

America's Changing Religious Identity

Summary

The American religious landscape is undergoing a dramatic transformation. White Christians, once the dominant religious group in the U.S., now account for fewer than half of all adults living in the country. Today, fewer than half of all states are majority white Christian. As recently as 2007, 39 states had majority white Christian populations. These are two of the major findings from this report, which is based on findings from PRRI's 2016 American Values Atlas, the single largest survey of American religious and denominational identity ever conducted. This landmark report is based on a sample of more than 101,000 Americans from all 50 states and includes detailed information about their religious affiliation, denominational ties, political affiliation, and other important demographic attributes.

Major Findings:

1. White Christians now account for fewer than half of the public. Today, only 43% of Americans identify as white and Christian, and only 30% as white and 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.
2. White evangelical Protestants are in decline—along with white mainline Protestants and white Catholics. White evangelical Protestants were once thought to be bucking a longer trend, but over the past decade their numbers have dropped substantially. Fewer than one in five (17%) Americans are white evangelical Protestant, but they accounted for nearly one-quarter (23%) in 2006. Over the same period, white Catholics dropped five percentage points from 16% to 11%, as have white mainline Protestants, from 18% to 13%.
3. Non-Christian religious groups are growing, but they still represent less than one in ten Americans combined. Jewish Americans constitute 2% of the public while Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus each constitute only 1% of the public. All other non-Christian religions constitute an additional 1%.
4. America's youngest religious groups are all non-Christian. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists 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, white Christian groups are aging. Slightly more than one in ten white Catholics (11%), white evangelical Protestants (11%), and white mainline Protestants (14%) are under 30. Approximately six in ten white evangelical Protestants (62%), white Catholics (62%), and white mainline Protestants (59%) are at least 50 years old.
5. The Catholic Church is experiencing an ethnic transformation. Twenty-five years ago, nearly nine in ten (87%) Catholics were white, non-Hispanic, compared to 55% today. Fewer than four in ten (36%) Catholics under the age of 30 are white, non-Hispanic; 52% are Hispanic.
6. Atheists and agnostics account for a minority of all religiously unaffiliated. Most are secular. 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, someone who is not religious; 16% of religiously unaffiliated Americans nonetheless report that they identify as a "religious person."
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.

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Marital Status and Family Size

Divisions in marital status among American religious communities largely occur along racial lines. At least six in ten white mainline Protestants (60%), white Catholics (61%), white evangelical Protestants (64%), and Mormons (68%) are married. In contrast, members of nonwhite religious traditions are much less likely to be married. Only 37% of black Protestants, 45% of Hispanic Protestants, and half (50%) of Hispanic Catholics report being married.

Notably, among non-Christian groups, Hindus (66%) are far more likely than Muslims (49%) and Buddhists (35%) to be married. More than six in ten (62%) Jewish Americans also report being married, although there are some differences by denomination. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Orthodox Jews are married, compared to about six in ten who belong to Conservative (64%) and Reform (59%) denominations. Roughly four in ten (42%) religiously unaffiliated Americans are married.

White Christians stand out in that they do not have young children living at home. Nearly three-quarters of white evangelical Protestants (73%), white mainline Protestants (73%), and white Catholics (75%) do not have children under the age of 18 living at home. Roughly seven in ten Jews (71%) and Buddhists (72%), and approximately two-thirds of religiously unaffiliated Americans (68%), black Protestants (67%), and Hindus (67%), also report that they have no children living in their household. In contrast, only about half (50%) of Hispanic Catholics and Hispanic Protestants (52%) have no children in their households. Among Americans who report living with children in their household, Mormons have by far the largest families. More than four in ten (42%) Mormon parents say they have at least three children in their household under the age of 18.

Political Ideology

White evangelical Protestants and Mormons are the most conservative religious groups in the country. More than six in ten (62%) white evangelical Protestants and a majority (57%) of Mormons identify as politically conservative. Liberals make up only 12% and 15%, respectively, of these religious traditions. White mainline Protestants also lean more conservative than liberal (38% vs. 25%, respectively), while white Catholics are about twice as likely to identify as conservative than liberal (42% vs. 22%, respectively).

There is wide variation in the political ideology of nonwhite Christian groups. Despite their strong Democratic leanings, black Protestants are about as likely to be conservative (30%) as they are to be liberal (29%). Similarly, Hispanic Catholics are about equally as likely to identify as conservative (33%) and liberal (29%). Hispanic Protestants are much more likely to be conservative than they are to be liberal (41% vs. 23%, respectively).

Non-Christian communities are more liberal leaning. Close to half of Jews (45%), Buddhists (48%), and Hindus (45%) identify as liberal; significantly fewer Jews (27%), Buddhists (17%), and Hindus (16%) identify as conservative. Muslims are also more likely to identify as liberal (38%) than they are to identify as conservative (20%). Religiously unaffiliated Americans also lean liberal in their politics. More than four in ten (43%) identify as liberal, while 21% are conservative.

[Adapted from an article by Daniel Cox, Ph.D., and Robert P. Jones, Ph.D., 09.06.2017. Sources: various surveys by The Pew Research Center for the People & The Press and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, and American Values.]