

Atheists face uphill climb with new political party

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) How viable is a political party with the word "atheist" in its name?

Troy Boyle, a corporate legal representative for a finance company, thinks very viable. Last March, he and a friend founded the National Atheist Party, which they believe to be the first American political party organized on the belief that God does not exist.

Boyle, 45, got the idea to start the party while watching an interview with Richard Dawkins, the British evolutionary biologist and author of several "New Atheist" manifestos, including the best-selling "The God Delusion." In the interview, Dawkins wondered why atheists did not organize to influence politics.

"It struck me like a bolt of lightning when he said it," Boyle recalled. From his home in Elsmere, Ky., he started researching atheists in politics. "And I found nothing. So I picked up the gauntlet. I decided to start a political party."

First called the Freethought Party, its original Facebook page attracted only a couple hundred members. But when the name was changed to the National Atheist Party, supporters started streaming in, currently more than 8,200.

"It immediately began growing much quicker and with less argument and controversy among members," Boyle said. "Everyone seemed to understand implicitly what the National Atheist Party would stand for."

What it stands for, Boyle said, is no governmental favoring of religion -- including no religion.

"We are convened with the idea that the Founding Fathers had it right," Boyle said in an interview. "The separation of church and state, the establishment of the U.S. as a

secular nation -- those two concepts are our watchwords. We don't want government to impose a religion, and we don't want government to impose no religion. We want government to be silent with regards to religion."

Boyle says the NAP has 7,500 members and a chapter in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The largest chapter is Florida, with 200 members, and the smallest is Alaska, with two.

Bridget Gaudette, a 33-year-old medical case manager, joined the Florida chapter after visiting NAP's Facebook page. She now volunteers as NAP's deputy vice president and focuses on outreach.

"I am a big advocate of civic participation in government and I'm an atheist, so I loved the idea of a political party that could be the voice of atheists," she said.

The party's platform was decided on by a vote -- again via Facebook -- and includes hot-button issues such as gay marriage (for it) gun control (tighten it), abortion (a woman's decision), immigration (reform it), energy (green it), and the economy (legalize recreational drugs to create revenue and jobs).

Currently, the NAP is registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a 527 political party, which means it is a nonprofit that can put money behind issues, but not behind specific candidates. Boyle hopes his party will support candidates sometime in the future.

There could be quite a wait. A November poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 67 percent of Americans said they would be "uncomfortable" with an atheist in the White House.

In 2007, the Pew Research Center found that a candidate who doesn't believe in God would have the hardest time gaining support from voters, with 63 percent "less likely to support" an atheist, outranking a gay candidate (46 percent), a philanderer (39 percent) or a Mormon (30 percent).

To date, only one "out" atheist serves in Congress, Rep. Pete Stark, a California Democrat.

"Relative to other religious minority groups, atheists tend to anchor the low end of the favorability scale," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute, who ties it to the Cold War image of "godless communism."

John Green, a political scientist at the University of Akron and an expert on religion and politics, says the NAP may be the first American political party to organize itself around atheism. But such issues-based parties have a long history of dotting the American political landscape -- before disappearing.

Sometimes, their concerns are absorbed by a major party, and other times, they fade away, Green said.

"One of the reasons it is hard for a minor party to sustain itself is they don't win very much," Green said. "It is easier to keep people interested when it comes to ideas -- you follow them on Facebook, subscribe to their magazine and you go to their convention. That is an easier thing to do than to try and mobilize millions of voters."

None of this fazes Boyle, who says donations are coming in and membership is growing.

"We know we are a minority and we know that is not likely to change in the near future," he said. "We simply want the right to exist. And if that doesn't turn into a majority landslide of popular support, whoever thought it was going to? But an election on an issue or on a candidate can be swayed by a small group of people. ... In two or 10 or 20 years, who knows how many of us there will be and when we vote on an issue it will matter."