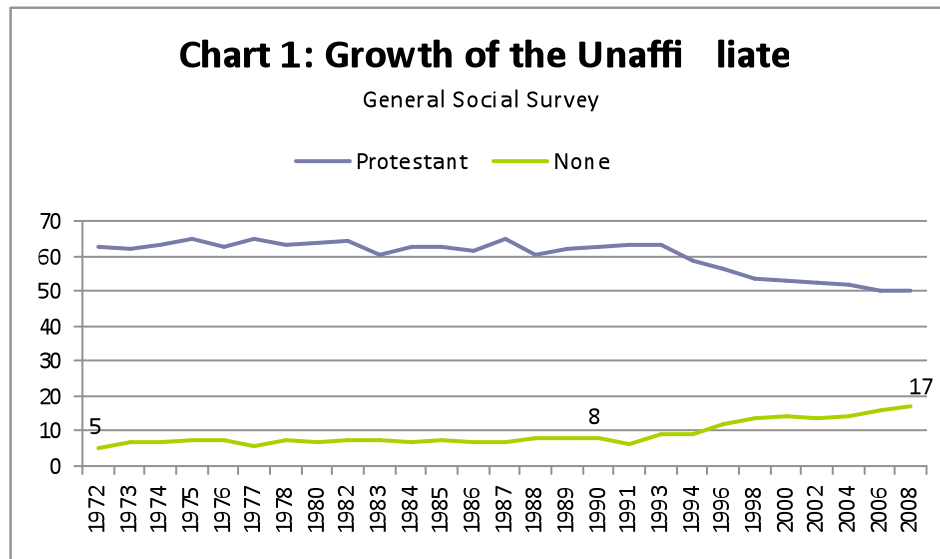


Non-believers, Seculars, the Un-churched and the Unaffiliated: Who are Non-religious Americans and How do we Measure them in Survey Research?

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Since 1972, the General Social Surveys have tracked American religious affiliation, including Americans who have no formal affiliation.¹ Starting in the early 1990s the GSS has shown a remarkable increase in the number of Americans identifying their religious preference as none. In 1972, only 5% of Americans said they had no formal religious affiliation, which proved very stable over the next 20 years. In 1990, 8% of Americans had no formal religious affiliation. However, during the 1990s the number of Americans identifying religiously as none increased dramatically. Between 1990 and 2008 the size of the religiously unaffiliated doubled from 8% to 17%.

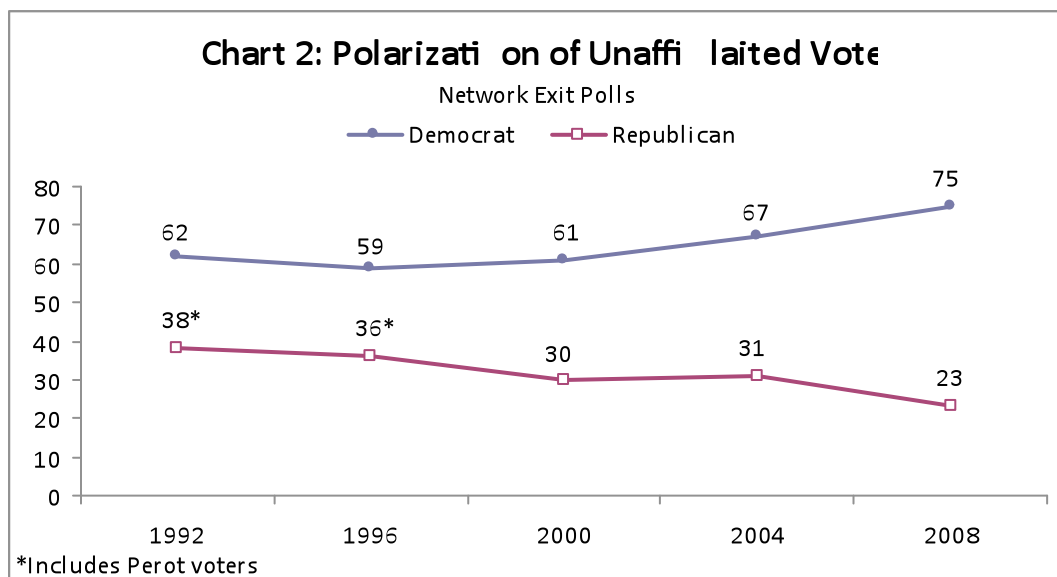


Other surveys have reported similar findings. The 2007 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, for instance, found that 16.1% of the US population describes their religious affiliation as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” Similarly, the recently released American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) found dramatic increases in the percentage of Americans who identify with no faith in the last 20 years. In 1990, the first

¹ From 1972 to 2006 the GSS has included the same basic measure of religious identification: “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?”

