

Growth in number of Americans citing no religion may be slower than previously reported

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Americans continue to pull away from organized religion, but the rate of departure previously reported may not have been as abrupt as originally thought, according to research to be presented at the 104th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Sociologists Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer of the University of California, Berkeley, find that the previous estimate of a doubling during the 1990s of the proportion of Americans with no [religion](#) probably started earlier than 1991 and doubled over a 14- or 15-year period. New data suggest that the trend continued through 2008, likely fueled at least partially by the growing number of Americans who were raised with no religion.

The current investigation revisits the researchers' April 2002 [American Sociological Review](#) article, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," using data from the General Social Survey fielded between 1973 and 2008. The General Social Survey is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center and funded by the National Science Foundation.

According to the new data, 93 percent of Americans believe in God; a figure unchanged since 1988. The group that increased was the group Hout and Fischer call "unchurched believers," those people who believe in God but report no religion.

"If you think of organized religion as having two parts—the organized part and the religious part—the church-leavers' quarrel is with the organized part," said Michael Hout, professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and the lead author of the study.

As originally reported in 2002, Hout and Fischer assert that politics continue to play a role in the increase in those reporting no religion preference. The sociologists note a parallel between the rising rates of non-religious Americans and the number of mentions of the "religious right" in press coverage in the past nearly four decades.

Political liberals and moderates are much less likely to report a religion now than in 1988; almost all political conservatives identify with a church now as they did twenty years ago.

"Invoking religion to promote a conservative social agenda may energize conservative members, but it alienates political moderates and liberals," Hout said. "The result has been a significant decrease in the fraction of American adults identifying with an organized religion."

Americans expressed stronger anti-religious feelings in 2008 than in 1998. For example, two-thirds of adults agreed that "religion brings more conflict than peace" in 2008 compared with just one-third in 1998. Similarly more Americans described themselves as "non-religious" in 2008 than in 1998.

Among the rising number of Americans who cite no religious preference, those who believe in either God or the afterlife outnumber those with no beliefs. In addition, the number of religiously affiliated non-believers declined sharply between 1973 and 2008.

Source: American [Sociological](#) Association ([news](#) : [web](#))

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