

**Hunter Driggers<sup>1</sup>**

Eastern Illinois University  
United States of America

Original scientific paper

<https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1502313d>

Date received: August 26, 2021

Date accepted: September 3, 2021

**Ryan P. Burge<sup>2</sup>**

Eastern Illinois University  
United States of America

## DID THE NONES PUT JOE BIDEN IN THE WHITE HOUSE? AN ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING PATTERNS OF THE RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED IN 2020

### Abstract

The fastest growing segments of the American religious landscape are atheists, agnostics, and nothing in particulars. In 2008, these three groups together (often called the Nones) represented 22% of the population, but just twelve years later their numbers surged to 34% of the populace. Given that one in three adults is a None, it stands to reason that they are having a growing influence on electoral politics. To that end, this analysis focuses on how those three types of unaffiliated Americans shifted their political ideology, partisanship and voting patterns from 2016 to 2020. The results indicate that Donald Trump's baseline of support dropped among all types of Nones, and that the drop was especially acute for nothing in particulars who had high household incomes in 2020.

**Keywords:** atheist, agnostic, voting behavior, nones, Trump, Biden

Over half a century ago, Glenn Vernon wrote a research note calling to attention "a neglected category" of American voters that held largely unknown implications for society.<sup>3</sup> At that point, religious "Nones" – the overlooked minority that Vernon had identified – amounted to only 2.7 percent of individuals.<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the century, that figure had swelled to 14 percent. Today, the number of religious Nones has nearly doubled, from 14 percent in 2000 to 23 percent in

1 Hunter Driggers is Second year Graduate Assistant conducting novel research on populism and international relations at Eastern Illinois University. He specializes in experimental political science and quantitative analysis. Contact E-mail: [mhdriggers@eiu.edu](mailto:mhdriggers@eiu.edu)

2 Ryan P. Burge (Ph.D., Southern Illinois University) teaches in a variety of areas, including American institutions, political behavior, and research methods. His research focuses largely on the intersection between religiosity and political behavior (especially in the American context). His work has been published in a number of well regarded peer reviewed journals, including *Politics & Religion*; *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*; *Review of Religious Research*; *Journal of Religious Leadership*; *Representation, Politics, Groups, and Identities*; and *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Contact E-mail: [rpburge@eiu.edu](mailto:rpburge@eiu.edu)

3 Glenn M. Vernon, The Religious 'Nones': A Neglected Category, *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1968, pp. 219–229.

4 Irene Oh, Richard Flory, Rebecca Bartel, John Modern, Joseph Winters, Lila C. Berman, and Kathryn Lofton, Forum: The Religious Situation, 1968 (Part 2), *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2019, pp. 135–178.

2018.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, this collection of atheists, agnostics, and other religiously unaffiliated persons has become one of the three largest religious denominations in the United States<sup>6</sup>. Thus, this group is theoretically capable of exerting considerable influence over American politics and society, especially given the powerful relationship between religious identity and political behavior.<sup>7</sup> Despite the implications, there remains a considerable lack of awareness surrounding religious Nones.

That is not to say over five decades of sociological research into this subject has been entirely fruitless, however. Scientists have long suspected that religious Nones are more socially and politically liberal than those who identify with a religion<sup>8</sup>, and recent efforts by scholars such as Philip Schwadel affirm this<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, Nones tend to identify as or lean Democrat<sup>10</sup>, in stark contrast to the overwhelmingly religious composition of the Republican Party. Although political polarization and partisan sorting has undoubtedly played a role in this<sup>11</sup>, the explicitly religious language employed by conservatives and Republicans may have reinforced the trend<sup>12</sup>. Alternatively, some have suggested that religious non-affiliation does not lead to identification with liberal values and the Democratic Party but instead that exposure to liberal ideology causes individuals to become less religious and even to identify as one of the Nones<sup>13</sup>, perhaps explaining the

- 5 Tom W. Smith, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, and Stephen L. Morgan, *General social surveys, 1972–2018, cumulative codebook*, University of Chicago Press, 2019. Also see: Ryan Burge, How Many ‘Nones’ Are There? Explaining the Discrepancies in Survey Estimates”, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 62, 2020.
- 6 Philip Schwadel, The Politics of Religious Nones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2020, pp. 180–189.
- 7 Philip Schwadel, The Republicanization of Evangelical Protestants in the United States: An Examination of the Sources of Political Realignment, *Social Science Research*, Vol. 62, 2017, pp. 238–254; Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2018.
- 8 Kirk C. Hadaway and Wade Clark Roof, Those Who Stay Religious ‘Nones’ and Those Who Don’t: A Research Note, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1979, pp. 194–200; John G. Condran and Joseph B. Tamney, Religious ‘Nones’: 1957 to 1982, *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 1985, pp. 415–423; Bernadette C. Hayes, The Impact of Religious Identification on Political Attitudes: An International Comparison, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 1995, pp. 177–194.
- 9 Philip Schwadel, The Politics of Religious Nones. . . ; Philip Schwadel, The Political Implications of Religious Non-Affiliation in Emerging Adulthood, *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement 17, 2018, pp. 149–166; Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*, NYU Press, New York, 2015; Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987–2012, *Sociological Science*, Vol. 1, 2014, pp. 423–447; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon & Schuster, 2012.
- 10 Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*. . . ; Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*. . . ; Philip Schwadel, The Political Implications of Religious Non-Affiliation in Emerging Adulthood. . .
- 11 Ryan L. Claassen, Paul A. Djupe, Andrew R. Lewis, and Jacob R. Neihsel, Which Party Represents My Group? The Group Foundations of Partisan Choice and Polarization, *Political Behavior*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2021, pp. 615–636; Nicholas T. Davis, Religion and Partisan-Ideological Sorting, 1984–2016, *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 4, 2018, pp. 1446–1466.
- 12 Robert B. Calfano and Paul A. Djupe, God Talk: Religious Cues and Electoral Support, *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2009, pp. 329–339; Ryan L. Claassen, Paul A. Djupe, Andrew R. Lewis, and Jacob R. Neihsel, Which Party Represents My Group? The Group Foundations of Partisan Choice and Polarization. . .
- 13 David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession. . . ; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American*