ARIS found that just 8% of Americans stated no religious preference or identified as atheist or agnostic. In 2008, the number of Americans with no faith grew to 15%. According to authors of ARIS nearly 35 million Americans currently identify with no particular faith.²

Like their size in the population as a whole, Americans with no religious affiliation have increased their share of the electorate, from 7% in 1992 to 12% in 2008. At the same time the religiously unaffiliated have become more politically unified, becoming more supportive of Democratic presidential candidates since the 1990s. In 1992, Bill Clinton was victorious among unaffiliated voters by 24 points (62% to 38%), but this margin has grown since then to a 36-point victory for John Kerry in 2004 and a 52-point win for Barack Obama in 2008, when he won fully three-quarters of the unaffiliated vote. The non-religious in recent elections have voted as a bloc in much the same way as evangelical Protestants, and evince much more political unity compared with Catholics and white mainline Protestants.



² According to the ARIS, most of the increase in the size of the “nones” took place between 1990 (8.2%) and 2001 (14.2%), holding fairly steady over the last eight years and registering 15.0% in 2008.

Given the growth and corresponding political importance of the non-religious population in the United States, we use this paper to examine some alternative methods for identifying and measuring this group. We conclude that each method has unique strengths and weaknesses and can be a valid way to measure and define this group, though the degree of overlap with people affiliated with religious groups suggests using these measures in conjunction, rather than by themselves. Researchers should continue to monitor the composition of this group going forward, to ensure that we remain fully informed as to the characteristics of this important population.

We consider four basic methods that can be used to identify the non-religious. These include formal religious affiliation (with those who describe themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic” or “nothing in particular” combined to form the unaffiliated),³ measures of theism (with those saying they do not believe in God or a Universal Spirit defined as non-believers), frequency of worship service attendance (with those saying they never attend forming the un-churched category), and religious salience (with those saying religion is not too important or not at all important in their lives defined as secular). Throughout the rest of this paper, we use the term “unaffiliated” to refer to the non-religious as defined by religious affiliation, we use “non-believers” to identify the non-religious as defined by (lack of) belief in God, “un-churched” to refer to the non-religious as defined by (lack of) attendance at worship services, and “secular” to refer to the non-religious as defined by ascribing little importance to religion in one’s own life.

³ When asking about religious identification, it matters whether respondents are explicitly given an opportunity to say they are unaffiliated. This concept was demonstrated clearly when the Pew Research Center modified its own religion question in mid-2007 to include “atheist,” “agnostic,” and “nothing in particular” as listed response options, rather than volunteered pre-coded categories. Pew also changed its introductory language from “What is your religious preference?” to “What is your religion, if any?” providing a cue from the outset that not having a religion was a valid response. Not surprisingly, the new approach results in higher estimates of the proportion of people who are religiously unaffiliated.

Size and Overlap of the Non-Religious Groups

Each of these definitions captures a slightly different swath of people. Moreover, as Table 2 shows the size of the groups varies considerably depending on the definition used, from just 5% to 16% of the population.

<u>Religious Measure</u>	<u>Size</u>	<u>Name</u>
Affiliation	16%	“Unaffiliated”
Atheist	2	
Agnostic	2	
Nothing in particular	12	
Believe in God	5%	“Non-believer”
No	5	
Attendance	11%	“Un-Churched”
Never	11	
Salience	16%	“Secular”
Not too important	9	
Not at all important	7	

Given that each definition purports to measure the same aspect of religiosity we might expect a high degree of correlation between our definitions. However, an examination of the religious identification of non-believers, the un-churched and seculars reveals that the level of correlation is surprisingly low in some instances. Among the un-churched only slightly more than half (56%) also identify as unaffiliated. More than 4-in-10 identify with a specific faith such as Protestant (22%), Catholic (12%), or some other religion (9%). Among seculars a similar number (57%) do not have a particular faith. Even among the non-believers – those who do not believe in God – roughly one quarter identify with a specific religion.

Table 2: Where Do the Non-Religious Come From?

