belief systems, and patterns of social and political engagement, provides a more complete picture of this significant and growing segment of the U.S. population.

A. Demographic Profile

The religiously unaffiliated population in the U.S. exhibits distinct demographic characteristics:

- **Age:** “Nones” are, on average, significantly younger than religiously affiliated

Americans. National data from Pew Research Center indicates that 28% of “nones” are aged 18-29 and 41% are 30-49, meaning 69% are under the age of 50. In contrast, only 45% of religiously affiliated adults are under 50.³ This younger age profile suggests that the influence of “nones” on American society is likely to continue, if not grow, in the coming decades through generational replacement.

- **Gender:** Overall, the “nones” population is roughly split between men (51%) and women (47%). However, the atheist and agnostic subgroups include notably more men than women. This gender disparity is not observed among those who identify their religion as “nothing in particular”.³
- **Race and Ethnicity:** The racial and ethnic composition of “nones” is broadly similar to that of religiously affiliated Americans. However, White adults constitute larger shares of U.S. atheists (77%) and agnostics (69%) compared to those whose religion is “nothing in particular” (57%). Conversely, Black adults make up a very small percentage of self-described atheists (2%) and agnostics (4%).³
- **Education:** The overall educational attainment of “nones” is similar to that of religiously affiliated adults. Within the “nones” category, however, atheists and agnostics tend to have higher levels of educational attainment than those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular”.³

B. Beliefs and Spirituality

The beliefs of the religiously unaffiliated are diverse and often defy simplistic categorization:

- **Belief in God/Higher Power:** Contrary to a common assumption that all “nones” are non-believers, a majority actually report believing in God or some other higher power. Pew Research indicates that only 29% of “nones” reject the notion of any higher power or spiritual force in the universe.⁴ This suggests that for many, disaffiliation is more a rejection of *organized religion* and its specific doctrines or structures rather than a complete abandonment of personal, often more diffuse, spiritual or supernatural beliefs.
- **Spirituality:** About half of “nones” consider spirituality to be very important in their lives or describe themselves as spiritual. Many also express belief in spirits or spiritual energies in nature or animals.⁴ However, these spiritual inclinations are not exclusive to “nones”; religiously affiliated individuals typically report similar or even higher levels of spirituality by many measures.
- **Views on Religion:** “Nones” are not uniformly hostile toward religion. While a plurality (43%) believe religion does more harm than good in society, a significant portion (41%) say it does equal amounts of good and harm, and 14% believe it

does more good than harm. Many acknowledge that religion can provide meaning and purpose or encourage positive social behaviours, even as they also see it as a source of intolerance or superstition.⁴

- **Views on Science:** While often perceived as relying solely on scientific explanations, most “nones” (56%) believe there are some things science cannot possibly explain, challenging the notion that they universally see science as omniscient.⁴

C. Civic and Political Engagement

The patterns of civic and political engagement among “nones” also reveal important nuances:

- **Civic Participation:** Generally, “nones” tend to report voting less frequently and doing less volunteer work compared to their religiously affiliated counterparts. However, this trend is primarily driven by those who identify as “nothing in particular.” Atheists and agnostics, in contrast, reported voter turnout rates in 2022 that were comparable to those of religiously affiliated adults.⁴
- **Political Ideology and Affiliation:** “Nones” are considerably more likely than religiously affiliated adults to identify as politically liberal and less likely to be conservative. Majorities of atheists (65%) and agnostics (56%) describe themselves as liberal. Among those who identify as “nothing in particular,” the largest share is moderate (46%). Overall, 62% of “nones” identify as Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party, with this figure being even higher for atheists (78%) and agnostics (71%).³

The distinct educational profiles and civic engagement patterns (particularly voting rates) of atheists and agnostics compared to the “nothing in particular” group are noteworthy. Higher educational attainment often correlates with greater civic skills and socioeconomic resources. If atheists and agnostics are more educated and as civically active in voting as the religiously affiliated, they may exert a disproportionate influence on public discourse and policy debates relative to their numerical share within the broader “nones” population. Their capacity to articulate their perspectives and advocate for their interests could be more pronounced.