rising presence of atheism that has been noted<sup>14</sup>. In any case, it seems evident that religious Nones will continue to grow as a constituency for years to come, necessitating additional research into this group.

To that end, some researchers have spent the past decade scrutinizing religious Nones not only in contrast to the religiously affiliated but also with an eye towards within-group divisions. Most of these studies have elected to compare Nones by their aversion to organized religion. Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam, for example, differentiate between secular Nones and “liminal” Nones, which they define as those which have an unstable religious denomination over time<sup>15</sup>. They find that regardless of this unstable identifier, religious belief and practice do not significantly change over time for the liminal Nones, indicating there exist Nones which are religious but that do not identify with any particular religious affiliation.

In the wake of this revelation, Streib and Klein typify Nones in three categories: atheists, agnostics, and apostates.<sup>16</sup> Within this framework, atheism is denoted by disbelief in and hostility towards religion, agnosticism by skepticism and neutrality towards religion – what Barry Kosmin calls “softer” secularism – and apostates as those who have religious beliefs but do not affiliate themselves with a specific religious affiliation.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Streib and Klein’s definition of the apostate is roughly comparable to that of Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam’s concept of liminal Nones. Likewise, their definition of atheism is fully compatible with Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale’s characterization of its affiliates as more dogmatic and less agreeable than other Americans.<sup>18</sup>

Employing this tripartite conception of religious Nones, Philip Schwadel explores atheists, agnostics, and nothing in particulars (NIPs) along three dimensions: “political behavior and interest, politics and social interactions, and partisanship and ideology”<sup>19</sup>. To that end, Schwadel executes a series of ordinal, binary, and multinomial logistic regressions across two separate models, a “partial” model which has no controls and a “full” model that controls for a suite of social indicators, including age, race, education, income, and geography<sup>20</sup>. Ultimately,

---

*Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. . .*

14 “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, Pew Research Center, 2015. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>, (accessed August 26, 2021).

15 Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor and Robert D. Putnam, Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2010, pp. 596–618.

16 Heinz Streib and Constantin Klein, “Atheists, Agnostics, and Apostates”, in: *APA handbooks in psychology: APA Handbook of psychology, religion and spirituality: Vol 1*, Kenneth I. P., Julie J. E. and James W. J. (eds.), American Psychological Association, Washington D.C., 2013, pp. 713–728.

17 Barry A. Kosmin, “Contemporary Secularity and Secularism”, in: *Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, Kosmin Barry A. and Ariela Keysar (eds.), Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, Hartford, CT, 2007, pp. 1–13.

18 Phil Zuckerman, Luke W. Galen and Frank L. Pasquale, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 2016.

19 Philip Schwadel, The Politics of Religious Nones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2020, p. 182.

20 Ibidem, p. 184.

the author finds support for the concepts that atheist and agnostics are more likely to vote, identify with the Democratic Party, and feel politically efficacious than NIPs, with agnostics typically falling somewhere between atheists and NIPs. NIPs, meanwhile, tend to vote more like religious affiliates than other Nones.

Overall, this leads Schwadel (2020) to agree with Frost and Edgell's (2018) assertion that NIPs may be more politically moderate and apathetic than other Nones as a result of their uncertainty over values, making them a unique demographic.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, he concurs with the notion from that contemporary atheism has become highly politicized<sup>22</sup>, especially as "on some measures, atheists are more politically active than the religiously affiliated themselves"<sup>23</sup>. Further, he observes that agnostics voted in the 2016 election at a much higher rate than either NIPs or atheists, a finding which the author tentatively attributes to this demographic being relatively more knowledgeable on the topics of philosophy and reason than other groups, as was once posited by Baker and Smith.<sup>24</sup>

Schwadel's conclusions demonstrate that Nones are not a monolith. Resultantly, as with other social groups, failure to thoroughly assess the behavioral differences among religious Nones will invariably lead researchers to overlook nuances that may be critical to better understanding them and their votes. Yet very little research has been conducted to illustrate the within-group composition of this ever-growing demographic as it has grown over time, and this lack of attention has hindered social scientists' ability to construct an accurate picture of the American electorate, of shifts in trends regarding which individuals more frequently identify as Nones, and how Nones' opinions and ideology have changed over time.

