

Republicans have been extending dominance among white Protestants

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A few weeks ago the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution regarding the religiously unaffiliated. In it, the committee contends that “the religiously unaffiliated demographic represents the largest religious group within the Democratic Party.” It was seen as an attempt to solidify a growing portion of Democratic voters.

But could that resolution turn off another important voting bloc, namely, white Protestant voters?

Probably not—in large part because most white Protestants are already Republicans. Almost every predominantly white Protestant denomination—from Southern Baptists and United Methodists to Missouri Synod Lutherans and the Assemblies of God—is solidly Republican, according to data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Of the 20 largest majority white Protestant denominations (which represent nearly 85 percent of all white Protestants), only six have more Democrats than Republicans. The largest of those denominations is the 1.7-million-member Episcopal Church, of which Democratic candidate Pete Buttigieg is a member. Episcopalians make up 3.5 percent of all white Protestants in the sample, and just over half of them (54.6 percent) identify as Democrats. Other denominations where Democrats outnumber Republicans include the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Church.

By contrast, some of the largest predominantly white Protestant denominations, including the 14.8-million-member Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, all lean Republican. So do nondenominational evangelical churches.

What may be even more troublesome for any Democrat who is trying to court white Protestants in 2020 is that every year, more and more of them are slipping away.

Of the top 20 denominations, only two became less Republican in a statistically significant way in the last ten years, according to the data from the 2008 and 2018 CCES.

On the other hand, 16 of these denominations have larger shares of Republicans today than they did when Barack Obama was elected in 2008. This includes the United Church of Christ, which was one of the first denominations to affirm LGBT people; it became 4 percent more Republican in the last decade. Buttigieg's tradition, the Episcopal Church, also saw 4.7 percent more of its members identify as Republicans.

The two largest denominations, the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church, which together comprise nearly a quarter of all white Protestants, are 5 percent more Republican today than ten years ago.

There is a possibility that many of these white Protestants may be Republicans in political affiliation but not supportive of President Donald Trump. However, the data shows otherwise. Among the 25 largest predominantly white Protestant denominations, the majority of people in 20 of them approve of Trump. Five have an approval rating for the president of less than 50 percent, but only two of those have a rating below 40 percent. By contrast, an aggregation of national polls by the website FiveThirtyEight shows that only 40 percent of the general public approves of Trump.

The religious composition of the Democratic Party looked drastically different in 1978. Four decades ago, 20 percent of Democrats were mainline Protestants; now it's half that. Additionally, the religiously unaffiliated share has tripled, going from 8.8 percent in 1978 to 28 percent in 2018. —Religion News Service