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Recommended Citation

Djupe, Paul, "Religion on Campus: A Minority Are Religious And With a Foot Out the Door" (2023). *Faculty Publications*. 1785.

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Religion on Campus: A Minority Are Religious And With a Foot Out the Door

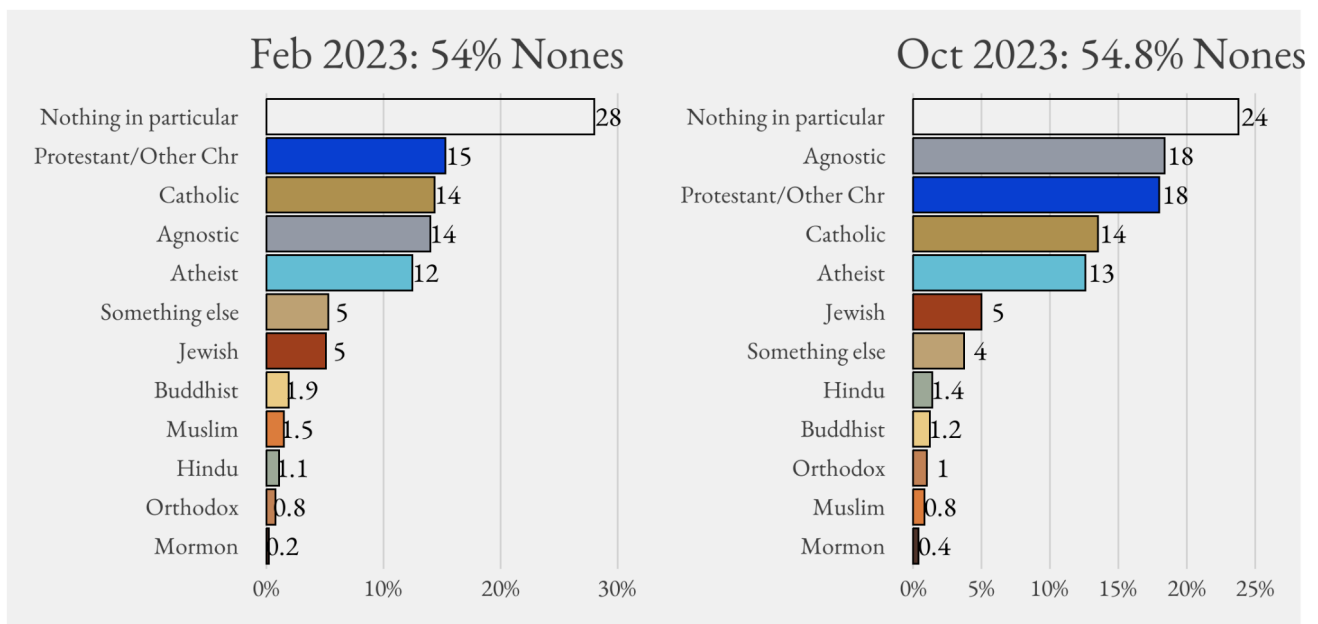
Paul A. Djupe

December 11, 2023

By Paul A. Djupe, Director of Data for Political Research

In 2023, for the first time in its history, the majority of Denison students (54-55 percent) identified as some sort of religious none. With “nothing in particular” leading the way, the next biggest religious group didn’t come close in our spring survey (Protestants at 15 percent), but the second biggest group in the fall survey was Agnostic (with 18 percent), just 6 percentage points behind the nothing in particulars (24 percent). These are some of the new findings from an ongoing survey effort in the Data for Political Research program that receives about 500 responses (out of 2,300 students) each semester; we use these data in our classes and for public writing.

While Denison stands out in many regards, this is not one of them. A look at Gen Z in 2022 in the American population found that 48 percent were nones using the same question wording as the Denison survey. We don’t have access to huge datasets yet for 2023, but preliminary evidence from other data I have suggests that the youngest of Gen Z are right in line with what we’re seeing at Denison.

