

# United States : The midterms will see a number of nonreligious candidates - but why is it so hard for atheists to get voted into Congress ?

vendredi 28 octobre 2022, par [ZUCKERMAN Phil](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 24 octobre 2022).

**The midterm elections are likely to return to Congress elected representatives who hold a range of religious beliefs.**

**But while self-identified [Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus](#) currently rub shoulders in the corridors of power, one group is noticeably absent : atheists. And despite a [growing number of openly nonreligious candidates](#) running for office, it remains difficult for atheists to get a foothold in Congress.**

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Of 531 members of Congress included in a 2021 survey (at the time, four seats were unfilled), [88% identified as Christian](#), with those of a Jewish faith second, with 6%. Indeed, according to that survey, only two people in Congress don’t openly identify with any mainstream religion : Rep. Jared Huffman, a Californian Democrat, who identifies as a “humanist,” and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, who describes herself as religiously unaffiliated. But neither has self-identified as being an “atheist.” A [list compiled by the Freethought Equality Fund Political Action Committee](#) indicates that atheists are running for a few seats in the U.S. Congress, and many more are doing so at the state level.

But throughout history, only one self-identified atheist in the U.S. Congress comes to mind, the late [California Democrat Peter Stark](#).

## **‘In atheists, they don’t trust’**

This puts the country at odds with democracies the world over that have elected openly godless – or at least openly skeptical – leaders who went on to become revered national figures, such as [Jawaharlal Nehru in India](#), [Sweden’s Olof Palme](#), [Jose Mujica in Uruguay](#) and [Israel’s Golda Meir](#). New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern, the global leader who has arguably navigated the coronavirus crisis with the most credit, [says she is agnostic](#).

But in the United States, self-identified nonbelievers are at a distinct disadvantage. A [2019 poll asking Americans who they were willing to vote for](#) in a hypothetical presidential election found that 96% would vote for a candidate who is Black, 94% for a woman, 95% for a Hispanic candidate, 93%

for a Jew, 76% for a gay or lesbian candidate and 66% for a Muslim – but atheists fall below all of these, down at 60%. That is a sizable chunk who would not vote for a candidate simply on the basis of their nonreligion.

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In fact, a [2014 survey](#) found Americans would be more willing to vote for a presidential candidate who had never held office before, or who had extramarital affairs, than for an atheist.

In a country that [changed its original national motto in 1956](#) from the secular “e pluribus unum” – “out of many, one” – to the faithful “in God we trust,” it seems people don’t trust someone who doesn’t believe in God.

As a [scholar who studies atheism in the U.S.](#), I have long sought to understand what is behind such antipathy toward nonbelievers seeking office.

### **Branding issue ?**

There appear to be two primary reasons atheism remains the kiss of death for aspiring politicians in the U.S. – one is rooted in a reaction to historical and political events, while the other is rooted in baseless bigotry.

Let’s start with the first : atheism’s prominence within communist regimes. Some of the most murderous dictatorships of the 20th century – including [Stalin’s Soviet Union](#) and [Pol Pot’s Cambodia](#) – were explicitly atheistic. Bulldozing human rights and persecuting religious believers were fundamental to their oppressive agendas. Talk about a branding problem for atheists.

For those who considered themselves lovers of liberty, democracy and the First Amendment guarantee of the free exercise of religion, it made sense to [develop fearful distrust of atheism](#), given its association with such brutal dictatorships.

And even though such regimes have long since met their demise, the [association of atheism with a lack of freedom](#) lingered long after.

The second reason atheists find it hard to get elected in America, however, is the result of an irrational linkage in [many people’s minds between atheism and immorality](#). [Some assume](#) that because atheists don’t believe in a deity watching and judging their every move, they must be more likely to murder, steal, lie and cheat. One recent study, for example, found that Americans even [intuitively link atheism with necrobstantiality and cannibalism](#).

Such bigoted associations between atheism and immorality do not align with reality. There is simply no empirical evidence that most people who lack a belief in God are immoral. If anything, the evidence points in the other direction. Research has shown that atheists tend to be [less racist](#), [less homophobic](#) and [less misogynistic](#) than those professing a belief in God.

Most atheists subscribe to [humanistic ethics based on compassion and a desire to alleviate suffering](#).

This may help explain why atheists have been found to be [more supportive of efforts to fight climate change](#), as well as [more supportive of refugees](#) and of [the right to die](#).

This may also explain why, [according to my research](#), those states within the U.S. with the least religious populations – as well as democratic nations with the most secular citizens – tend to be the most humane, safe, peaceful and prosperous.

## **Freethought Caucus**

Although the rivers of anti-atheism run deep throughout the American political landscape, they are starting to thin. More and more nonbelievers are [openly expressing their godlessness](#), and swelling numbers of Americans are becoming secular : In the past 15 years, the [percentage of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has risen](#) from 16% to 26%. Meanwhile, some find the image of a Bible-wielding Trump troubling, opening up the possibility that suddenly Christianity may be contending with a branding problem of its own, [especially in the skeptical eyes of younger Americans](#).

In 2018, a new group emerged in Washington, D.C. : The Congressional Freethought Caucus. Although it has only 16 members, it portends a significant shift in which some elected members of Congress are no longer afraid of being [identified as, at the very least, agnostic](#). Given this development, as well as the growing number of nonreligious Americans, it shouldn't be a surprise if one day a self-identified atheist makes it to the White House.

Will that day come sooner rather than later ? God only knows. Or rather, only time will tell.

*Editor's note : This is an updated version of an [article that was originally published](#) on Oct. 5, 2020.< !—> <http://theconversation.com/republishing-guidelines> —>*

[Phil Zuckerman](#), Professor of Sociology and Secular Studies, [Pitzer College](#)

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### **P.-S.**

- Publié : 24 octobre 2022, 21:47 CEST.

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- [Phil Zuckerman](#), [Pitzer College](#)

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