Explaining the Rise of Americans With No Religious Preference:
Politics and Generations[1]

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Explaining the Rise of Americans with No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations

Between the start and the end of the 1990s, the proportion of American adults reporting that they preferred no religion doubled from 7 percent, its level for about 20 years, to an unprecedented 14 percent. Not only is that a startlingly rapid social change in its own right, it also challenges many scholars' understanding of American culture. From at least the era of Tocqueville to contemporary survey research, observers have described Americans as especially religious (e.g., Callow 1985; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Kohut et al. 2000), an attribute that helped to define "American exceptionalism" (e.g., Greeley 1991; Lipset 1996). A sharp rise in the percentage of Americans with no religious preference could signal that the United States is less exceptional now than it used to be. One hundred-year-old predictions of secularization may be (finally) coming true. These frames prove to be inconsistent with some key pieces of the evidence we have uncovered and report here. The increase nonetheless points to important changes in religion's role in the cultural milieu of *fin-de-siècle* America, when many political controversies were about or entwined with religion.

We seek to explain why American adults became increasingly likely to say they had no religious preference as the 1990s unfolded. Briefly summarized, we find that the increase was *not* a statistical aberration, that it was *not* connected to a loss of religious piety, and, most dramatically, that it *was* connected to politics. The case is not airtight, but the preponderance of evidence implicates politics as the cause of changing religious identification. Throughout American history, many adults maintained an identification with the religion in which they were raised, in spite of infrequent attendance at religious service. In the 1990s many of the people who had this kind of weak attachment to religion and either moderate or liberal political views found themselves at odds with the conservative political agenda of the Christian Right and reacted by breaking their weak attachment to organized religion. People with religious commitments and people with conservative political views did not contribute to the trend.

We arrive at this conclusion in four steps: (1) We identify three theories on the doubling of "no religion" answers; (2) we examine the trend more closely and establish that the change

is a real historical change and not an artifact of survey methodology or the replacement of religious cohorts by less religious ones; (3) we assess secularization by examining carefully the beliefs, practices, and social origins of people who have no religion; and (4) we quantify the contributions that demography, politics, and beliefs make to explaining the trend in religious preference and find that an aversion to mixing conservative politics with religion and demographic changes combine to account for it. Neither private piety nor core beliefs about God have changed, so we conclude that the trend toward no religious preference cannot be interpreted as secularization.

THE TREND TO BE EXPLAINED

National surveys taken since the early 1990s show a sharp increase in the proportion of American adults who reported having no religion.[1] The proportion doubled between 1990-1991 and 1998-2000 – from 7 to 14 percent – according to the General Social Survey (GSS), a large, nationally representative survey of American adults conducted annual or biennially from 1972 to 2000 (and continuing).[2] After 17 years of no significant change in surveys from 1974 to 1991, this sudden increase is one of the most dramatic proportional changes in any of the variables measured by the GSS. Figure 1 shows the GSS data. The circles show the observed percentage in each survey, the thin vertical lines show the 95-percent confidence

[1]Usually the question includes the word "preference" and may or may not explicitly mention "no religion" as one of the options. Most of the data for our analysis comes from the General Social Survey which does both: "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?"

[2]We average two surveys together at each end of the decade in order to reduce the sampling error of our estimate of how much religious preference changed (as elementary statistics show that the standard error of a difference is greater than the standard error of either point). In this and all other calculations involving GSS data we restrict attention to persons who are between 25 and 74 years old. We exclude 18-24 year olds because their lives are so much in flux that inferences about them are particularly tenuous. We exclude persons 75 years old and over because differential mortality and institutionalization make the 75 year-old and older population living in households unrepresentative of their cohorts. We exclude the 1972 GSS and half the 1973 GSS because they do not use full probability sampling methods (and the method we use to estimate standard errors is only appropriate for full probability samples). Furthermore, the 1972 GSS did not include a question about religious origins – an important variable in the multivariate analysis to come. We also exclude persons who are missing data on their age, marital status, parenthood, or education because those are important variables in subsequent analyses. The cases excluded due to missing data amount to less than one percent of the cases that would otherwise have been available to estimate the trend.

intervals (adjusted for survey sampling effects),[3] and the heavy, dark line is a spline function that traces the main trend in among the sampling fluctuations.[4] The sharp upturn after 1991 in the observed percentage with no religious preference is unmistakable; it would be clear even if we were to leave the spline function off the chart.