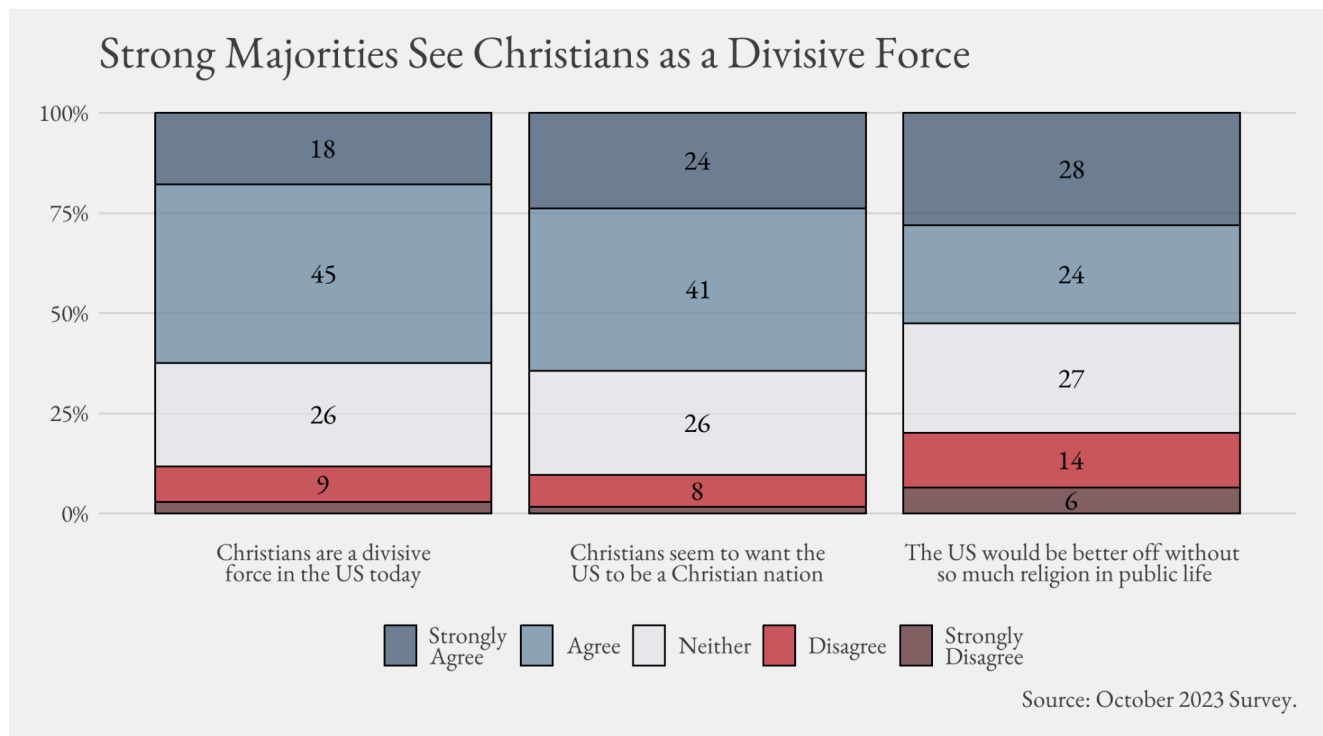


A natural reaction is to think that views toward religion among the young are changing *because* of the growth of the nones. As that argument might go, the more nones there are, the more that students will see little place for religion in society or go so far as to see religion

as a divisive force in the world. This is not an unreasonable belief. Except the data do not support that view.

