

Fewer Americans Affiliate with Organized Religions, Belief and Practice Unchanged:

Key Findings from the 2014 General Social Survey

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Abstract

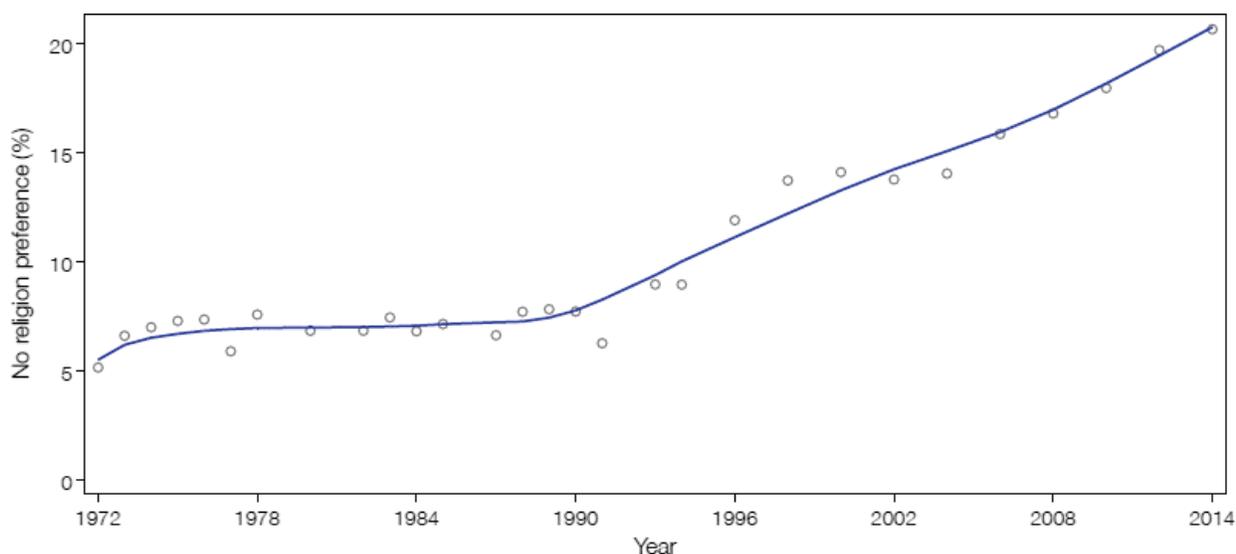
In 2014, 21 percent of American adults stated that they had no religious preference when they were interviewed in the latest round of the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of American adults. This continues a trend of Americans disavowing a specific religious affiliation that began around 1990 and continues at a very steady pace. The GSS has asked about religious preferences for forty-two years: “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” The percentage answering “no religion” was 21 percent in 2014, 20 percent in 2012, just 14 percent as recently as 2000, and only 8 percent in 1990. While some types of people identify with an organized religion less than others, Americans in almost every demographic group were more likely to state “no religion” in 2014 than in the past. Preferring no religion is *not atheism* which is still very rare; in 2014, just 3 percent of Americans said they did not believe in God. Praying and attending religious services are also less frequent than they were twenty years ago, but people who have a religious preference are not significantly less likely to attend services weekly or more than they were in the past.

Introduction

Religious affiliation was once a standard identity for almost all American adults. In the most recent data from the General Social Survey (GSS, collected in 2014 and released March 6, 2015), 21 percent of Americans has no religious affiliation. The GSS has been tracking trends in religious preference since 1972, asking “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” The answers changed little from 1973 to 1990, then the percentage preferring no religion started rising from 8 percent in 1990 to 21 percent in 2014. The percentage of Americans with no religious preference increased 13 percentage points in 24 years. We find no evidence of a slowdown. The increase of 3 percentage points between 2010 and 2014 was within the statistical margin of error of what we would expect based on the overall rate of increase since 1990.¹

¹ The GSS was originally an annual survey, but it has collected data in even-numbered years since 1994.

Figure 1. No Religious Preference (%) by Year, 1972-2014



Note: Statistical smoothing used to reduce variability due to sampling (shown in blue). Gray circles show raw data.
Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-2014.