Nonetheless, the cursory research that does approach this topic from such an angle suggests inter-group differences may not be limited to current political opinions but instead extend to how political phenomena may sway the Nones. Specifically, the inference by Jesse Smith that nothing in particulars are less politically efficacious than other Nones due to uncertain values may indicate that factors like the president's actions, news media, and additional external variable will have more sway over the behavior of this subgroup.<sup>25</sup> In the Cooperative Election Study (CES), this would most likely translate to NIPs moving further along

21 Jesse Smith, Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 52, 2013, pp. 80–99.

22 See: Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 2014; Penny Edgell, Douglas Hartmann, Evan Stewart and Joseph Gerteis, Atheists and Other Cultural Outsiders: Moral Boundaries and the Non-Religious in the United States, *Social Forces*, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2016, pp. 607–638; Stephen LeDrew, Reply: Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism: Identity, Politics, Ideology, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 4, 2013, pp. 464–470.

23 Philip Schwadel, The Politics of Religious Nones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2020, p. 187.

24 Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*, NYU Press, New York, 2015.

25 Jesse Smith, Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists. . .

the seven-point partisan spectrum between 2016 and 2020 than did atheists and agnostics. Agnostics, in contrast, may be expected to show the least amount of change in behavior between the two presidential election years on account of the deeper philosophical knowledge and less dogmatic perceptions they seem to hold, at least when compared to atheists and NIPs. It is for these same reasons that one can reasonably deduce atheists will have shifted less than NIPs but more than agnostics, although the relatively left-leaning orientation of atheists before 2016<sup>26</sup> combined with the explicit religiosity of America's political right over the past four years<sup>27</sup> also lends credibility to the idea that this group will not have shifted drastically. This is because atheists, like any other social group, cannot shift beyond the end of the political spectrum. As this group shows little indication of moving to the right, any shift among atheists will probably be leftward, and a ceiling effect in the magnitude of shift in partisan identification may be revealed.

Whether any of these specific predictions are demonstrable is less important than the unbiased exploration and interpretation of new data itself. With the remainder of this research paper, we answer two main questions. First, who are the Nones? Second, how is the composition of the Nones changing, if at all? While we know this group is growing, much remains unknown about its overall membership, and this can be easily remedied through exploration of existing data. Simultaneously, we do not assume that the composition of Nones of today matches that of Nones in years past, especially as exogenous factors may have contributed to individuals joining and leaving the group over time. Consequently, we compare data from 2016 and 2020. In doing so, we hope to not only elucidate who the Nones are at this moment but also to identify emerging trends that have gone unnoticed to this point and spur further interest in researching religious Nones. To conclude, we will discuss the results of our analysis and suggest plausible explanations for shifts in the Nones.

## Data/Measures

The data for this analysis comes from the Cooperative Election Study, which has been conducted since 2006, and from 2010 onwards has been fielded annually by a team based out of Harvard University. The CES is designed to allow for research teams to easily join the efforts of the core team. How this works is that for a set amount of funds, a research team adds 1,000 respondents to the total sample size which are asked the core set of questions along with a smaller bat-

---

26 Philip Schwadel, *The Politics of Religious Nones*. . .

27 Ryan Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2021; "America's Changing Religious Landscape", Pew Research Center, 2015. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>, (accessed August 26, 2021); Yonat Shimron, "How Partisanship Drives Religious Attitudes", *Religion News Service*, 2018. Available at: <https://religionnews.com/2018/07/31/how-partisanship-drives-religious-attitudes-and-not-the-other-way-around/>, (accessed September 1, 2021).

tery that are written by the specific research group that provided the additional funding. This serves two purposes: it affords researchers the ability to ask about a narrow topic for their own research agenda while also increasing the sample size for those who want to use the full sample for conducting statistical analysis.<sup>28</sup>

Because of this innovative design, the CES is best known for its incredibly robust sample size. While the General Social Survey or American National Election Study often have samples of 2,000-3,000 respondents, the CES is often twenty to thirty times the size. For instance, the 2020 wave of the survey had a total sample of 61,000 respondents. The survey is administered using the YouGov survey firm and is conducted in an online format, with participants taking the survey via web browser and receiving compensation for their time. The team at Harvard also includes appropriate survey weights with each data file so that the sample matches the national averages as closely as possible. These weights will be used to conduct the analysis in the forthcoming section.

To identify the Nones for this research, a single question will be used, "What is your present religion, if any?" Twelve response options appear on the survey: Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Eastern or Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic, Nothing in Particular, and Something Else. For the purposes of this analysis, the Nones are made up of three different groups: atheists, agnostics, and those who indicate they are nothing in particular. Identifying these three groups as Nones has become commonplace in recent scholarship in the field.<sup>29</sup>