Furthermore, the strong liberal and Democratic leanings of “nones,” especially atheists and agnostics³, indicate that as their numbers have grown to constitute a substantial demographic bloc, they represent an increasingly vital component of the Democratic Party's coalition. This demographic reality may also contribute to the party's platform evolving on certain secular and liberal social issues, potentially widening the values gap with more religiously conservative segments of the electorate

and contributing to ongoing political polarization where religious affiliation serves as a significant dividing line.

V. Concluding Observations: The Evolving American Religious Identity

The religious landscape of the United States is clearly in a state of flux. The rise of the religiously unaffiliated (“nones”) over the past few decades marks one of the most significant demographic shifts in American religious history.

A. Summary of Key Findings

This report has identified that a substantial portion of the U.S. adult population, approximately 29%, now identifies as religiously unaffiliated.¹ This group is internally diverse, comprising atheists (5%), agnostics (6%), and a larger segment who identify as “nothing in particular” (19%).⁵ States with the highest percentages of “nones” are predominantly found in New England and the Western U.S., with New Hampshire (48%), Vermont (41%), Montana (39%), Massachusetts (37%), Oregon (36%), and Washington (35%) leading the list based on the most recent available data.⁹ While the overall growth of “nones” nationally appears to have plateaued in the last few years¹, their numbers remain substantial.

The specific request to identify top states for “atheists” encounters limitations due to the general unavailability of robust, publicly accessible state-level data for this distinct subgroup. This is likely due to the statistical challenges of measuring smaller demographic segments at such a granular level.¹ However, it can be reasonably inferred that states with high concentrations of “nones” also have more significant atheist populations.

B. Implications of Growing Unaffiliation

The increasing proportion of religiously unaffiliated Americans carries broad societal implications. The shift away from traditional religious institutions may impact social capital, as these institutions have historically been hubs for community life and civic engagement. While some “nones” (particularly atheists and agnostics) maintain high levels of voting participation⁴, the lower engagement reported by the large “nothing in particular” group could affect overall civic participation rates if this trend persists. Political alignments are also influenced, with “nones” overwhelmingly leaning liberal and Democratic, influencing the political landscape.³ Furthermore, as fewer Americans affiliate with religious institutions, the traditional roles these bodies have played in providing social services, shaping public discourse on morality, and fostering

community cohesion may evolve or diminish, necessitating alternative or secular frameworks to fulfil these functions. The very understanding of community, morality, and meaning-making in American society, traditionally heavily influenced by religious institutions, is undergoing a re-evaluation in light of these demographic changes.

C. Future Outlook and Areas for Further Research

The religious identity of Americans is a dynamic and continuously evolving aspect of the nation's social fabric. The recent stabilization in the growth of “nones” raises questions: Is this a temporary pause before further increases, or does it signify a new, more stable equilibrium in the religious marketplace? Longitudinal studies tracking current cohorts of “nones” across their lifespan will be crucial to understanding the persistence of non-affiliation.

Given that younger Americans are considerably more likely to be “nones” than older generations², the process of generational replacement is likely to continue exerting upward pressure on the overall proportion of unaffiliated individuals in the long term. This is projected even if the rate of individuals switching out of religion slows, unless there is a significant resurgence of religious affiliation among upcoming generations or a marked improvement in retention rates by religious groups.⁶

Further research is particularly needed to understand the large and heterogeneous “nothing in particular” segment. Their beliefs, motivations for disaffiliation, and relatively lower levels of civic engagement warrant deeper investigation, as they represent a substantial and somewhat disengaged portion of the populace.⁴

Understanding their perspectives is vital for a comprehensive view of American society and for any efforts aimed at bolstering civic life. Additionally, developing methodologies or accessing restricted data that allow for more granular state-level analysis of specific subgroups like atheists and agnostics could provide valuable insights for local policymakers and community organizations. The evolving religious tapestry of the U.S. will undoubtedly continue to be a key area of sociological inquiry for years to come.

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