Figure 1 shows the strong upward trend in the preference for no religion. Since 1990, Americans have steadily increased their preference for no religion; the trend line rose at a rate of approximately 0.6 percentage points per year for the last 24 years. Few important social phenomena show such steady change over such a long time.

Identification is but one aspect of religion. The GSS also asks questions about religious behavior and religious belief. The main indicator of religious behavior is attendance at religious services. In 2014, 24 percent of Americans reported attending religious services weekly (or more often); that was down from 30 percent in 1991. Almost all of the change in attendance is due to changing identification. In 2014, 30 percent of Americans who had a religious preference reported attending services weekly (or more often) compared to 31 percent of those with a preference in 1991. A majority of Americans pray daily; in 2014, 30 percent said they prayed once a day and 27 percent said they prayed several times a day. In 1990, those percentages were slightly lower but not statistically significantly different; 29 percent prayed once a day and 23 percent prayed several times a day. We see little evidence of changing religious behavior among Americans who identify with a religion.

The religious beliefs Americans expressed in the 2014 GSS resemble closely the beliefs they expressed in the past. Belief in God is at the core of religious belief. Table 1 (appended at the end of this report) shows that a strong majority (58%) of Americans believe in God without doubt. That is only six percentage points less than 24 years ago. Nor have they shifted to atheism or agnosticism. In 2014, 3 percent of Americans did not believe in God and 5 percent expressed an agnostic view; the comparable percentages were 2 percent and 4 percent in 1991. More people believed in a “higher power” in 2014 (13%) than in 1991 (7%).

Eighty percent of Americans believe there is a life after death; that percentage has not changed by a statistically significant amount since 1990.

Beliefs about the Bible have changed to a statistically significant extent. The GSS question offers three views of the Bible and asks people to pick the one that comes closest to their feelings:

- a. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word;
- b. The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word;

and

- c. The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man. In 2014 32 percent chose the literal option (a) and 22 chose the historical option (c). In 1990, 33 percent chose the literal option but only 15 percent chose the historical option. The historical option has become a more prevalent choice each year since 1990.

Most Groups Less Religious

Preferring no religion is a very widespread trend, evident in most major subpopulations, including among men and women, in most racial and age groups, and in all regions of the country. Only political conservatives are relatively immune from the trend. All of these sub-group variations are included in Table 2.

Women are generally more religious than men, and that generalization holds here. In the most recent GSS, 18 percent of women compared to 25 percent of men had no religious preference. Both genders changed significantly compared to 1990, each was 13 or 14 percentage points higher in 2014 than in 1990.

All three of the largest racial and ancestry groups show similar rates of increase in a preference for no religion. Non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Hispanics are all more likely to have no religious preference in 2014 than in 1990.

Younger Americans are much less likely to state a religious preference than are their elders. Among 18-to-24 year olds, 33 percent prefer no religion; among people 75 years old and over, only 5 percent had no preference. The other age groups fall in line according to their age. The young-adult group changed most since 1990, as well. Multivariate analysis of the trends through 2012 indicates that the differences once in place tend to stay in place. Americans born during the baby boom have remained significantly less attached to religion than their parents were from the first GSS surveys in the 1970s through the most recent ones. And the generations that have come after the boomers have been successively less attached to organized religions, too, and show no sign of becoming more religious as they approach middle age (see Hout and Fischer, “Explaining religious change,” published in *Sociological Science* in 2014).

Religious preference varies modestly across educational levels; preferring no religion increased from 15 percent of high school dropouts to 23 percent of people with some college or more education.

The South is the most religious region of the country and changing the least; only 15 percent of southerners had no religious preference in 2014. The Pacific states have the highest percentage with no religious preference, 30 percent in 2014.

Political conservatives identify far more with organized religion than political liberals do; political moderates fall between them in religious identification, as they do in politics. In 2014, 9 percent of political conservatives had no religious preference compared to 19 percent of political moderates and 38 percent of political liberals. In 1990, 5 percent of conservatives, 6 percent of moderates, and 15 percent of liberals had no religious preference. Hout and Fischer wrote extensively about this trend in their 2014 article in the *Sociological Science*, pointing to political polarization and generational succession as the keys to understanding the trend in religious preferences. Their detailed analysis showed how the alliance between conservative politicians and the leadership of conservative religious denominations was pushing political liberals who had been raised in conservative denominations away from organized religion.