## Findings

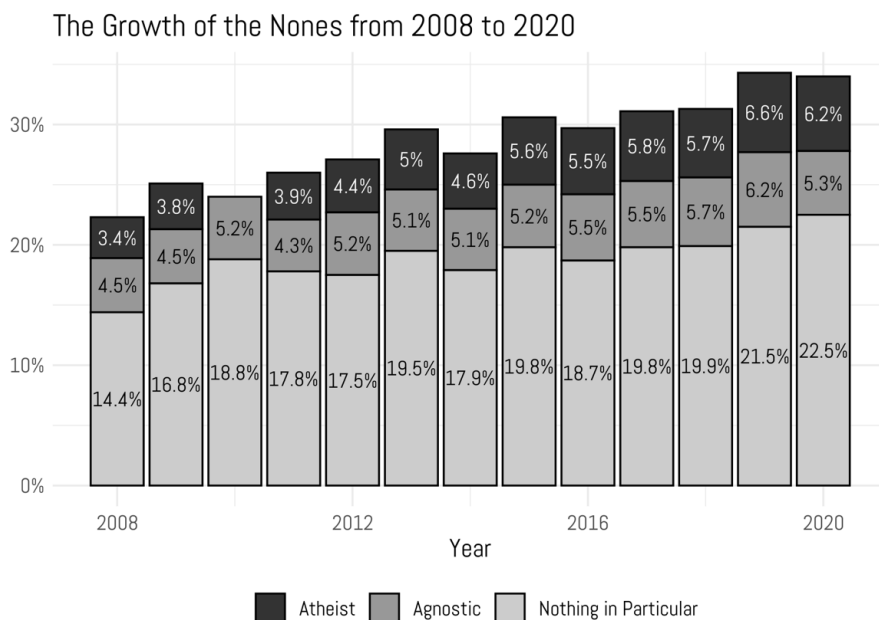
To begin, we assess the relative size and growth of the religiously unaffiliated in the United States over the last twelve years according to estimate of the Cooperative Election Study. In 2008, 3.4% of the total sample said that they were atheists, 4.5% chose the agnostic option, while 14.4% were nothing in particular. In total, 22.3% of Americans were classified as Nones in the year Barack Obama defeated John McCain for the presidency. In the next twelve waves of the CES, there is a clear and unmistakable upward trend in the share of Americans who fall into one of these three categories.

28 Ansolabehere Stephen and Douglas Rivers, Cooperative Survey Research, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2013, pp. 307-329.

29 Philip Schwadel, The Politics of Religious Nones...; Ryan Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going...*; Ryan Burge, How Many 'Nones' Are There? Explaining the Discrepancies in Survey Estimates, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 62, 2020, pp. 173-190.

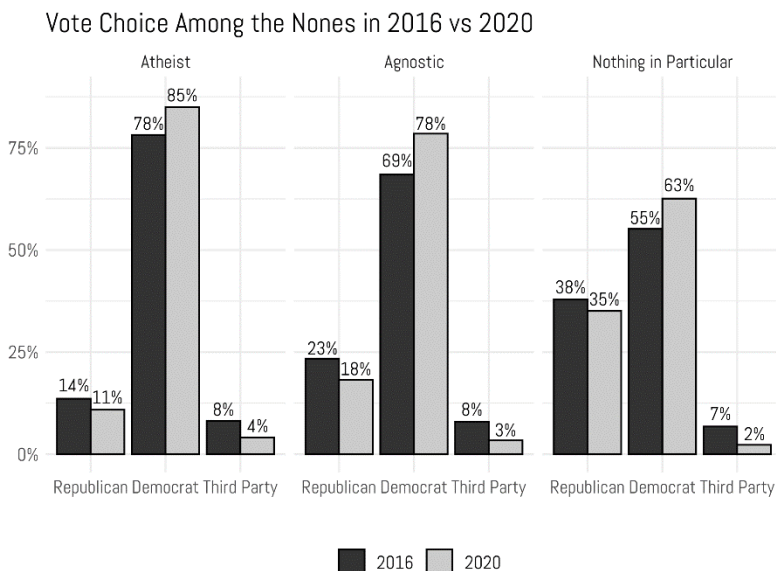


**Figure 1. The Growth of the Nones from 2008 to 2020**



By 2020, the share of Americans who said that they were atheists nearly doubled to 6.2%, while agnostics experienced a much smaller increase (just about one percentage point). However, the portion of the sample that indicated that they were nothing in particular rose from 14.4% to 22.5%, an increase of over eight percentage points in just twelve years. While 22% of Americans were Nones in 2008, it was 34% of adult Americans in 2020. Given that there are about 210 million adult Americans in the United States according to the Census Bureau, that means that there are over seventy-one million Nones in the United States today. If the share would have remained steady at 22% until 2020, the share would be only forty-six million adults. Thus, there are likely 25 million more Nones in the United States today than just twelve years ago, and their impact on electoral politics is growing larger by the year.

Given that an estimated one in three adult Americans is now religiously unaffiliated, it stands to reason that just a small shift in the voting patterns of atheists, agnostics, or nothing in particulars could result in significant electoral consequences for candidates running for statewide or national office. In this case, we want to investigate how the vote choice of these three groups shifted from the 2016 presidential election to the 2020 electoral contest. Because both elections were some numerically close, the votes of the Nones may be a primary reason that Donald Trump did not win a second term in the White House in 2020. The CES evidence seems to provide some support for that position.

