

The 'nones' say 2012 election proves they are a political force

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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Last month, Lauren Anderson Youngblood, communications manager for the Secular Coalition for America, approached Broderick Johnson, a senior adviser to the Obama campaign, as they both left a conference on religion and the election.

The SCA is an umbrella group representing 11 nontheistic organizations. So who, Youngblood asked Johnson, could she reach out to with their concerns about civil rights, access to health care and education?

"He said, 'We don't view you as a constituency,'" Youngblood said. "He said, 'We don't do outreach to that community.'"

After Tuesday's election, that may soon change. According to a Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life study released last month (October), "nones" – those who say they have no religious affiliation or do not believe in God – are the fastest-growing faith group in America, at 20 percent of the population, or 46 million adults.

In addition, nationwide exit polls conducted Tuesday show that "nones" made up 12 percent of all voters – more than the combined number of voters who are Jewish, Muslim or members of other non-Christian faiths (9 percent), and only slightly smaller than the combined number of Hispanic Catholics and Black Protestants (14 percent).

The nones also skewed heavily Democratic, 70 to 26 percent.

All of this, Youngblood said, means political parties need to pay them more attention in the coming years.

"The numbers don't lie," she said in an email after the exit polls came in. "They are an indicator of our untapped potential and politicians who want our vote need to focus on making decisions as lawmakers with reason and science, not theology.

They need to tone down the religious rhetoric and when they do mention religious groups, mention us too, because we too are constituents and Americans and we deserve inclusion in our government."

The Obama campaign did not respond immediately with a comment.

Neither party seemed to pay much attention to the nones in this election. In the Republican primary, all the candidates repeatedly spoke of their religious beliefs, and the Republican National Convention was rife with talk about God - something nones and other Americans want less of in politics, according to surveys.

The Democrats seemed to ignore the nones as well. Many nontheistic and secular groups protested the Democratic National Convention's last-minute inclusion of the word "God" in the party platform, and a local chapter of American Atheists protested outside the convention center in Charlotte, N.C.

Indeed, reaching out to nones may be a problem for both parties in the future. In analyzing voting data about nones, political scientist Juhem Navarro-Rivera wrote on Public Religion Research Institute's website about the difficulty the Democrats will face trying to reconcile conflicting segments of their base, like black Protestants and the nones.

Their "positions on social issues," like same-sex marriage and abortion, he wrote, "are sometimes at odds."

Nor will it be easy for Republicans. There has already been plenty of talk about how they must work to attract a more diverse range of voters. A 38-year-old man who blogs under the pseudonym Heathen Republican said abandoning religious rhetoric will help attract more nones.

"By using faith-based arguments, religious conservatives actually hinder the conservative movement," he said in an email, asking to remain anonymous for professional reasons. "They create obstacles where there don't need to be any, and they make it harder for the non-religious voter to take the Republican Party seriously. Non-faith-based conservative arguments will appeal to religious voters and non-religious voters. Faith-based conservative arguments will make non-religious voters tune out."

Meanwhile, nontheistic and secular groups are celebrating the election results. Many see their muscle behind state victories for same-sex marriage – a pillar of their civil rights agenda – and especially in the defeat of Florida's Amendment 8, which would have channelled taxpayer money to religious schools, and which many of these groups opposed as a violation of the separation of church and state.

Some nontheistic groups have already moved to make their wants known. On Wednesday (Nov. 7), the American Humanist Association sent all newly elected members of Congress a request "not to join the Congressional Prayer Caucus and to actively work to ensure that the wall of separation between church and state is strengthened and maintained."

Writing on the AHA's website Wednesday, Matthew Bulger, the AHA's legislative associate, likened the nones' current political position to that of gays and lesbians a decade or more ago – poised to be a voting bloc candidates ignore at their peril.

"It may take another election of two before we are truly able to make our political mark," he wrote, "but have no doubt that day is coming." —RNS