News
Analysis



Voters cast their ballots at the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York on Election Day, Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2026. (AP/Yuki Iwamura)

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In the Democrats' historic midterm victory, Catholics and the religiously unaffiliated were key players as Republicans lost ground among most major religious groups, according to exit polls from both NBC News and CNN.

Political scientists and religious scholars said that while faith convictions may have played a role in the shift, economic challenges were likely the biggest factor.

"I don't particularly think it was a religious election," political scientist and researcher Ryan Burge told RNS. "I think it was pretty much an economic election, inflation election, a dissatisfaction with Trump election."

Burge's comments echoed data Pew Research Center released ahead of the midterms, which showed that most registered voters from the country's largest faith traditions — Black Protestants (89%), Catholics (87%), white mainline Protestants (83%) and white evangelical Protestants (81%) — all said the economy is very important in shaping their voting decision. Religiously unaffiliated voters, known as "nones," agreed (83%).

Catholics, who made up about 20% of midterm voters, shifted from majority red in 2024 to a near-even split this year between Republicans and Democrats, according to both exit polls. Two years ago, exit polls showed Catholics favoring Republicans, 59% to 39% in the NBC poll, and 60% to 39% in the CNN poll, which has renamed its exit poll "voter polls" due to a change in methodology. The 2024 NBC poll looked only at 10 key states, as opposed to all 50.

Nichole Flores, a religious studies professor at the University of Virginia, said she wasn't surprised by the shift in the Catholic vote. "I think the bishops in the United States have done a really good job expanding the range of social issues that are

being communicated as being salient to Catholic voters," she told RNS. She pointed to U.S. bishops' broader emphasis on immigration, the economy and peace alongside concerns about abortion.

Nicholas Hayes-Mota, a religious studies professor at Santa Clara University, said he's eager to see breakdowns showing how Latino Catholics and Latino evangelicals voted in the most recent election. The NBC poll showed Latino voters jumped from 51% to 64% Democrat between 2024 and 2026.

While he agreed U.S. bishops' positions or President Donald Trump's critique of Pope Leo XIV earlier this year may have swayed Catholic voters overall, for Latino Catholics, he said, "I suspect what the pope is saying or what the bishops are saying matters a lot less than their direct experience of the impact of the president's immigration policies on their own communities."

Exit polls also showed a noteworthy shift among religiously unaffiliated voters. In addition to increasing in number — in 2024, nones made up 24% of the vote, and in 2026 that number rose to 27%, according to both polls — they also shifted to the left 6 or 7 percentage points (77% in 2026 compared to 70% in the 2024 CNN poll and 71% in the 2024 NBC poll).

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That group includes atheists, agnostics and people who describe their religion as "nothing in particular." And while atheists and agnostics are predictably left-leaning, the "nothing in particular" group is more likely to be swayed in an election and to have lower incomes, said Burge. "They're the people who are going to be hurt by inflation the most," he said.

Exit polls showed nonreligious voters were instrumental in securing key Senate victories for Democrats whose faith was central to their campaign. CNN found that megachurch pastor Adam Hamilton lost both Protestants (37%) and Catholics (47%) in the Kansas Senate race, but he won support from 82% of religious nones. In Texas, James Talarico won the support of 58% of Catholics and 77% of nones. And in Michigan, CNN found that Democrat Abdul El-Sayed lost both Protestants (38%) and Catholics (41%) to Republican Mike Rogers, but won among nones (76%) and those of non-Christian faiths (68%). Statewide exit polls are based on a much smaller

sample.

Steven Emmert, executive director for the Secular Coalition for America, said that in addition to being influenced by economic factors, nonreligious voters were likely reacting to Trump administration policies that blur the lines between church and state. He said the exit polls highlight the crucial role nonreligious voters played in securing Democratic victories.

"They were nearly 30% of the electorate, and so it's a group that every person running for office needs to be paying attention to."

In a departure from the broader leftward trend, Jewish voters, while still predominantly voting Democrat, were less likely to do so in 2026 than in 2024. Two-thirds of Jews (68%) in both the NBC and CNN polls favored Democrats, down from three-quarters in 2024. During that election, CNN found that 74% of Jews supported Democrats, while NBC found that 78% supported Democrats. Jews made up about 3% of voters in 2026.

Two-thirds of those from other faiths (66%) supported Democrats in the midterms, up slightly from 2024, when 61% in the NBC poll and 63% in the CNN poll did so. Both 2026 polls found that people from other faiths made up 10% of voters.

While most Protestants voted Republican, exit polls showed they did so at a slightly lower rate. Both polls showed that 60% of Protestants overall favored Republicans, down from about 63% in the 2024 election. Black Protestants, however, were significantly more likely to vote Democrat (90%), while white Protestants (67%) and Hispanic Protestants (56%) voted Republican, according to the NBC poll.

The percentage of white evangelicals backing Trump remained stable at about 82%. Burge noted that while voter turnout data is still inconclusive, preliminary results may suggest more white evangelical voters stayed home this election, compared to prior elections. NBC's poll showed 17% of voters were White born-again or evangelical Christians, down from 23% in 2024.

Ed Stetzer, dean of Talbot Seminary at Biola University, said we don't yet have data on what might have made white evangelicals hesitant to vote — whether it was factors like the war in Iran and tariffs or concerns about "character issues" in Republican candidates.

"I do think that the enthusiasm gap was evident, and I think that white evangelicals, who tend to be Republican, were certainly less enthusiastic (than) in prior elections," said Stetzer. "My hope is that this is an opportunity for Republicans to return to principled conservatism and to issues of character."

This story appears in the **2026 Midterm Elections** feature series. View the full series.