(Figure 1 about here)

Other surveys confirm the increase. The National Election Study shows a rise from 8 to 13 percent from 1992 to 2000, and a 1996 study of religion and politics estimated that 14 percent of American adults had no religious preference (Kohut et al. 2000). There is one exception among major data sources; Gallup Polls as late as the first quarter of 2001 continued to report that 8 percent of American adults claimed no religion.[5] While it is conceivable that Gallup is right and every other major survey is wrong, we are inclined to accept the preponderance of evidence which indicates an increase of 6 to 8 percentage points. One important distinction between Gallup and the other surveys: Gallup interviewers accept "no religion" as an answer but do not suggest it to their respondents; NES, Pew, and the GSS interviewers all read "or no religion" as an explicit alternative.

THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

There are at least three ways to explain the upsurge in "no religion" in the 1990s, each with its own theoretical significance and implications. The three are not contradictory; that is, one or more of the theories might be true.

One: The increase in no preference responses may be a simple artifact of changing demography. Religion follows a family lifecycle; people frequently disengage from organized

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[3]The adjustment takes account of the oversamples of African Americans included in the 1982 and 1987 GSSs and of the variations among the sampling frames (updated in 1983 and 1993) and, within sampling frames, variation among primary sampling units.

[4]A spline function splices lines; specifically it joins together two lines with different slopes. The slopes are usually estimated using maximum likelihood methods. We used a logistic regression of the log-odds on having no religious preference on a year spline that had the value of zero for years 1973-1991 and (t-1991) for subsequent years. Note that the net change in expected percentages between 1991 and 2000 is 8.5 percentage points.

[5]The Gallup figure refers to a poll conducted 19-21 February 2001 and reported on their website (www.gallup.com/poll). The same website reports that the percentage of Gallup respondents with no religion fluctuated between 6 and 9 percent through most of the 1990s after an all-time high of 11 percent in 1990 and 1991.

religion when they leave the family they grew up in and re-attach themselves about the time they start a family of their own (Glenn 1987; Greeley and Hout 1988; Roof 1993, chap. 6). Extended schooling and delayed family formation may have contributed to the trend in non-preference. If such demographic factors explain the change, then there is no need to search for cultural sources.

Two: The increase reflects a historical trend, suddenly accelerated, of secularization. The debate over whether modernization brings secularization is generations-old in sociology. (Even the briefest bibliographies would include, in addition to the classic works of sociology's founders, sources from the 1990s such as Bruce 1992; Butler 1990; Casanova 1994; Chaves 1994; Finke and Stark 1992; Lechner 1991; Swatos and Christiano 1999.) Secularization seems to have been long-delayed in the United States, compared to other mostly Protestant English-speaking nations. Perhaps the 1990s upsurge heralds the coming of secularization at last. That is how Glenn (1987) treated earlier, smaller trends in "no preference," as the leading edge of secularization.

The term, secularization, is itself a subject of debate. Some suggest that distinctions be made, especially between public and private religious expressions. Chaves (1994), for example, distinguishes between secularization as a decline in individual piety, which he says has not happened, and secularization as the loss of religious authority in society, which he says has happened. Casanova (1994) cautions that the public-to-private transition may be reversible; there was as much evidence (from Spain, Brazil, Poland, and the United States) of religion moving from the private to the public sphere as there were clear indications that religion had "retreated" to the private sphere. Below, we will distinguish between individual piety and denominational identity as we attempt to assess whether the trend to no religious preference is secularization.

Three: The increase in no preference responses may reflect the emergence of what has loosely been termed the "culture wars," controversies that connect politics and religiosity (as opposed to specific religious affiliations). This is an old association in many other nations, where to declare oneself religious was – and still is – to take a political stance, typically a conservative one, while anti-clericalism was deeply ingrained in Left politics (Lipset and Rokkan 1964; Greeley 1991; Casanova 1994; Gorski 2001). We have in mind the Dutch

confessional parties, the Christian Democrats in Italy and Germany, and several parties including Shas and the National Religious Party in Israel. That kind of institutionalized connection between religiosity and party did not exist in the United States for much of the twentieth century (Dalton 1988, p. 169; Lipset 1996) though specific religion was an important influence on voting (Manza and Brooks 1997). With the emergence of the Religious Right as a force in Republican Party politics, a connection may have emerged (Casanova 1994). Research suggests that Americans did not become more polarized on most cultural matters in the last few decades, but also suggests that religious identities and political party affiliations have become more closely aligned to positions on those cultural matters like abortion that touch on the public regulation of choices that have moral components (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Miller and Hoffman 1999; see also Layman 1987 and Hout 1999). Our conjecture is that the growing identification in the press and in the Congress between Republicans and Christian evangelicals may have led Americans with moderate and liberal political views to express their distance from the Religious Right by saying they prefer no religion.