Changes among Denominations

We can study the implications of these changes for religious denominations by comparing peoples' current religious preference to their answers about what religion (if any) they were raised in. Those comparisons are in Table 3.²

The GSS asks people who expressed a religious preference "What specific denomination is that, if any?" People have named over 300 specific denominations over the years. Scholars classify those responses in various ways. Most scholars concur that most Baptist denominations, Pentecostal ones, and the Church of God in Christ are among a doctrinally conservative group while Protestant denominations such as Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian are more doctrinally moderate or liberal (see, for example, Smith, "Classifying religious denominations," Re-view of Religious Research). We use that distinction here to distinguish two kinds of Protestant; we also distinguish Catholics and Jews from other religions. We apply the same classification to peoples' current religions and the religions they were raised in.

² Simply comparing the distribution of Americans across religious denominations in 1990 with the distribution in 2014 can be very misleading. Demographic changes due to differences in fertility, mortality, and immigration can alter the distributions over time even when there is no underlying religious change. Comparing a sample of people over their lifetime, as we do here, is a more direct assessment of the implications of changing religious preferences for denominations.

Twenty-eight percent of Americans were conservative Christians in 2014; about one-third had been raised in a conservative Christian tradition. There is lots of flux behind that unchanging number as new converts to conservative Christian churches offset defections by others, resulting in a net decrease of four points in the size of the conservative Christian segment within the generation.

About one-in-five Americans identify with Protestant denominations that are not generally considered to be doctrinally conservative. A similar percentage were raised in that tradition.

The Catholic Church experienced the greatest net exit within the generation. While one-fourth of American adults were Catholic in 2014, over one-third were raised Catholic.

The Jewish population is very small. But the current share of 1.5 percent matched the share of origins.

It is hard to say much about the “other religion” category because it combines a very heterogeneous collection of faiths even though all together they do not comprise a very large share of the total.

Finally, while 21 percent of people currently had no religious preference in 2014, only 8 percent had been raised without a religious preference. The summary data in Table 3 should not be read as implying a direct flow from Catholic origins to no current religious preference. Our analysis of the detailed flows from each origin to each current preference shows that every origin contributes something to the rise of no preference, although Catholicism contributes the most. About 16 percent of people raised Christian — Protestants and Catholics alike — plus those who describe their religious upbringing as “other religion” currently prefer no religion. That boosts no religion. But people raised with no religion also develop religious preferences through life; 40 percent of those raised without religion had a current religion in 2014. The net is the redistribution we show in the table. The dynamics of these exchanges among denominations are a field of study unto itself.

Conclusions and Future Work

Americans were among the world’s most religious populations for most of the twentieth century. In recent years, some signs of estrangement, especially from organized religion, have emerged. More Americans than ever profess having no religious preference. Conventional religious belief, typified by belief in God, remains very widespread — 59 percent of Americans believe in God without any doubt. Atheism is barely growing; one percent of Americans positively did not believe in God in 1965, two percent in 1991, and three percent in 2014. Nor is disbelief fueling the trend toward no preference as beliefs changed much less during these years of institutional defection than between the 1960s to the 1990s when religious preferences changed little (and differential birth rates explained the changes that did occur).

Scholars of religion, politics, demography, and social change will make extensive use of these new data, just as they made use of previous GSSs.

About the Data

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a project of NORC, an independent research unit at the University of Chicago, with principal funding provided by the National Science Foundation. It is a unique and valuable resource that has tracked the opinions and behaviors of Americans over the last four decades. The GSS is NORC's longest running project, and one of its most influential. Except for U.S. Census data, the GSS is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences. More than 200,000 research publications of many types are based on the GSS; and about 400,000 students use the GSS in their classes each year. Since 1985, the GSS has taken part in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), a consortium of social scientists involving 57 countries around the world. The ISSP asks an identical battery of questions in all countries; the U.S. version of these questions is incorporated into the GSS.