**Figure 2. Vote Choice Among the Nones in 2016 and 2020**

For all three of the subgroups the data indicates that the Nones did alter their voting patterns in ways that likely had real electoral consequences for outcome of the race. In 2016, 14% of atheists cast their ballot for Donald Trump, but in 2020 that dropped by three percentage points. However, Joe Biden got much more robust support for atheists in 2020 than Hillary Clinton received for her own presidential bid. How did that happen? According to this data, it appears that atheists were much more willing to throw their support behind a third-party candidate in 2016 (8%) than they were in 2020, when only 4% did not vote for a Republican or Democrat. Thus, Biden's increased margin among atheists was largely due to winning back third-party voters, not by converting former Trump voters into his supporters in 2020.

That same general pattern also emerges among agnostic voters. In 2016, Hillary Clinton received 69% of the agnostic vote, while Biden did nine points better in 2020. At the same time, Donald Trump saw his support among this group drop from 23% in 2016 to just 18% four years later. The third-party voters are again the story. In 2016, 8% of all agnostics cast their ballot for someone other than Clinton or Trump. In 2020, that dropped to just three percent. Again, Biden's widening margin was a combination of flipping voters from Republican to Democrat and of persuading third-party voters to back Biden in 2020. It is important to note that agnostic voters support the Democratic candidate, but not in quite the lopsided way that atheists do.

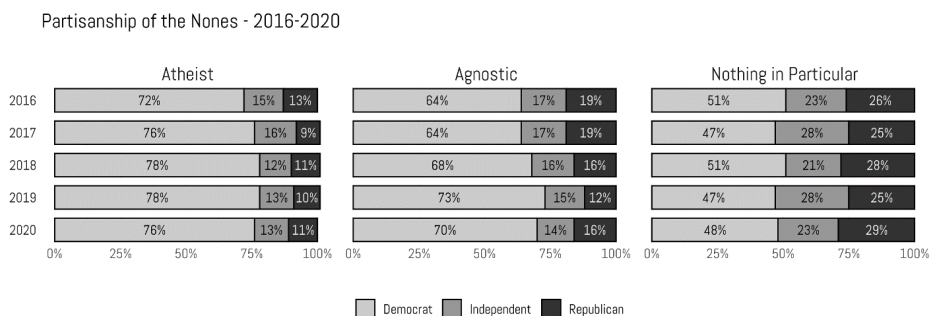
Finally, the nothing in particulars also showed a strong swing toward Joe Biden compared to Hillary Clinton. Just 55% of NIPs cast a ballot for the Demo-



crat in 2016, while Biden did eight points better in 2020. Like with agnostics, this difference was achieved through a combination of winning over Trump voters from 2016 and convincing other nothing in particulars that a vote for a Democrat in 2020 was better than a vote for a third-party candidate. While this shift for nothing in particulars may be similar when it comes to percentage point shifts, in terms of actual voters, this may be the most significant shift in voting behavior between 2016 and 2020. Recall that NIPs were 22.5% of the public in 2020, while atheists and agnostics combined were 11.5%. Thus, an eight-point swing toward Biden among nothing in particulars likely resulted in millions more additional votes in the ballot box in November than did the same movement among atheists and agnostics.

Having established that the vote choices of the Nones shifted significantly in the Democrats' favor between 2016 and 2020, we now turn to trying to understand why those changes happened during Trump's four years in office. The CES asks respondents to describe their political partisanship on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican with the middle option being independent. We collapsed those into three categories and calculated the partisan composition of each group of the Nones from 2016 through 2020. The goal of this is to understand whether Joe Biden won in 2020 because more Nones began identifying as Democrats or less were aligning with the Republicans during that five-year period.

**Figure 3. Partisanship of the Nones 2016 – 2020**



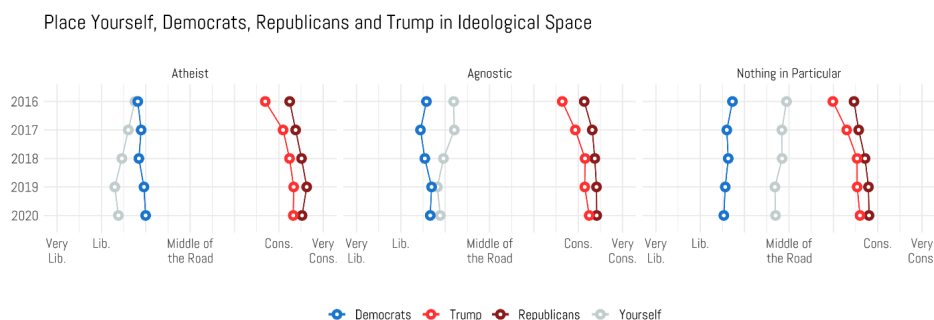
In the case of atheists, there is subtle but clear evidence that this group shifted its partisanship between 2016 and 2020 toward the Democrats. When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, 72% of atheists said they were Democrats, 15% indicated that they were independents, and 13% aligned with the Republican party. When Donald Trump's bid for reelection was rejected in 2020, 76% of atheists were Democrats, 13% were independents and 11% were Republicans. Agnostics evince a very similar pattern. Sixty-four percent were Democrats in 2016, that increased in 2020 to 70%. At the same time independents went down

three percentage points (17% to 14%) with Republicans losing the same share (19% to 16%).