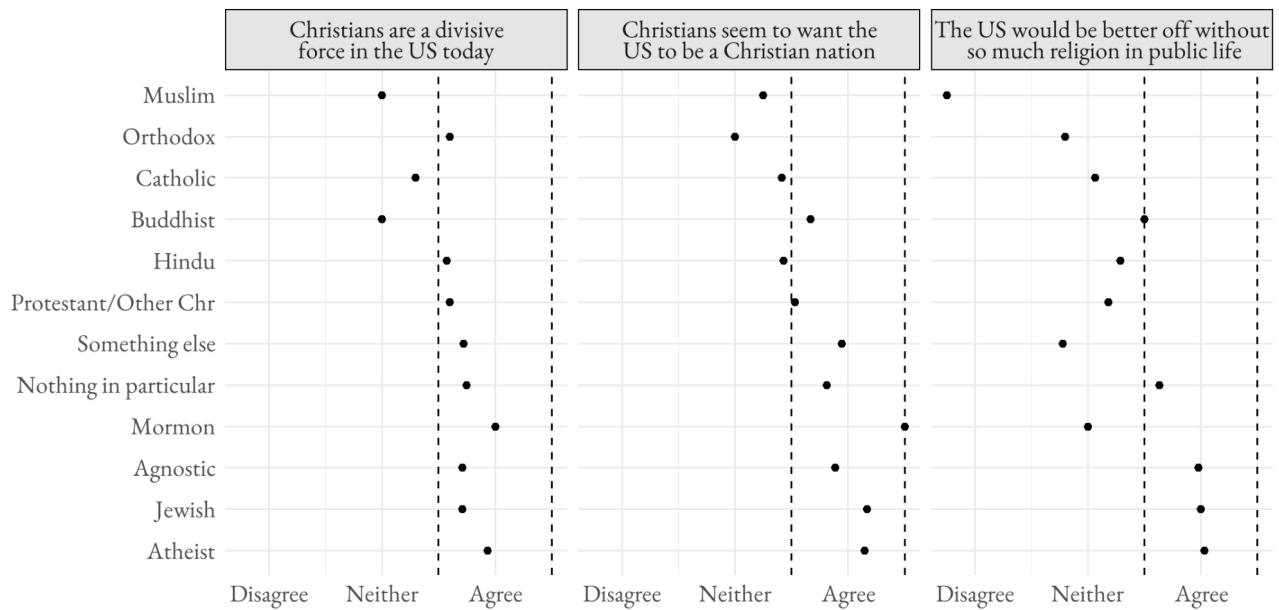
First, let's take a look at the responses to three questions about Christianity and religion in general. It is no surprise to see that a majority of students (nearly two-thirds) see Christians as a divisive force in the US today. Only 11 percent disagree. And an even greater number agree that "Christians seem to want the US to be a Christian nation" (65 percent agree; only 9 percent disagree).

One surprising thing is that students do not completely generalize views about Christians to religion as a whole. A slim majority (51 percent) agree that the "US would be better off without so much religion in public life" (here 20 percent disagree).



These are sizable majorities with dim views of American Christians and there have to be some religious students who agree with those statements. So, why would they believe it? Of course, one reason is that they are religious nones or non-Christians. So, let's look at that evidence in the figure below. I've superimposed a band (dashed lines) to show groups averaging agreement with the statement. It's no surprise that Atheists, Jews, and Agnostics lead the way in each category, with the nothing in particulars just behind. But it's notable that **Christians do not disagree, on average**. In fact, Protestants (and other Christians) agree that Christians are a divisive force and that they want a Christian nation. Catholics are a bit less likely to agree, but not much more. And **Muslims**, of all groups, are the least likely to agree with these sentiments. They are by far the least likely to agree that the US would be better off without so much religion — they are the only group that disagrees.

