

Religious newcomers on Capitol Hill: First Muslims and Buddhists in Congress

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When it reconvenes, Congress will for the first time include a Muslim, two Buddhists, more Jews than Episcopalians, and the highest-ranking Mormon in congressional history.

Roman Catholics remain the largest single faith group in Congress, accounting for 29 percent of all members of the House and Senate, followed by Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jews and Episcopalians.

While Catholics in Congress are Democrats by nearly a 2-to-1 ratio, the most heavily Democratic groups are Jews and those not affiliated with any religion. Of the 43 Jewish members of Congress, only three are Republican, one in the House and two in the Senate. The six religiously unaffiliated members of the House are all Democrats.

Because 2006 was such a good year for Democrats, they have regained their commanding advantage among Catholics, which had slipped during the era of GOP dominance. In Pennsylvania alone, five new Democrats, all Catholics, were elected to Congress in November, including Bob Casey, who defeated Senator Rick Santorum, a far more conservative Catholic.

By contrast, after big Republican gains in 1994, 44 percent of Catholic members of Congress were Republican, according to Albert Menendez, a writer and researcher who has been counting the religious affiliation of members of Congress since 1972.

“It’s a thankless task, but somebody’s got to do it,” said Menendez, 64, who lives in nearby North Potomac, Maryland. He has published his counts and analyses first with Americans United for Separation of Church and State and more recently in “Voice of Reason,” the newsletter of Americans for Religious Liberty.

When Menendez did his first tally after the 1972 election, Congress was still much in the sway of a few mainline Christian faiths. At that time, just three mainline Protestant denominations—Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian—accounted for 43 percent of all members of Congress, including 51 senators. Now, those three groups account for just a fifth of Congress, including 32 senators. Still, all three—especially Episcopalians and Presbyterians—continue to be better represented on Capitol Hill than among the general population.

The most heavily Republican groups are the small band of Christian Scientists in the House (all five are Republican) and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (12 Republicans and three Democrats)—though the top-ranking Mormon in the history of Congress will be Nevada senator Harry Reid, the incoming Democratic majority leader.

Baptists divide along partisan lines defined by race. Black Baptists, like all current black members of Congress, are Democrats, while most white congressional Baptists are Republicans. Notable exceptions include incoming House majority leader Steny Hoyer (D., Md.) and Senator Robert Byrd (D., W. Va.), who will serve as president pro tem in the new Senate, making him third in succession to the presidency after the vice president and House speaker-to-be Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.).

Through it all, Lutherans have held their own. Menendez said they were underrepresented relative to their population in 1972, with 16 members of Congress, and remain underrepresented today with 17. (While their total numbers have held steady, their political allegiance has flipped from 2-to-1 Republican to 2-to-1 Democrat.)

Evangelical Christians—a category that cuts across denominational lines—are even more underrepresented, according to Furman University political scientist James Guth, all the more so after this year's defeat of Republican incumbents like representatives John Hostettler of Indiana and Jim Ryun of Kansas.

Perhaps the most underrepresented group in Congress is the 14 percent of all U.S. adults who, according to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, conducted by scholars at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, claim no religion at all.

Only six members of Congress, all Democrats, identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated: representatives John Tierney and John Olver of Massachusetts, Earl

Blumenauer of Oregon, Neil Abercrombie of Hawaii, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin and Mark Udall of Colorado.

For Buddhists and Muslims, the 110th Congress will bring their first congressional representation. The two Buddhist Democrats—representatives Mazie Hirono of Hawaii and Hank Johnson of Georgia—both have avoided talking about their religion, saying it is an entirely private matter.

A spokesperson for Johnson would only confirm that he became a Buddhist some 30 years ago when he became affiliated with the Japan-based Soka Gakkai International. Like Johnson, Keith Ellison of Minnesota, the first Muslim elected to Congress, is a convert and African American. Raised Catholic, he converted to Islam at age 19 while attending Wayne State University. *-Jonathan Tilove, Religion News Service*