	<u>Non-believers</u>	<u>Un-churched</u>	<u>Secular</u>
	%	%	%
Protestant	8	22	20
<i>Evangelical</i>	2	9	5
<i>Mainline</i>	5	11	14
<i>Hist. Black</i>	1	2	1
Catholic	5	12	14
Unaffiliated	75	56	57
Other	11	9	8
DK/Ref	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	100	100	100

Similarly, the degree of overlap between these four groups, though high in some instances, is far from complete. Among the unaffiliated, for instance, 57% also qualify as secular, 37% qualify as un-churched, and only 22% qualify as non-believers.

Table 3: Overlap Among the Non-Religious

	<i>% who are also...</i>			
	<u>Unaffiliated</u>	<u>Non-believers</u>	<u>Un-churched</u>	<u>Secular</u>
<i>Among...</i>	%	%	%	%
Unaffiliated	100	22	37	57
Non-believers	75	100	53	83
Un-churched	56	23	100	58
Secular	57	24	38	100

In total, more than a quarter (27%) of Americans are non-religious by at least one definition – identity, practice, belief and salience. In other words, 27% of Americans either never attend religious services, are not affiliated with a specific religious tradition, do not believe in God or say religion is not important in their lives. However, only 2% of Americans meet all four definitions. This reflects the fact that three groups at least – unaffiliated, secular and un-churched – are composed of a significant number of people who on some level can be described as religious.

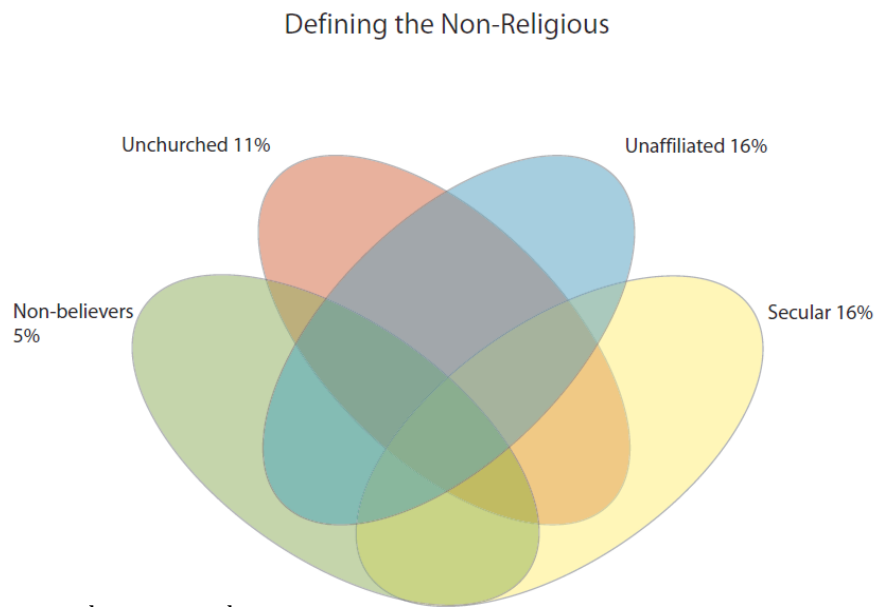


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Demographic Differences

Given that each definition relies upon a different type of religious measure – religious affiliation, salience, worship attendance and belief – to sort out the non-religious it is not surprising that each group may look slightly different demographically. However, we might expect any demographic variation between the groups to be relatively small.

This turns out not to be the case. In fact the differences between some groups are quite significant.

Overall, compared to the general population the non-religious tend to be disproportionately male. Nearly 6-in-10 (59%) of the unaffiliated are men compared to 41% who are women. The greatest imbalance in gender composition is found among the non-believers of whom 70% are men and only 30% are women. There is much greater gender parity among the un-churched among whom 56% are men.

The non-religious also tend to be younger than the general population overall. Among the unaffiliated 70% are under the age of 50, and 30% are under the age of 30. Two-thirds of non-believers are under 50.

TABLE 4: Demographic Profiles of the Non-Religious

	<u>All</u>	<u>Unaffiliated</u>	<u>Secular</u>	<u>Un-churched</u>	<u>Non-believer</u>
<i>Gender...</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Male	48	59	63	56	70
Female	52	41	37	44	30
<i>Age...</i>					
18-29	20	30	26	23	29
30-49	38	40	39	37	37
50-64	24	20	23	25	20
65+	16	8	11	14	13
DK	2	2	1	1	2
<i>Race/Ethnicity...</i>					
White	70	72	81	76	82
Black	11	8	3	5	3
Asian	2	4	4	3	6
Hispanic	12	11	8	11	6
Other/DK	4	6	4	5	4
<i>Education...</i>					
Less than HS	14	13	9	17	6
HS Grad	36	34	31	36	28
Some College	23	24	24	21	22
College Grad	16	16	20	15	21
Grad School	11	13	16	10	22
DK	1	1	*	*	*

Patterns of race and ethnicity also vary by definition. The racial and ethnic composition of the unaffiliated closely resembles that of the general population. About 7-in-10 are white, and slightly more than 1-in-10 are black or Hispanic, respectively. Among the other groups whites make up a greater proportion – 82% of nonbelievers, 81% of Seculars and 76% of the un-churched. Blacks make up a smaller proportion of non-believers and seculars (3%), than the unaffiliated (8%).

