

PRRI Releases Largest Survey of American Religious and Denominational Identity Ever Conducted

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Survey of 101,000 Americans chronicles the country's changing religious landscape, including the declining dominance of white Christian groups and a more diverse future

WASHINGTON—With aging white Christian groups now accounting for fewer than half of the public and non-Christian groups constituting the country's youngest religious communities, the future of American religion will likely look strikingly different than its past. A massive new survey out today from PRRI reveals seismic shifts in the religious landscape over the last few decades, including the sharp growth of the religiously unaffiliated—a category that includes atheists, agnostics, and those who say they do not identify with any particular religion—along with racial and ethnic changes that are transforming nearly all major Christian denominations.

These are among the major findings from “[America's Changing Religious Identity](#),” a report released today by PRRI. The report is based on findings from PRRI's 2016 American Values Atlas, the single largest survey of American religious and denominational identity ever conducted, based on interviews with more than 101,000 Americans from all 50 states conducted across 2016. The report includes detailed information about religious affiliation, denominational ties, political affiliation, and other important demographic characteristics.

“This report provides solid evidence of a new, second wave of white Christian decline that is occurring among white evangelical Protestants just over the last decade in the U.S.,” says **Robert P. Jones, PRRI CEO and author of *The End of White Christian America***. “Prior to 2008, white evangelical Protestants seemed to be exempt from the waves of demographic change and disaffiliation that were eroding the membership bases of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics. We now see that these waves simply crested later for white evangelical Protestants.”

Today, only 43% of Americans identify as white Christian, and only 30% as white Protestant. In 1976, roughly eight in ten (81%) Americans identified as white and identified with a Christian denomination, and a majority (55%) were white Protestants.

Fewer than one in five (17%) Americans now identify as white evangelical Protestant, but they accounted for nearly one-quarter (23%) of the public just a decade ago in 2006. Over the same period, white Catholics dropped five percentage points from 16% to 11%, and white mainline Protestants have shed an equal number, decreasing from 18% to 13%.

The Catholic Church is also undergoing a dramatic transformation as its share of white, non-Hispanic members dwindles and its Hispanic membership rises. Twenty-five years earlier in 1991, nearly nine in ten (87%) Catholics were white, non-Hispanic, compared to 55% today. Among Catholics under the age of 30, fewer than four in ten (36%) are white, non-Hispanic, compared to 52% who are Hispanic.

More evidence that America's future is less white and less Christian: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and the religiously unaffiliated are all far younger than white Christian groups. At least one-third of Muslims (42%), Hindus (36%), and Buddhists (35%) are under the age of 30. Roughly one-third (34%) of religiously unaffiliated Americans are also under 30. In contrast, slightly more than one in ten white Catholics (11%), white evangelical Protestants (11%), and white mainline Protestants (14%) are under 30.

"The unprecedented growth of the religiously unaffiliated has made this group much more complex," said **PRRI Research Director Dan Cox**. "For example, atheists and agnostics, two of the most known subgroups among the unaffiliated, account for just a sliver of the entire group." Atheists and agnostics account for only about one-quarter (27%) of all religiously unaffiliated Americans. Nearly six in ten (58%) religiously unaffiliated Americans identify as secular, or someone who is not religious; 16% of religiously unaffiliated Americans nonetheless report that they identify as a "religious person."

Additional findings:

- **Non-Christian religious groups are growing, but they still represent less than one in ten Americans combined.** Jews constitute 2% of all Americans while Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus each constitute only 1% of the public. All other non-Christian religions constitute an additional 1%.
- **There are now 20 states in which no religious group comprises a greater share of residents than the religiously unaffiliated.** These states tend to be more concentrated in the western U.S., although they include a few New England states, as well. More than four in ten (41%) residents of Vermont and approximately one-third of Americans in Oregon (36%), Washington (35%), Hawaii (34%), Colorado (33%), and New Hampshire (33%) are religiously unaffiliated.
- **No state is less religiously diverse than Mississippi.** The state is heavily Protestant and dominated by a single denomination: Baptist. Six in ten (60%) Protestants in Mississippi are Baptist. No state has a greater degree of religious diversity than New York.
- **The cultural center of the Catholic Church is shifting south.** The Northeast is no longer the epicenter of American Catholicism—although at 41% Catholic, Rhode Island remains the most Catholic state in the country. Immigration from predominantly Catholic countries in Latin America means new Catholic populations are settling in the Southwest. In 1972, roughly seven in ten Catholics lived in either the Northeast (41%) or the Midwest (28%). Only about one-third of Catholics lived in the South (13%) or West (18%). Today, a majority of Catholics now reside in the South (29%) or West (25%). Currently, only about one-quarter (26%) of the U.S. Catholic population lives in the Northeast, and 20% live in the Midwest.

- **Jews, Hindus, and Unitarian-Universalists stand out as the most educated groups in the American religious landscape.** More than one-third of Jews (34%), Hindus (38%), and Unitarian-Universalists (43%) hold post-graduate degrees. Notably, Muslims are significantly more likely than white evangelical Protestants to have at least a four-year college degree (33% vs. 25%, respectively).
- **Asian or Pacific-Islander Americans have a significantly different religious profile than other racial or ethnic groups.** There are as many Asian or Pacific-Islander Americans affiliated with non-Christian religions as with Christian religious groups. And one-third (34%) are religiously unaffiliated.
- **Nearly half of LGBT Americans are religiously unaffiliated.** Nearly half (46%) of Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) are religiously unaffiliated. This is roughly twice the number of Americans overall (24%) who are religiously unaffiliated.
- **White Christians have become a minority in the Democratic Party.** Fewer than one in three (29%) Democrats today are white Christian, compared to half (50%) one decade earlier. Only 14% of young Democrats (age 18 to 29) identify as white Christian. Forty percent identify as religiously unaffiliated.
- **White evangelical Protestants remain the dominant religious force in the GOP.** More than one-third (35%) of all Republicans identify as white evangelical Protestant, a proportion that has remained roughly stable over the past decade. Roughly three-quarters (73%) of Republicans belong to a white Christian religious group.

The topline, full methodology, and additional findings and analysis can be found here: <https://www.prrri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>

Methodology

The 2016 American Values Atlas (AVA) is a project of PRRI. Results were based on 101,438 bilingual telephone interviews (including 60,355 cell phone interviews) conducted between January 6, 2016 and January 10, 2017 by professional interviewers under the direction of SSRS. The sample was designed to represent the total U.S. adult population from all 50 states, including Hawaii and Alaska. The AVA was made possible by generous grants from The Ford Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, The Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, The Gill Foundation, and The Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.

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