Yet nothing in particulars have a much different composition. While atheists and agnostics are clearly left-leaning in their partisanship, nothing in particulars are much more divided. In 2016, a bare majority were Democrats (51%), while the remainder were evenly split between independents at 23% and the Republican share at 26%. Over the next few years, the share who were Democrats actually declined slightly to 48%, while independents remained the same at 23%. Republicans, meanwhile, increased in size to 29%. It's worth pointing out that while nothing in particulars shifted three points toward the Republicans in terms of partisanship, Donald Trump did three points worse in 2020. Thus, it's reasonable to infer that partisanship is less linked to voting behavior among this type of religious None than it is for atheists and agnostics.

However, the CES also asks a series of additional questions about political ideology that are helpful in understanding how the three types of Nones see both themselves, as well as other major institutions and individuals in political space. Respondents are given a seven-point scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative with a "middle of the road" option as the midpoint. Then they are asked where they place themselves on the scale, alongside both the Republican party, the Democratic party, and Donald Trump. We calculated the average response for those four different groups each year of the survey from 2016 through 2020 and visualized those results in Figure 4. This offers a fascinating peak not only to how the Nones view the political landscape, but also how those positions have shifted over the last five years.

**Figure 4. Place Yourself, Democrats, Republicans and Trump in Ideological Space**



In 2016, the average atheist saw themselves at 2.75 on the scale from zero to seven, which is not substantively different from where they placed the Democratic party. However, from that point forward, those means begin to diverge in revealing ways. By 2019, the average atheist placed themselves at 2.3 on the

scale – movement to the left of .45 points. At the same time, atheists viewed the Democratic party as moving just slightly to the right (.18 points in 2020). These results indicate that atheists think they are further to the left than the Democratic party – a fascinating window into how atheists think that the Democrats have responded to the election of Donald Trump.

When it comes to placing Trump and the Republican party in ideological space, two things become clear. The first is that atheists see Donald Trump as less conservative than the GOP and that is maintained across the entire time series. However, at the same time atheists see both Trump and the Republicans moving significantly to the right between 2016 and 2020. In 2016, Trump's mean was 5.7 and the GOP was 6.24. By 2020, Trump's estimate was 6.32 and the Republican's was 6.52. Atheists believed that Trump had moved .52 to the right, while the Republican party's shift was smaller at .28.

For agnostics, they perceive both their ideological position as well as the Democratic party differently than the atheists in the sample. In most years, the average agnostic sees themselves between .5 and .6 points to the right of the average atheist. However, agnostics see themselves as moving to the left from 2016 through 2020, albeit the shift has been slightly smaller among agnostics at .30 compared to atheists who shifted .37 to the left end of the ideology spectrum. It is noteworthy that agnostics see the Democratic party as being further to the left than do atheists. In 2020, agnostics put the Democrats at 2.66, whereas atheists put them at 3.00. Likewise, it is worth pointing out that both atheists and agnostics see the Democratic party as subtly shifting toward the middle of the ideological spectrum between 2016 and 2020.

Nothing in particulars have a much different conception of the political landscape. That comes through most clearly when it comes to seeing how they place themselves in ideological space. While atheists and agnostics are undoubtedly to the left side of the political spectrum, nothing in particulars are much more moderate. This accords with Philip Schwadel's assertions about atheists being most left-leaning of all Nones<sup>30</sup>, and of Jesse Smith regarding nothing in particulars having less certain values and less powerful political views.<sup>31</sup> In 2016, NIPs were 3.94, with a four being the midpoint. Yet they have also moved just slightly leftward over time, as their mean score was 3.7 in 2020. Nothing in particulars also perceive the Democratic party as being more liberal than atheists or agnostics and believe they have also shifted subtly to the left between 2016 and 2020, moving .2 points.

At the same time, they see Donald Trump the Republican party as being more centrist than atheists or agnostics do. In 2016, atheists placed Trump at 5.69 while agnostics' mean was 5.64. For nothing in particulars, they placed Trump at

---

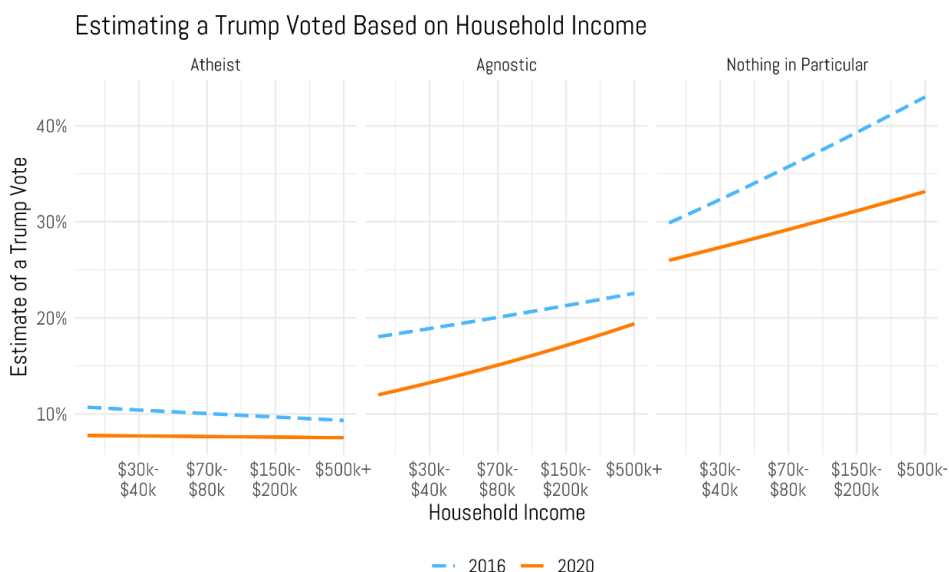
30 Philip Schwadel, *The Politics of Religious Nones*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2020, pp. 180–189.