The educational profiles of each group also exhibit significant variation. Both the unaffiliated and the un-churched have an educational profile that mirrors the general

population. Non-believers and seculars have higher levels of education. More than 4-in-10 non-believers and more than one-third of seculars have college degrees compared to just a quarter of the un-churched. Non-believers are more than twice as likely to hold advanced degrees as the un-churched (22% vs. 10% respectively).

Religious Differences

There are interesting variations in patterns of religious practice, belief and salience among the non-religious groups. Overall, the unaffiliated tend to participate in traditional religious activities (pray, attend worship services) most often, report higher levels of religious salience and belief in traditional religious ideas (God and the afterlife). On measures of belief the un-churched closely resemble the unaffiliated but are more likely to say religion is not important. Compared to the unaffiliated, secular Americans are somewhat less likely to participate in traditional religious activities and less likely to have traditional religious beliefs. Among all the groups, non-believers are least likely to be involved with the traditional forms of worship, are least likely to view religion as important and least likely to believe in an afterlife.

Americans generally exhibit high levels of religious involvement. Nearly 4-in-10 attend worship services at least once a week and nearly 6-in-10 (58%) pray at least daily. Among the unaffiliated only 5% attend worship services weekly and more than 7-in-10 seldom or never attend. Three quarters of secular Americans seldom or never attend religious services as do 4-in-5 non-believers.

More than four-in-ten of the unaffiliated pray at least a few times a month, compared with one-third of seculars and roughly one-eighth of non-believers who say the

same. About as many un-churched report praying at least a few times a month as the unaffiliated.

The unaffiliated and the un-churched report similar levels of religious salience; roughly 4-in-10 of each group say religion is somewhat or very important in their life. Among non-believers only 16% say religion is somewhat or very important and more than 6-in-10 (63%) say it is not at all important.

Roughly half of the unaffiliated and the un-churched believe in an afterlife as do 44% of secular Americans, compared with only 16% of the non-believers. There is little difference between the groups on belief in God. More than two thirds of the unaffiliated, un-churched and seculars believe in God or a universal spirit (71%, 71% and 67% respectively).

Table 5: Religious Differences

<i>Frequency of attendance....</i>	<u>All</u>	<u>Unaffiliated</u>	<u>Secular</u>	<u>Un-churched</u>	<u>Non-believer</u>
Weekly	39	5	2	n/a	4
Monthly/Yearly	33	22	23	n/a	15
Seldom/Never	27	72	75	n/a	80
DK/Ref.	1	*	*	n/a	*
<i>Frequency of Prayer...</i>					
Daily	58	22	13	26	5
Weekly/Monthly	22	20	20	15	7
Seldom	11	24	31	18	15
Never	7	32	36	39	72
DK/Ref	2	2	1	2	1
<i>Importance of Religion...</i>					
Very/Somewhat	83	41	n/a	41	16
Not too	9	25	n/a	18	20
Not at all	7	33	n/a	40	63
DK/Ref.	1	2	n/a	2	*
<i>Belief in God...</i>					
Yes	92	70	67	71	n/a
No	5	22	24	23	n/a
Other/DK	3	8	9	6	n/a
<i>Belief in an Afterlife...</i>					
Yes	74	48	44	50	16
No	18	39	43	39	78
Other/DK	8	13	13	11	6

Political Implications

Ultimately, many pollsters measure religion, in part, to help them understand political dynamics. Analysis shows that the method of defining the non-religious has considerable political implications, particularly for understanding the views of different

groups on social and cultural issues. On the questions of government protection of morality, views of homosexuality, abortion, evolution, and belief in absolute standards of right and wrong, non-believers stand out as the most “ideologically pure” group of the non-religious, consistently expressing the highest levels of politically liberal views. They are followed by seculars, who tend to be somewhat less liberal on these matters compared to non-believers, but more liberal compared with the unaffiliated and the un-churched. Though not as liberal as their secular and non-believing counterparts, both the unaffiliated and the un-churched are considerably more liberal in their views on these issues as compared with the public overall.

