

Minority Religion in Public Office

Keywords:

Congress, Religion, Minorities, Representation, Government

Description:

In examining the religions of members of congress, it seems that minority religions are able to attract broad support and depending on location succeed in gaining election at the local, state and federal levels.

Key points

- 91.8% of Congress members identify as Christian yet only 73% of Americans identify as so. I believe this discrepancy can be chiefly attributed to the 20% of Americans who consider themselves unaffiliated vs. .2% or one member of congress that considers themselves so
- Jewish members of congress account for about 5.2% of its members, while only 2% of the population identifies as such
- Though Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists make up about 2% of the population they comprise 1% of congress (Pew Center)
- Members of the Mormon faith hold every congressional district in Idaho and Utah (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/06/the-religions-of-the-114th-congress-mapped/>)
- Diversity primarily concentrated on Democrats side (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/05/politics/religious-survey-congress/>)
- Though it is unclear to what degree, it is likely that demographics and location play a factor with regards to the electability of a candidate (Utah, Idaho and only 1 Jewish + 1 Buddhist member in the South) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/06/the-religions-of-the-114th-congress-mapped/>)

In Examining

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/06/the-religions-of-the-114th-congress-mapped/>

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/jewcong114.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/11/05/this-u-s-city-has-become-the-first-to-elect-a-muslim-majority-city-council/>

<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/01/05/faith-on-the-hill/>



http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1638066_1398331,00.html



<http://www.snopes.com/politics/religion/ellison.asp>

During the 1960 presidential election, eventual winner John F. Kennedy was forced to address concerns that he would be subservient to the Pope and that his religion would dominate his Presidency. 55 years later, our nation though still far from perfect, is continuing to make progress with regards to religious tolerance and diversity. Despite the recent popularity of Presidential Candidate Donald Trump and his calls for a ban on Muslim travel to the US, minority religions continue to see increased tolerance and greater representation in mainstream society. This extends

to the United States Congress, where minority religions are generally well represented.

In examining the religions of Congress, a large majority at 91% identify as some Christian denomination. This is in contrast to only 73% of the American population who identify as such. (Pew Research Center) This is likely accounted for by the fact that while 20% of Americans consider themselves unaffiliated, only 1 member of Congress identifies herself as such. It is likely that irreligious members of Congress, in an effort to make themselves more appealing to a broader number of voters classify themselves as Christian. This is likely to be more effective with conservative voters who take religious reasoning into account for many of their social views, and thus would be less likely to vote for someone who considers themselves irreligious or atheist.

Despite the majority of voters and congress members being Christian, there are a disproportionately high number of Jewish legislators in Congress. While making up only 2% of the American population, they make up 5.2% of Congress. (Pew) This possibly results from the social acceptance of Judaism, as well as their being predominantly white, enabling a majority of voters to identify with them. Additionally there is only one current Jewish republican in the house, (Jewish Virtual Library) this matters, as Democrats are generally more welcoming of diversity. Geographically speaking, Jewish members of Congress are spread throughout the US. (Washington Post)

8 of Idaho and Utah's 9 congress members are Mormon while Utah's neighbors Nevada and New Mexico have congress' other three Mormon members.

Though categorized as Christians, Mormons have found themselves victims of historical persecution within the United States, due to its differences from the mainstream denominations. This and its strong congressional showings in the Southwest make it deserving of special examination. 3% of US congress members are Mormon against 2% of the population. There seems to be a degree of favoritism for Mormon candidates in Utah and Idaho where the Mormon populations are 60 and 26% of the population respectively. (Wikipedia) In Utah the simple explanation could be that Mormons only vote fellow Mormons into office, while in Idaho where Mormons are the largest demographic, being Mormon simply makes election more probable, as one of Idaho's two Senators is a Catholic.

The primary concern with minority religions relates to Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim members of Congress, as they are under represented. The elections of these officials is likely due to their ability to appeal to voters on a broad level, as all of these members of congress are Democrats, the party which tends to be more socially and religiously liberal. With Muslim congressmen Keith Ellison and André Carson as primary examples, these small minority members of congress typically have both socially and fiscally liberal stances making them attractive to Democrat voters, who are less likely to care about religious differences. Additionally the groups are spread throughout the US, as the two Muslim Congressmen are in Mid-Western States, one Hindu congresswoman and one Buddhist Senator represent Hawaii, while another Buddhist Congressman represents Georgia. (Washington Post) A major takeaway being that half of Hawaii's members of Congress are from two of the least represented religions.

Though the religious diversity of the most recent 114th Congress has decreased from that of the previous 113th, as there are three less Jewish members, and one less Buddhist, there is still great religious diversity in Congress, and minority religions still find themselves well represented. These statistics serve to reflect both our diversity as a nation, and the social progress we have made since the 1960 election.

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Relevant Websites

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<http://www.senate.gov/index.htm>

<http://www.pewresearch.org/>