Nontheist groups see rise in numbers, donations since Trump's election

by Audrey Thibert
June 6, 2025

Anti-Trump protesters march to Trump Tower as they rally for a number of issues on the day of President Trump's inauguration, January 20, in Chicago. (AP Photo/Erin Hooley)

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, a nonprofit organization that advocates for separation of state and church and for nontheism, is experiencing what its co-president calls a “Trump bump.”

National membership at the foundation has grown by over 2,600 members since October 2024, reaching a total of 42,450 by the end of March 2025. Over the last few years, the group has hovered around 40,000 members but had been losing a

couple hundred members a month before the bump, said Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF.

The group also saw a 56 percent increase in membership from 2016 to 2017, when Donald Trump won his first presidential term, growing by 10,000 net new members.

Other US secular civil liberties and freethought groups have seen similar increases in membership, and in contributions, since Trump was elected last year.

The American Humanist Association, a nonprofit that promotes secular humanism, reported a 68 percent rise in donations since Trump won the 2024 election—and a 77 percent increase since he took office, said executive director Fish Stark.

“Not only are people joining—or re-joining—the movement, but existing members are digging deeper and putting their trust in the humanist movement to defend our rights at a time when lots of institutions have failed us,” Stark said. “We’re using the increase in donations we’ve received to provide significantly more support to local groups and increase staffing in our legal center to defend nontheist civil rights.”

American Atheists, another nonprofit advocating for the separation of church and state and for civil liberties of atheists, expects an 18 percent to 20 percent increase in new members from last year.

“In previous years, new member figures have been down,” said Emily Stinson, American Atheists member services coordinator. “We believe (the current increase is) a combination of our additional outreach and the political situation.”

Meanwhile, the Secular Coalition for America, an umbrella group for nonreligious organizations, said many donors have boosted their giving in recent months, including lapsed donors who are again supporting its work.

Other groups defending constitutional rights saw a bump when Trump took office in 2016, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, which saw its membership jump from 400,000 to 1.48 million in the first 15 months after the 2016 election.

Gaylor said her group’s growth has been more modest compared with larger, broader groups like the ACLU because FFRF has a more narrow focus on the separation of church and state.

“It tends to be at the bottom of priorities when people look at assaults on civil liberties,” Gaylor said. “There’s a lack of understanding that so many individual rights and civil liberties are really predicated on keeping religion out of government.”

Still, FFRF is becoming more politically engaged. In addition to legal advocacy, the group recently launched a 501(c)(4) arm to engage in lobbying and political advocacy. That wing is already beginning endorsement work ahead of the 2026 midterms. Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens joined FFRF’s staff as its first regional governmental affairs manager—on top of his work as state representative.

Founded in 1976 by Gaylor and her mother to protest prayer at local government meetings in Madison, Wisconsin, FFRF has long been on the legal front lines of church and state separation.

In April, Ryan Walters, Oklahoma state superintendent of public instruction, and the State Department of Education filed a federal lawsuit against FFRF arguing that cease-and-desist letters the organization sent to an Oklahoma school district violated federal and state protections for religious expression. The letters were sent by FFRF on behalf of a local parent over Bible verses being read during class and the district starting the school day with prayers over the intercom, which FFRF alleged were violations of church-state separation.

Walters said in a press release the FFRF’s actions are “nothing more than a desperate attempt to erase faith from public life, and we will fight them at every turn,” Newsweek reported.

FFRF, represented by the ACLU and the ACLU of Oklahoma, filed a motion to dismiss. Gaylor said the lawsuit is “paranoid Christian nationalist nonsense” and Walters is trying to “destroy public secular education.”

Gaylor said FFRF is also awaiting decisions on some of its long-standing court cases—in Arkansas over the constitutionality of a Ten Commandments monument on the state Capitol grounds, and in Louisiana over displaying the Ten Commandments in the classroom. And in a California school district, FFRF prevailed in halting prayer in school board meetings.

Gaylor said she believes this increased support for secular advocacy is both a political reaction to the Trump administration’s policies and part of a long-term

cultural shift.

According to the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study, religiously unaffiliated people are more likely to agree homosexuality should be accepted by society, support stricter environmental regulations and support legal abortion than those who are part of religious groups. Pew has also found that over the long term, Christians have been declining among the US adult population, while the religiously unaffiliated share has been rising.

“It’s just true overall that the secular voices tend to be the most progressive and the most concerned about preserving our world—this world, the only world that we know. We’re not focusing on the afterlife,” Gaylor said. —Religion News Service