

American involvement in organized religion continues to wane

The data on the decline in church membership shares “almost exactly the same pattern of ups and downs” as engagement in secular civil society, said political scientist Robert Putnam.

by [Bob Smietana](#) and [Aysha Khan](#)

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A new Gallup report found that only half of Americans say they belong to a religious congregation.

“U.S. church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s,” Jeffrey M. Jones [wrote on Gallup’s website](#). “The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade.”

That lines up with an overall lack of interest in belonging, according to Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam, whose 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, argued that Americans have been engaging less and less in communal activities such as bowling leagues, Rotary clubs, gardening clubs, or book clubs, since the 1960s. The data on the decline in church membership shares “almost exactly the same pattern of ups and downs” as engagement in secular civil society, Putnam said.

And the decline is not only among younger people. The data from 2016–2018 found that 68 percent of those born before 1945 are part of a church or other religious body. That percentage has decreased from 78 percent in the period from 1998 to

2000.

Among other findings:

- Catholics (63%) are less likely to belong to a church than Protestants (67%).
- Nondenominational Christians (57%) are less likely to belong to a church than those tied to a specific denomination (70%).
- Mormons are among the highest in church affiliation, at about 90 percent.
- Jewish membership in synagogues has remained steady at about 50 percent.

Gallup's new numbers suggest an even lower level in religiosity than other recent data on religious affiliation. Last year's General Social Survey, a poll conducted since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, found that those who reported that they don't affiliate with any religion are the same size as those identified as evangelical—about 23 percent.

The difference between the two surveys is one of wording, said Ryan Burge, a pastor and political science researcher. While the GSS looked at affiliation, Gallup asked about membership, which suggests a more formal connection with a specific religious body.

"A lot of people say they're Catholic, for example, but they never go to mass," Burge said. "If you ask if they're a member of the Catholic Church, they're more likely to say they're not because they don't actively attend." —Religion News Service

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