The GSS makes high-quality data easily accessible to scholars, students, policy makers, and others, with minimal cost and waiting. People use the GSS to monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes, to examine the structure and functioning of society in general as well as the role played by relevant subgroups, to compare the United States to other societies in order to place American society in comparative perspective and develop cross-national models of human society.

The GSS has an unusually broad and detailed array of demographic information about each respondent that researchers find valuable in placing subjective responses in social context. These include basics like sex, age, race, and education, but details about religious denominations (if any), occupations (if any), marital history, geography, and nativity make the survey particularly useful for both descriptive and analytical work. GSS questions include such items as national spending priorities, marijuana use, crime and punishment, race relations, quality of life, and confidence in institutions. Since 1988, the GSS has also collected data on sexual behavior including number of sex partners, frequency of intercourse, extramarital relationships, and sex with prostitutes.

Interviews are designed to be conducted in-person, usually at a person's home. In 2014, 87 percent of interviews were completed in-person; the rest of the interviews were conducted via telephone. Over 70 percent of individuals selected for interview participate; this is a much higher response rate than most surveys achieve. Interviews last an average of 90 minutes. They are usually conducted between March and June of the year in question. The survey had a broader interviewing period in 2014; the first interview was March 31st and the last was October 13th. The 2014 GSS consists of 2,538 completed interviews and some supplementary information about each case.

The survey was drawn in stages that assure every household in the United States an equal chance of being included. The probabilities of being selected were updated in 2012 to reflect the results of the 2010 census. The largest metropolitan areas are drawn into the sample with certainty; smaller places are included with a probability proportional to the count in the most recent census. Places are divided into sampling units, addresses are sampled randomly within sampling units, and one adult is selected randomly at each sampled address that has residents. Initial nonrespondents are recontacted many times to assure representativeness. Approximately 60 percent of respondents receive a payment to participate; \$20 is the most common amount although payments of \$75 or more have become more common in recent years.

References

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Table 1. Beliefs about God by Year: Adults, United States, 1991 and 2014

Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?	2014	1991	Change
I don't believe in God	3%	2%	1%
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out	5%	4%	1%
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	13%	7%	6%
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	4%	5%	-1%
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	17%	18%	-1%
I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it	58%	64%	-6%
Total	100%	100%	
Number of persons	2,521	1,327	

Source: General Social Surveys, 1991 and 2014.

Table 2. Percentage with No Religious Affiliation by Year and Selected Characteristics:
Adults, United States, 1990 and 2014

Subgroup	2014	1990^a	Change
Total	21%	7%	13%
Women	18%	5%	13%
Men	24%	10%	14%
Whites (non-Hispanic)	21%	8%	13%
African Americans	19%	5%	15%
Hispanics	20%	7%	13%
18-24 year olds	33%	9%	23%
25-34 year olds	29%	10%	19%
35-44 year olds	26%	8%	18%
45-54 year olds	19%	5%	14%
55-64 year olds	15%	4%	10%
65-74 year olds	11%	5%	5%
75 year olds and up	5%	3%	2%
Less than high school	15%	7%	8%
High school diploma	16%	5%	11%
Some college	23%	6%	17%
College degree	22%	10%	12%
Advanced degree	21%	12%	8%
Northeastern states	23%	7%	15%
Midwestern states	21%	6%	14%
Southern states	15%	6%	10%
Mountain states	23%	4%	19%
Pacific states	30%	15%	15%
Political liberals	38%	15%	24%
Political moderates	19%	6%	13%
Political conservatives	9%	5%	4%

Source: General Social Surveys, 1989-1991 and 2014.

^a This column combines the 1989, 1990, and 1991 surveys in order to reduce sampling variability.

Table 3. Religious Denomination of Origin and Current Religious Denomination:
Adults, United States, 2014

Religious denomination	Current religion	Religion raised in	Difference
Conservative Christian (e.g., Baptist, Pentecostal, "Christian," Church of God in Christ)	28%	32%	-4%
Other Protestant (e.g., Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian)	21%	20%	1%
Catholic	25%	36%	-10%
Jewish	1%	2%	-0%
Other religion	4%	3%	1%
No religion	21%	8%	12%
Total	100%	100%	
Number of persons	2,522	2,522	

Source: General Social Survey, 2014.