31 Jesse Smith, *Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 52, 2013, pp. 80–99.

4.99 – over 10% less conservative. However, it should be mentioned that nothing in particulars perceived Trump shifting to the right at nearly the same severity as other none groups. Atheists believed Trump has shifted .63 to the right, for agnostics it was .61 and for nothing in particulars movement was similarly .61 to the right. For the Republican party, nothing in particulars believe that they are to the right of Donald Trump, but this gap has narrowed considerably over time. In 2016, the gap between Trump and the GOP was .47 points, but by 2020 it has shrunk to .20. Altogether, this indicates that all the Nones believe the ideology of Donald Trump and his party converged during his four years in the White House.

Yet it's still beneficial to model how support for Donald Trump shifted in 2016 compared to 2020 using some common demographic variables to extricate what causal factors were the most important to his lower overall vote share in his reelection bid. To do that we specified a logit regression analysis where the dependent variable was two-party vote share for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020. Control variables included: age, gender, education, and a dummy variable for white respondents. A three-way interaction was specified with household income, type of none, and the year of the election included in this interaction term. The results of this regression analysis are visualized in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5. Estimating a Trump Voted Based on Household Income**



The overall impression from this analysis is that Donald Trump's baseline of support declined substantially across the Nones at all levels of the income spectrum. While the Republican candidate did not do well with atheists in either 2016 or 2020, he lost three to four percentage points of support at all income levels in

his reelection bid. For agnostics, there is a slight positive impact of income on a Trump vote in both 2016 and 2020, but again, the baseline is lower in 2020. For instance, he received about 22% of the votes of agnostics with the highest income – that dropped to 19% in 2020. But for nothing in particulars, the impact of income on a Trump vote looked much differently in 2016 compared to 2020. For instance, only 30% of the lowest-income nothing in particulars voted for Donald Trump in his matchup with Hillary Clinton, but that increased substantively as income rose. Among the highest earners, Trump's share was 43%. In 2020, meanwhile, the impact of income on a Trump vote was much more subtle. Among the lowest earners, Trump garnered 26% of the vote. That figure rose just seven percentage points among those who were making at least half a million dollars a year. Essentially, the impact of household income on a Trump vote was halved between 2016 and 2020 among nothing in particulars.

## Conclusions

Looked at in totality, there are several conclusions worth reflecting on that emerge from this analysis. The first is that Donald Trump did worse among Nones in 2020 compared to 2016 across the board. He lost between seven and nine percentage points across each group of Nones – that translated into millions of votes on election day. But that cannot be pinned entirely on vote flipping. The data indicates that the share of Nones who were Trump voters in 2016 but backed Biden in 2020 was likely only three percent of the Nones overall. Instead, Biden benefited from winning over voters who had cast a ballot for third-party candidates in the 2016 contest, perhaps due to the polarized political environment enhancing the strength of “Duverger's law”<sup>32</sup>, coercing third-party voters in 2016 to behave differently in 2020. This relates to another element about the election that cannot be explored due to data limitations: voter turnout. The aspect of the 2020 election that may be remembered for the longest period of time is the sheer volume of people who cast a ballot in the election. One-hundred fifty-eight million votes were cast in 2020, an increase of over nearly twenty-two million from just four years prior. It is impossible to know how much of that increase came from the Nones, but given that they are one third of the adult population it seems likely that millions more Nones got involved in the 2020 presidential contest.

The other finding from this analysis is that it's unwise to continue to lump atheists, agnostics, and nothing in particulars into a singular group. The evidence here is unmistakable: atheists are the most liberal of all religious groups and they supported Joe Biden at incredibly high levels in 2020. Agnostics are slightly more centrist than atheists, and while they did overwhelmingly vote for Biden in 2020, it was not so lopsided as it was for atheists. Nothing in particulars are much more

---

32 William H. Riker, *The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science*, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 1982, pp. 753–766.

centrist in their political leanings, contrary to our expectations. For instance, the gap in vote share between Clinton and Trump in 2016 was 17 points among nothing in particulars. The gap for atheists was 64 points, and for agnostics it was 45 points. Yet NIPs shifted eight points toward Joe Biden in 2020. Given that they are 22% of all adults, that movement toward the Democratic nominee may well have been the difference in key battleground states like Michigan and Georgia.

Over fifty years ago, Glenn Vernon called the Nones “a neglected category” among social scientists. In recent years, academics have taken his admonition seriously and the amount of scholarship that is being published is increasing exponentially. The data is clear on this point – the Nones are rising rapidly and their impact on American electoral politics is unmistakable. Both parties would be wise to consider how they are going to attract new none voters, while keeping the ones that are already part of their coalition. Because without the Nones, it will be highly unlikely for a presidential candidate to find electoral success in the years to come.