Seeing Christians as Christian Nationalists is Nearly Universal

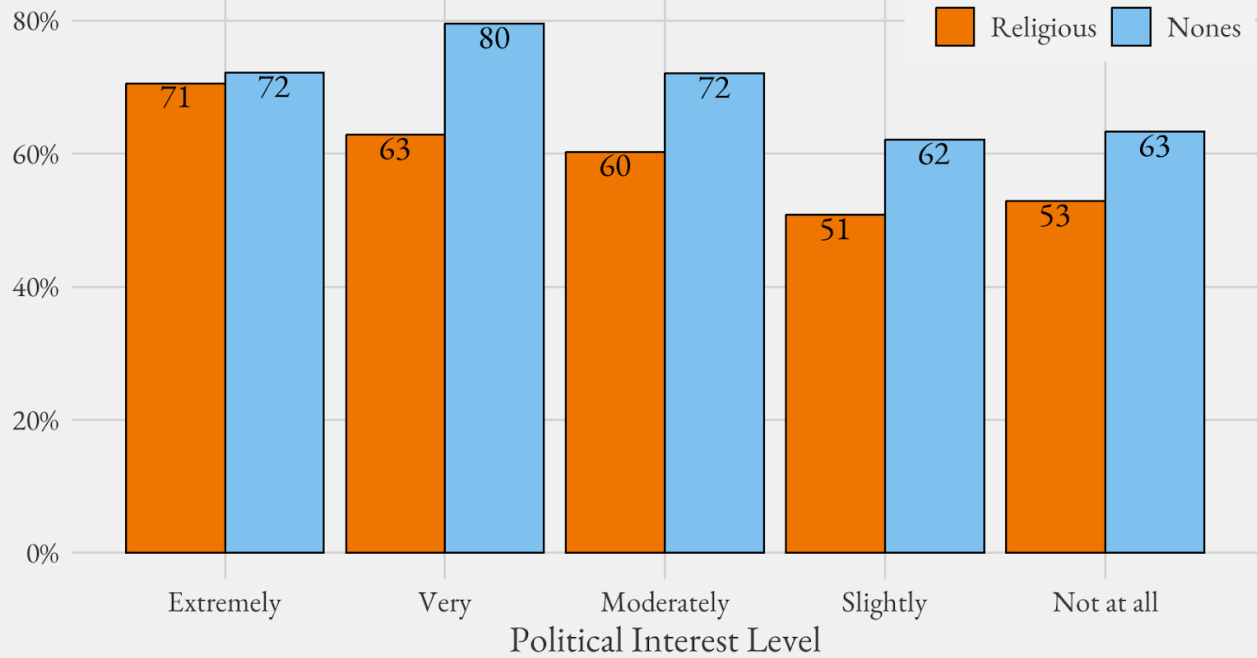


Source: October 2023 Survey.

Another explanation advanced for these sorts of beliefs by academic researchers, including me, is that people, young and old, are paying attention to modern American politics. And if they are, they're highly likely to run across American Christians espousing very conservative, often unpopular stances on public policy, about diverse groups in the US and world, and about democracy itself. Often grouped under the worldview labeled Christian nationalism, these views are an explicit rejection of a pluralist America that is looking and thinking more like Gen Z every day.

We can find evidence that simply witnessing American politics helps drive negative views about American Christians. Among the extremely interested in politics, there is almost no daylight between the nones and the religious – 71/72 percent agree that Christians want the US to be a Christian nation. From there as political interest wanes the two groups separate, but among both groups, agreement with the Christian nationalist aims of Christians drops. It drops 20 percent among the religious and 10-20 percent among the nones. There is clearly something to the attention thesis.