The succession of explanations one, two, and three is a useful schematic to guide and organize our analysis. But we would not want to rule out either complementary or overlapping effects from each in crafting our understanding and explanation of the increase in null religious preferences. For example, prolonged education may not only be delaying religious attachment, it may be raising the likelihood of never attaching (melding demographic and secularizing effects). More subtly, the activism of some evangelical Christians may be simultaneously increasing the religious vigor of fellow evangelicals who share their sympathy for a conservative social agenda and prompting a withdrawal from public religious expression among other Protestants (and even some Catholics) who dissent from the conservative agenda.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC EXPLANATION

Religious practice is, according to previous research (e.g., Glenn 1987; Greeley and Hout 1988), connected to the family lifecycle. Perhaps contemporary delays in family formation or other lifecycle events may be delaying religious affiliation. Yet it seems unlikely that all of the trend can be coming from this one source. The religious change is so sudden compared to the

longer-running and slower trend toward delaying school-leaving and family formation that it must be regarded as unlikely that family events or cohort succession can fully account for the sudden increase we are trying to explain. Nonetheless, it is essential to start with these kinds of compositional arguments, if for no other reason than to get them off the table.[6] Figure 2 presents GSS data on the trend in religious preference for each of five birth cohorts. If the lifecycle thesis is correct, then the two youngest cohorts should have high prevalence of no religion early and move downward toward the average as they age. The cohort succession argument implies that all the change should be evident in the contrast between the younger and older cohorts; no cohort should show a dramatic increase in the 1990s. The circles show observed percentages; the trend lines trace the percentages expected from a logistic regression of having no religious preference on the spline function we described in connection with Figure 1 and four dummy variables that distinguish among the five birth cohorts.[7]

(Figure 2 about here)

People from younger cohorts that entered the adult population after 1973 expressed significantly less attachment to organized religion than the cohorts they replaced had. That much of the cohort succession argument is correct. However, the younger cohorts also increased their preference for no religion by a wider percentage-point margin after 1991, thus widening, not narrowing, the gaps among cohorts in no preference. The small and mostly random differences between observed percentages (the circles) and expected percentages (the lines) in Figure 2 suggest that we have arrived at a reasonably descriptive function. Table 1 formalizes that assessment by partitioning the total association between year and religious preference into the fraction due to differences among years 1973-1991 and the fraction due to differences among the first period taken as a whole and each subsequent year. In particular, if our spline function is the correct expression of preference for no religion changed over time (within cohorts), then we should see no significant association between year and religion for

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[6]We start with cohort succession because it implies that no individuals changed their religious identification by arguing that the most religious cohorts passed out of view (by death or passing our upper age limit) while less religious cohorts came into view for the first time in the 1990s.

[7]The spline function is equal to zero for 1973-91 and equal to t-1991 for $t>1991$. The logistic regression coefficient for the spline function is .050 (with an asymptotic standard error of .011), and the coefficients are 0, .040, .520, 1.108, and 1.283 for cohorts 1900-14 through 1960-74, respectively.

the period when the spline function is flat, i.e., from 1973 to 1991. We should see a uniform (log-linear) trend upward from 1991 to 2000. The first part of our model is confirmed; the chi-square tests show that change from 1973 to 1991 is statistically insignificant within all five cohorts.[8] The oldest cohort passed out of our observation before 1991 so we have tests for 1991-2000 in only the last four cohorts. The trend from 1991 to 2000 is not significant for the 1915-29 cohort, but it is significant at conventional levels in each of the three subsequent cohorts. In each of these three cohorts the changes from 1991 to 2000 account for more than half of the total association between year and religious preference; in the last cohort the 1991-2000 trend amounts to 79 percent of the total association.

