

Meet John Q. Nones: A profile of the fast-growing religiously unaffiliated

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

October 9, 2012

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Meet John Q. Nones, a young, white male who is making a big impression on the American religious landscape for something he doesn't do: align with any religious group.

The rise of the religiously unaffiliated, or "nones," as documented in a new study from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, has major implications for almost all aspects of American life — from religion to business to culture.

Whether you believe the proliferation of Mr. Nones is a depressing or hopeful trend, it pays to get to know him.

Who is John Q. Nones? Here's a snapshot drawn from the Pew Forum's new poll:

1. He's a he. Though fewer than half of Americans are male, 56 percent of nones are. The gender divide among nones who are atheists or agnostics is even more pronounced: 64 percent of this group is male.
2. He's young. The older the American, the more likely he or she is to be affiliated with a religion. One-third of Americans under 30 say they have no religious affiliation, compared to 9 percent of those 65 and older. This is mostly due to "generational replacement" as a younger generation assumes the place of an older one that is decidedly more religious.
3. He's white. Of all nones, 71 percent are white, 11 percent are Hispanic, 9 percent are black and 4 percent are Asian. If you narrow the pool to just agnostics and atheists, the group is even whiter: 82 percent.

4. He's not necessarily an atheist. The largest group of nones (68 percent) say they believe in God or a universal spirit. Within that group, 30 percent of them are certain God exists. Another 27 percent of nones say there is no God.

5. He's not very religious. This may sound obvious, but it makes the distinction between a person who has no religious affiliation, and one who is not religious. There are some nones who do consider themselves religious — just outside the confines of a religious organization. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of nones seldom or never attend religious services.

6. He's a Democrat. Nones are among the most reliably Democratic of voters. In 2008, three-quarters of them voted for Barack Obama and 23 percent for John McCain, making them as strongly Democratic as white evangelicals were Republican.

7. He thinks abortion and same-gender marriage should be legal. Big gaps separate nones and Americans in general on these issues. While 53 percent of the general public say abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances, 72 percent of the unaffiliated do. And while 48 percent of the general public favors same-sex marriage, 73 percent of nones do.

8. He's liberal or moderate. And not just on the issues above. More than three-quarters of the unaffiliated describe themselves as generally liberal or moderate, compared to the one-in-five of them who call themselves conservative.

9. He's not necessarily hostile toward religious institutions. He just doesn't want to belong to one. More than half of the nones (52 percent) say religious institutions protect and strengthen morality, though an even greater proportion (70 percent) believes these institutions are too concerned with money and power.

10. He's more likely a Westerner. Nones are most concentrated in the West and least concentrated in the South. While 23 percent of Americans live in the West, 30 percent of nones do.