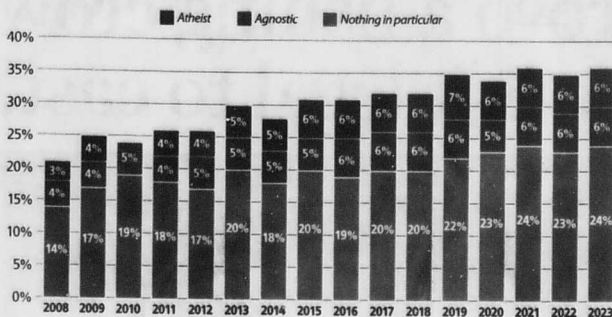
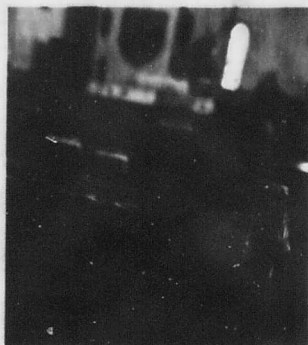


The rise — and plateauing — of America's nonreligious



Source: Ryan Burge based on data from the Cooperative Election Study, 2008-2023
GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune



FRANCISCO KJOLSETH | The Salt Lake Tribune

Since the early 1990s, the number of America's "nones" has risen at a steady clip, outstripping all other religious groups. New data suggests a possible stall.

Data suggests a slowdown among 'nones'

Nones

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WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW

Between 1991 and 2021, the number of the country's religiously unaffiliated shot up from 5% to "about" 30%, Burge, a pastor in the American Baptist Church, explained in an interview with The Salt Lake Tribune. Some of the greatest growth took place between 2008 and 2013, when it rocketed from 21% to 30%, according to the CES.

"That's a massive shift in such a short window of time," Burge wrote in his newsletter, "really stunning for anyone who studies demographics."

Since 2020, however, that number has waffled between 34% and 36% — some years gaining and some years losing, but never budging more than a percentage point.

CES isn't the only survey to observe a slowdown, either.

Pew pegged the number of "nones" at 28% in 2019 and 2023, with some minor fluctuation in between.

And while the University of Chicago's General Social Survey found a jump from 23% in 2018 to 29% in 2021, its most recent study recorded a dip to 27% in 2022.

"On its own, this one data point does not

an argument make," Burge acknowledged in his newsletter. But pair it with the other studies, he continued, and "it feels like the polling data is converging on the same reality."

MORE DATA MAY BE NEEDED

Ryan Cragun, a professor of sociology at the University of Tampa in Florida and co-author of "Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society," is skeptical of Burge's conclusions.

"From my perspective," he said, "it's way too early to say we're seeing a plateauing."

For an observation to rise to the level of an actual trend, he said it would need to be repeated for a minimum of five years, and ideally as many as 10. Anything short of that is "noise in the data," he said, and well within the kind of fluctuations researchers expect in year-to-year sampling.

Few researchers agree with this assessment. In a write-up discussing their findings, they acknowledge that, while it's "possible" the group has stalled out, "it's also possible that their growth has continued, but at a gradual pace."

Such possible trends, they explained, "are best assessed over the long haul, based on many survey readings."

'RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION'

Burge doesn't just offer data, however. He provides a theory for this possible plateau. "In some ways," he told The Tribune, "this speaks to the continuing religious polarization facing America."

In the past, "a whole lot of people were marginally attached Christians," he explained. These were the ones who showed up some years for Christmas, maybe Easter. Burge believes these individuals have shaken loose the identifier of "Christian" (and it does appear to be Christianity, and in particular Protestant Christianity, taking the hit) in recent years.

"Now," he said, "we are at the place where Christians are more comfortable with that label — so are 'nones.'"

The result: "We are getting a more accurate picture of what American religion actually looks like now," he said. "People aren't afraid to say what they really believe on surveys."

Put another way, he wrote in his newsletter: "The loose topsoil has been scooped off and hauled away, leaving nothing but hard bedrock underneath."

That's not to say the number will remain completely flat for the foreseeable future.

"Older people will not live forever," he wrote. "Instead, they will be leaving this Earth and their replacements will be a whole lot of members of Gen Z, who tend to be less religious than their grandparents." Critically, however, "the generational gap

between those groups," he observed, "may be smaller now than many initially thought."

REASONS FOR SKEPTICISM

Cragun cast doubt on Burge's thinking here as well, pushing back against the idea that religions are merely sloughing off the uncommitted.

"There's definitely a mass deconstruction

of religiosity going on," he said, including among previously devout members of so-called "strict" religions.

"There's been some debate if it's [the Christmas and Easter Christians] or the devout Mormons who served missions going to church each week who are leaving," he said. "Turns out, it's everybody."

The data is clear, he said: "There's no subset that's not affected by secularization."

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