## References

Ansolahehere Stephen and Douglas Rivers, Cooperative Survey Research, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2013.

Baker Joseph O. and Buster G. Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Non-religious Belief Systems*, NYU Press, New York, 2015.

Burge Ryan, How Many ‘Nones’ Are There? Explaining the Discrepancies in Survey Estimates”, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 62, 2020.

Burge Ryan, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2021.

Calfano Brian Robert and Paul A. Djupe, God Talk: Religious Cues and Electoral Support, *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2009.

Campbell David E., Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2018.

Cimino Richard and Christopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 2014

Claassen Ryan L., Paul A. Djupe, Andrew R. Lewis, and Jacob R. Neiheisel, Which Party Represents My Group? The Group Foundations of Partisan Choice and Polarization, *Political Behavior*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2021.

Condran John G. and Joseph B. Tamney, Religious ‘Nones’: 1957 to 1982, *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 1985.

Davis Nicholas T., Religion and Partisan-Ideological Sorting, 1984-2016, *Social Sci-*



ence Quarterly, Vol. 99, No. 4, 2018.

Edgell Penny, Douglas Hartmann, Evan Stewart and Joseph Gerteis, Atheists and Other Cultural Outsiders: Moral Boundaries and the Non-Religious in the United States, *Social Forces*, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2016.

Frost Jacqui and Penny Edgell, Rescuing Nones From the Reference Category: Civic Engagement Among the Nonreligious in America, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2018.

Hadaway C. Kirk and Wade Clark Roof, Those Who Stay Religious" Nones" and Those Who Don't: A Research Note, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1979.

Hayes Bernadette C., The Impact of Religious Identification on Political Attitudes: An International Comparison, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 1995.

Hout Michael and Claude Fischer, Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012, *Sociological Science*, Vol. 1, 2014.

Kosmin Barry A., "Contemporary Secularity and Secularism", in: *Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, Kosmin Barry A. and Ariela Keysar (eds.), Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, Hartford, CT, 2007.

LeDrew Stephen, Reply: Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism: Identity, Politics, Ideology, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 4, 2013.

Lim Chaeyoon, Carol Ann MacGregor and Robert D. Putnam, Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2010.

Oh Irene, Richard Flory, Rebecca Bartel, John Modern, Joseph Winters, Lila C. Berman, and Kathryn Lofton, Forum: The Religious Situation, 1968 (Part 2), *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2019.

Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape", 2015. Available at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>, (accessed August 26, 2021).

Putnam Robert D. and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Riker William H., The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 1982.

Schwadel Philip, The Republicanization of Evangelical Protestants in the United States: An Examination of the Sources of Political Realignment, *Social Science Research*, Vol. 62, 2017.

Schwadel Philip, The Political Implications of Religious Non-Affiliation in Emerging Adulthood, *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement 17, 2018.

Schwadel Philip, The Politics of Religious Nones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2020.

Shimron Yonat, "How Partisanship Drives Religious Attitudes", *Religion News Service*, 2018. Available at: <https://religionnews.com/2018/07/31/how-partisanship-drives-religious-attitudes-and-not-the-other-way-around/>, (accessed September 1, 2021).

Smith Jesse, Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 52, 2013.

Smith Tom W., Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, and Stephen L. Morgan, *General social surveys, 1972–2018, cumulative codebook*, University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Streib Heinz and Constantin Klein, "Atheists, Agnostics, and Apostates", in: *APA handbooks in psychology: APA Handbook of psychology, religion and spirituality: Vol 1*, Kenneth I. P., Julie J. E. and James W. J. (eds.), American Psychological Association, Washington D.C., 2013.

Vernon Glenn M., The Religious 'Nones': A Neglected Category, *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1968.

Wald Kenneth D. and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*. 8<sup>th</sup> edition, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2018.

Zuckerman Phil, Luke W. Galen and Frank L. Pasquale, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 2016.

**Хантер Дриггерс и Рајан П. Бурџ**

**ДА ЛИ СУ НЕОПРЕДЕЉЕНИ ПОСТАВИЛИ  
ЏОА БАЈДЕНА У БЕЛУ КУЋУ?  
АНАЛИЗА ГЛАСАЧКОГ ПОНАШАЊА ВЕРСКИ  
НЕОПРЕДЕЉЕНИХ 2020. ГОДИНЕ**

**Сажетак**

Најбрже растући део америчког верског мозаика су атеисти, агностици и они који не припадају нити једној посебној групи. Ове три групе (које се често означавају као неодређени) су 2008. године заједно представљали 22% популације, али само 12 година касније њихов број се повећао на 34%. Ако једна од три одрасле особе припада овој групи, разумљиво је да они имају све већи утицај на резултате избора. У складу са тим, овај рад представљају анализу како су ове три групе промениле своје политичке идеологије, партијску идентификацију и гласачке обрасце од 2016. до 2020. године. Резултати показују да је подршка за Доналда Трампа опала код све три групе, али посебно код групе која се не идентификује ни са ким а која има високе приходе у 2020. години.

**Кључне речи:** атеисти, агностици, гласачко понашање, неодређени, Трамп, Бајден