Outside of the social realm, the non-religious are less distinctive compared with the public overall, and the method of defining the non-religious makes comparatively little difference. In their views of government aid to the needy, preferences for bigger government and (to a lesser degree) views on the environment, all non-religious groups tend to resemble the public as a whole.

In terms of party identification and political ideology, all non-religious groups are considerably more Democratic and liberal compared with the public overall. This is especially true of non-believers, with the unaffiliated, seculars and the un-churched exhibiting roughly equivalent levels of Democratic identification and political liberalism.

TABLE 6: Political Profiles of the Non-Religious

	<u>All</u>	<u>Unaffiliated</u>	<u>Secular</u>	<u>Un-churched</u>	<u>Non-believer</u>
<i>Gov. protect morality</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Gov too involved	52	66	73	66	77
Gov should do more	40	27	21	26	19
<i>Homosexuality</i>					
Should be accepted	50	71	75	68	80
Should be discouraged	40	20	17	22	14
<i>Abortion should be</i>					
Legal	51	70	78	71	83
Illegal	42	24	18	23	14
<i>Believe evolution?</i>					
Yes	48	72	79	69	88
No	45	22	16	24	10
<i>Absolute right/wrong?</i>					
No	20	31	33	30	40
Yes	77	67	65	67	59
<i>For needy, government</i>					
Should do more	62	65	64	65	65
Can't afford to do more	29	26	28	25	28
<i>Environmental Regs...</i>					
Worth it	61	69	71	65	75
Not worth it	30	24	23	27	21
<i>Prefer</i>					
Bigger government	46	48	45	46	47
Smaller government	43	41	45	41	44
<i>Party</i>					
Dem/lean Dem	47	55	57	54	63
Rep/lean Rep	35	23	24	24	19
<i>Ideology</i>					
Liberal	20	34	36	34	45
Conservative	37	20	19	23	15
Moderate	36	39	38	34	34

Discussion and Conclusions

Clearly, each of these four methods of defining the non-religious successfully identifies a portion of the public that is distinctive compared with other groups in terms of their demographic profile, their lower levels of religious practice and belief, and their political liberalism, especially with respect to social issues. Each method brings strengths and weaknesses to the table in measuring and defining the non-religious.

Non-believers are clearly the most religiously and politically homogenous of the four groups we examine. This is a strength of this approach, since the members of the group thusly defined clearly share a secular worldview and a liberal approach to politics. At the same time, however, one of the drawbacks to this approach is that this group is quite small, consisting of only about 5% of the US adult population. Additionally, though three-quarters of this group are unaffiliated with any particular faith, one-quarter give at least some evidence of identifying with one religion or another. This will make comparisons with other affiliation groups difficult.

Seculars are also religiously and politically distinctive, and measuring the non-religious in terms of their religious salience has the added benefit of producing a larger group. Overall, about 16% of the population says religion is not too important or not at all important in their lives. However, this approach to identifying the non-religious is far from perfectly correlated with religious affiliation, with upwards of four-in-ten seculars expressing identification with a religious group. This will complicate attempts to compare the non-religious, as defined this way, with members of various religious traditions. The un-churched group shares many of the same characteristics and strengths and weaknesses of the secular group.

Compared with seculars and especially non-believers, the unaffiliated group tends to be somewhat less religiously and politically homogenous. Many members of the unaffiliated indicate that they participate in religious activities and hold religious beliefs though they do not associate with any particular religious group. And though this group is more Democratic and socially liberal than the population overall, it tends to be less politically distinctive compared with seculars and non-believers. One key advantage of this approach, however, is that it is directly equivalent to measuring religious identification among those who are affiliated with a religious group. This makes it possible to directly compare the views of the unaffiliated with Catholics, Protestants, and members of other religious traditions.

Where each of these approaches, by itself, can help the researcher understand characteristics of the non-religious, using methods in conjunction can ameliorate the weaknesses of one approach and add greater clarity to the religious and non-religious alike. For instance, analyzing respondents who are unaffiliated with a religion by salience (whether or not religion is important in their lives) adds greater differentiation among the non-religious, but it also can provide a useful lens to examine those who are affiliated with a particular religious group, but who are not as devout.

No matter what method the researcher chooses to define the non-religious, it should be kept in mind that as with all religious groups, the non-religious is actually a demographically, religiously and politically diverse group. Care should be taken in naming and describing the non-religious and in avoiding ascribing to them attributes or descriptions which may be inaccurate.