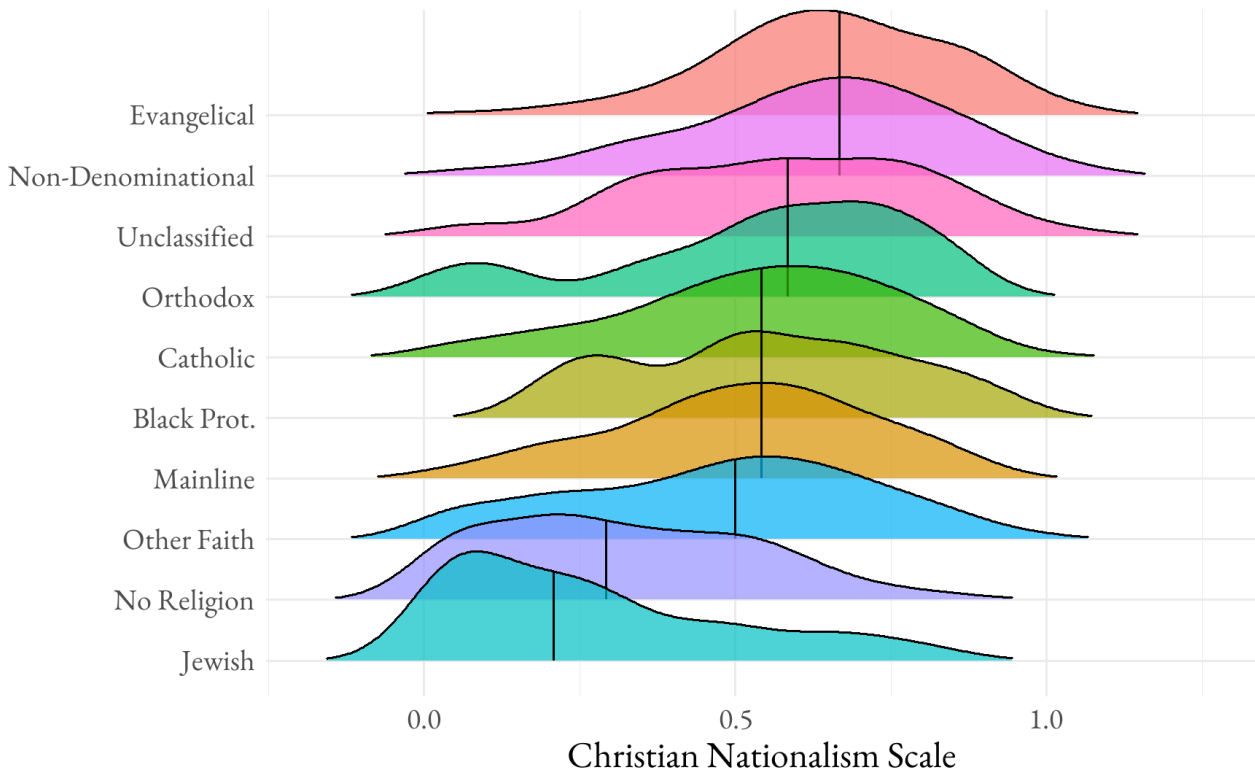
Political Interest Among Nones and the Religious Fuel Negative Views About Christians (Christian nationalism)



Source: October 2023 Survey.

To be sure, critics might argue that not all Christians are Christian nationalists. That's true, of course, but not nearly to the extent one might think. The following figure shows the distribution of a widely used Christian nationalism index (drawn from Baylor Religion Survey items put together by sociologists Whitehead and Perry). Median lines show that Christians score above average on these items (and not all items are pro-Christian, some are just pro-religion). But even that doesn't quite convey how concentrated Christian nationalist sentiments are. Fully 85 percent of evangelicals score above 0.5 on this scale as do 67 percent of Black Protestants, 65 percent of Catholics, and even 59 percent of mainline Protestants. Even if there were sizable concentrations of non-Christian nationalists out there, what matters most is exposure to them and that is less than likely. The representatives making claims linked to religion are highly likely to be from more conservative groups that have greater Christian nationalist sentiments, especially now that the media has a well-studied, stable concept and some definitions to work with.

Distribution of Christian Nationalism Among Religious Groups



March 2023 Survey.

Denison students, in my experience, are very smart, tolerant, and open to people with diverse races, cultures, and views. They do not, however, have much patience for intolerance itself. And this is just what they have witnessed from the most overtly identified Christians in American politics over their lifetimes. While we could go back to when current students were 3 and Christian Republicans were pushing ballot measures to ban same-sex marriage, we clearly don't have to look back very far for prominent examples from the Supreme Court banning abortion, the new Speaker of the House claiming a divine mandate, the former President labeling the 2024 election the end times against the "vermin" of the left, and an army of elites and interest groups attempting to make hay before the 2024 election. Take conservative Christian Jenny Donnelly, founder of Her Voice Movement, who [Rolling Stone quotes](#) as saying, "I just believe what the Bible says... We're supposed to go onto the Earth; we're supposed to dominate." With this sort of language in wide circulation, is it any wonder that many young people have left Christianity and the ones with a lingering identity are poised to leave their religious faith behind?

Professor Paul A. Djupe directs the Data for Political Research program at Denison University, is an affiliated scholar with [PRRI](#), the series editor of [Religious Engagement in Democratic Politics](#) (Temple), and co-creator of [religioninpublic.blog](#). Further information about his work can be found on his [website](#) and on [TwiX](#).