

Outside an organized religion, 'the nones' are still powerful voting bloc

By Carrie Dann, NBC News

December 12, 2012

It's a voting bloc as big as Hispanics, 18- to 24-year-olds and the staunchest pro-lifers, and it broke for the Democratic presidential nominee by a margin of 44 points.

"Religiously Unaffiliated Voters For Obama" doesn't really have a bumper-sticker catchiness to it, but it rang true in 2012.

President Barack Obama acknowledges supporters while addressing his election night victory rally in Chicago, November 6, 2012.

Voters who say they don't have a specific affiliation with a particular religion -- increasingly referred to with the minimalist moniker "the nones" -- made up 12 percent of the electorate in 2012 and 2008, a share that has more than doubled since 1980 and is up by 3 percent since 2000. Even more, 17 percent of 2012 voters said they never attend church.

Pew study: 'Nones' on the rise

"This is a big group, it's a growing group, and it's politically a pretty important and consequential group in that the religiously unaffiliated are one of the strongest Democratic constituencies in the population," said Greg Smith, senior researcher at the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life.

And there are many more who haven't shown up to the polls. In a new study, Pew found that in 2012, nearly one in five survey respondents nationwide classified themselves as "atheist," "agnostic" or "nothing in particular."

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga.; Bloomberg White House Correspondent, Julianna Goldman; NY Times White House Correspondent Helene Cooper; Washington Post Associate Editor Bob Woodward discuss the power the president feels he has since winning re-election.

All of that adds up to a substantial chunk of the American public in a country that just nominated (but didn't elect) its first non-Protestant presidential ticket this year. The unaffiliated bloc is comparable with the share of the electorate made up by either black or Hispanic voters. They make up nearly a quarter of Democratic or Democratic-leaning voters. In 2008, they were as reliable a constituency for Barack Obama as white evangelical Protestants were for John McCain.

That's not to say that the Democratic Party has gone out of its way to court them.

Lauren Anderson Youngblood, spokesperson for the Secular Coalition for America -- which lobbies on behalf of atheists, agnostics and other "nontheistic" citizens -- says that Democrats have been, at best, confused about how to reach out to non-believers, if not completely dismissive of the "nones" as a group.

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"If you want to reach out to someone, you will. If you want to work for their vote, you will," she said. "We're still a very stigmatized community that people don't necessarily want to be associated with because the word 'atheist' has all of these negative connotations."

Broderick Johnson, a senior adviser to the Obama campaign who concentrated on outreach to Catholics, said that while the campaign concentrated on messages of societal values that may appeal to unaffiliated voters, there was not a specific effort to court them as a unique constituency during the 2012 race.

"I don't know of an effort which was predicated on the idea that there was a large group of people who are unaffiliated with any particular religion, and the way to them was to talk about a certain set of issues," he said.

Data show that these voters' liberal affiliation comes primarily from social issues, like LGBT and abortion rights. Socially liberal but divided on issues of government and public life, religiously unaffiliated voters are far more likely than the general public to embrace same-sex marriage and to believe that all abortions should be legal.

But at the same time, half of them also say that they prefer a smaller federal government that provides fewer public services. One in five calls their political ideology "conservative," and another 40 percent describe themselves as "moderate."

"That segment really feels ignored," Youngblood said. "This is viewed as a very liberal movement, but there is also a segment that would identify as Republicans if it weren't for a lot of these social issues. It's really the intermingling of religion and government that's turning nontheistic Americans and religiously unaffiliated Americans off from the Republican Party."

The formal institutions of secular thought aren't exactly over the moon with the current president, either. While it clearly favored Obama over Romney, the Secular Coalition for America gave Obama an overall "C" grade in its presidential "election scorecard" this year, with failing marks for the categories of "Discrimination by religious organizations receiving taxpayer funding" and "Role of religion in decision making as president."

Those grievances reflect one of the common threads that link the "nones," even those who say they believe in God in some form: a distrust of institutionalized religion's exertion of political influence.

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Fully two-thirds of the group said that churches and other faith-based organizations are too involved in politics, and 70 percent say that religious institutions are "too concerned with money and power."

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Of course, money and power -- or at least the organizational structures that foster it -- are what make faith groups like evangelical Christians and Catholics ripe for targeting by campaigns that can gather data from churches about potential voters, plugging into the vast communication networks that unite congregants.

That's one advantage that unaffiliated voters, who have little formal structure outside of groups like the Secular Coalition, don't have.

"It's hard to know how, organizationally, they might be reached or mobilized," Smith said. "That's the question."