(Table 1 about here)

The data in Figure 2 are organized to show cohort and period effects. If an aging effect, presumably related to the family lifecycle, were significant it would show up in this figure as a down-sloping trend in the observed percentages from 1974 to 1991. Only in the 1945-1959 cohort do we get any hint that an age effect may have been important. A full decomposition of age, period, and cohort components of the patterns in Figure 2 is beyond the scope of the present paper. This evidence and a complementary figure designed to highlight the relationship between age and religious preference (not shown) is definitive on one point: the increase in the percentage of American adults with no religious preference after 1991 was *not* limited to people who were too young to have been interviewed in the 1970s or 1980s (or even in 1991). In other words, cohort succession, even in combination with (a hard to discern) lifecycle effect, does not fully explain the upsurge in no religious preference. But demography offers an important first step in the direction of forming a fuller explanation. The 1900-14 cohort was, by this measure, the most religious cohort born in the twentieth century. It aged out of the population in the last decade of the century while the least religious cohort of the century – that born 1960-74 – came of age and replaced it. This generational

[8]The one exception might be the 1945-59 cohort; the observed percentages for that cohort hint at a decrease in the percentage with no religious preference between 1973 and 1991. As the 1945-59 cohort is the one cohort whose experience spans the crucial age range from 14 to 45 years old, if there is a lifecycle effect increasing religious attachment as people age through their twenties and early thirties, then it would show precisely in the 1945-59 cohort. The chi-square tests in Table 1 are negative, but they do not order the years. A uniform association model the 1945-59 cohort over the 1971-1991 period does indicate a significant decrease ($L^2 = 8.50$; df = 1; $p < .01$).

succession, by itself, increased the percentage of American adults with no religion by 3 or 4 points. Thus, the average within-cohort change from 1991 to 2000 is only 3.8 percentage points – just about half of the gross change.

As the cohort succession process is gradual, it would be reasonable to expect it to gradually raise in the prevalence of no religious preference earlier than 1991. Yet we have no evidence of change in the 1980s. As nearly as we can figure with the GSS data, the modest period (or age) effect evident for the 1945-1959 cohort was just strong enough to counteract it. That is the percentage of the 1945-59 cohort with no religion declined just enough in the 1980s to offset the disappearance of the 1900-14 cohort. We would be persuaded by this observation to abandon the cohort succession idea but for one additional observation. The cohorts that had the highest proportion with no preference before 1991 also experienced the most change between 1991 and 2000. That observation convinced us that the cohort effects were indeed relevant to the explanation.

THE RELIGIOUS EXPLANATION: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF PEOPLE WITH NO RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE

If secularization accounts for the rise in no religious preference, then we should see evidence that people who have no religious preference, in effect, reject religion. Our principal finding, documented in the next few figures and tables, is that few people who claim no preference are atheists or agnostics; most have religious beliefs. Their beliefs tend to be less articulate and less certain than the beliefs of people who belong to a religion, but few adults with no preference are described well by the term "non-believer." The trend data we have offers *no* evidence of a sudden loss of belief or even of growing doubt. Over three-fourths of the people who expressed no religious preference in 1998 or 2000 also said that they believed in God or a higher power. Most prayed. Their self-image was of being "spiritual" without being "religious" (although a significant minority was neither). When faced with trouble, most respondents who said that they had no religious preference said they turn to God for hope, help, or solace. They did not practice religion in any other conventional sense, though; for example they rarely attended religious services and did not read the Bible. For the most part, people with no religious preference seemed to simply have no interest in churches, but there

is some indication that they distrusted religious leaders and may have been hostile to organized religion in general. Thus, we have evidence of detachment from organized religion but none that supports the view that Americans were losing religious faith.

Religious Beliefs

Most people with no religious preference say they believe in God or some higher power. The 1998 GSS inquired about this core belief in three ways. The first offered people six alternative expressions, typical of what people say about God (shown in the left margin of Figure 3A); respondents were asked to pick the one that comes closest to their own ideas about the existence of God. The other two were agree-disagree items. We compare the responses of people who have no religious preference with those who have one. People with no preference are divided into two groups, both groups shown with shaded bars. The darkest bars display the percentage of those who had no preference but who in each question expressed some confidence in God's existence; the lighter bars displays the percentage of those who had no preference and answered skeptically about God. Those with a preference are shown with broader white bars that have dots on them.

One-third of the people with no religious preference chose the atheist or the agnostic responses to the first question about God. One-third is far more than the 4 percent atheist or agnostic among people who have a religious preference, but it is also far less than a majority of the people who have no religious preference. Thus we cannot equate having no religious preference with being skeptical of religious beliefs. On the other hand, people with no religious preference are significantly less certain about God than are people who have a religious preference; 70 percent of those with a religious preference expressed no doubts about God's existence. (Note that, while "no preference" responses increased in the 1990s, certainty in God stayed the same or, paradoxically, increased.[9])

(Figure 3 about here)

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[9] In the GSS, 63 to 66 percent of respondents were certain of God. The Pew Center poll found an increase between 1990 and 1997 of 11 points in the percent of Americans who "never doubt the existence of God" (Pew Center 1997).