

# **The Transformation of Generation X: Shifts in Religious and Political Self-Identification, 1990-2008**

Barry A. Kosmin & Juhem Navarro-Rivera

## **A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008**

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**Highlights**

**Generation X** has weakened its ties to Christianity (85% in 1990 v. 75% in 2008), especially Catholicism, and the Republican Party (34% v. 26%) since 1990.

**Generation X** has secularized over time. In 1990 11% were Nones compared to 16% in 2008; 13% of Generation X did not identify with a religion (including Don't Know and refusals) in 1990, compared to 21% in 2008.

**Generation X's** shift away from religion can be attributed to defections among Catholics. Self-identified Catholics declined from 33% in 1990 to 26% in 2008.

**Generation X's** Catholic population fell by 700,000 identifiers during 1990-2008. The loss of 1.7 million white Catholics was not offset by the addition of one million Hispanic Catholics.

**Generation X** underwent religious polarization through religious switching. The Nones grew by 2.2 million persons and the non-denominational Generic Christian population by 1.8 million. The flow to conservative Christian traditions (Christian Generic; Pentecostals; Protestant Sects) appears to have come at the expense of the Baptists and Catholics but not at the expense of the Mainline Protestants.

**Generation X** Christian groups became more female dominated over time (with the exception of the Protestant Sects) while the Nones and Other Religions became more male dominated.

**Generation X** members who self-identified with the Christian traditions have more children and are more likely to be married than are Nones or Other Religions.

**Generation X** Nones had equivalent levels of educational attainment in 1990 and 2008.

**Generation X** shifted away from the Republican Party between 1990-2008. In 1990 they leaned Republican by five percentage points (34% v. 29%), but in 2008 they favored the Democratic Party by seven percentage points (33% v. 26%).

**Generation X's** partisan shift away from the Republican Party was even more pronounced among Nones. In 1990, Nones were evenly divided between Democrats (26%) and Republicans (24%). In 2008, Nones leaned Democratic by over a two-to-one margin (33% v. 15%).

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## Introduction

The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) series is a rich resource for understanding recent changes in the religious composition of the U.S. population. The large nationally representative ARIS samples allow us to explore in some depth the correlates of changes in religious and political identification among young Americans over the past two decades. To that end, in this report we compare responses obtained in 1990 and 2008 from members of a Generation X (born 1965-1972). In 1990, its oldest members were 18-25 years of age; many were students or just entering the workforce. In 2008, nearly 20 years later, the cohort was 36-43 years of age, and many had established homes, families and careers. This report investigates what happened to their religious and political identities in the interim period.

Since religious, social and political changes are often first evident and most pronounced among the youngest cohort of American adults, comparing responses between 1990 and 2008 is useful for highlighting social change. Moreover, the findings of this report are particularly important for predicting future trends in American society as a whole because Generation X is the current parenting generation which is raising the nation's middle and high school students today.

## About the Data

The data for this investigation was drawn from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) series. The ARIS series is based on a large, nationally representative sample of adults in the 48 contiguous United States utilizing random digit dialed telephone interviews. The survey questionnaire asks respondents to identify their religious preference, and also collects information on important demographic and sociological variables.

In this report, we draw on census-type data from two waves of the survey, focusing particularly on Generation X. This generation was between the ages of 18 and 25 years in 1990 and between 36 and 43 years in 2008.

The 1990 ARIS surveyed 113,723 respondents, including 16,959 respondents between the ages of 18-25 years.

The 2008 ARIS surveyed 54,461 people, including 6,407 respondents between the ages of 36-43 years.

The report's religion data is based on responses to the open-ended question: *What is your religion, if any?*

The report's political party data is based on responses to the question: *Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as: a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?*

For more information about the ARIS series methodology visit the methodology page in the ARIS website <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/about-aris/methodology>.

## Part I

### Demographic Change Among Generation X, 1990-2008

Background characteristics of Generation X help us understand the religious and political shifts the generation experienced between 1990 and 2008.

#### Population Increase

Between 1990 and 2008, Generation X increased its numbers by five million from 29 million to 34 million persons. The newcomers were immigrants, mainly from Latin America, which changed several characteristics of the cohort. For example, the influx of Latino immigrants made Generation X slightly more male (51%) than it would have been without the new immigrants.

#### Regional Distribution

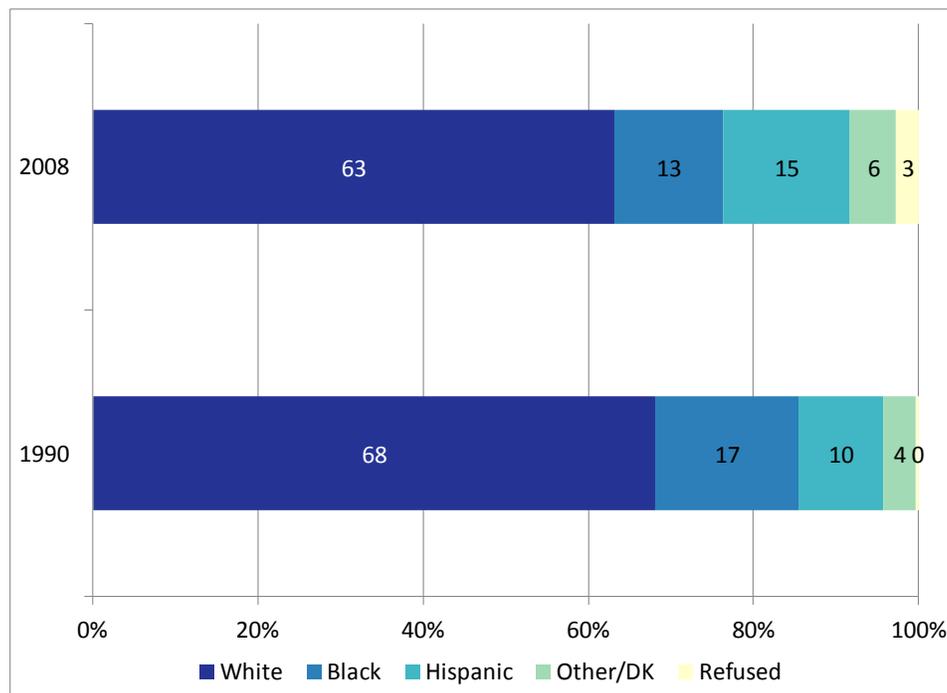
Internal migration and international immigration made the population more Southern (36% v. 33%) and less Northeastern (19% v. 23%) between 1990 and 2008.

#### Race

Immigration diversified the racial and ethnic composition of Generation X. The proportion of White non-Hispanics fell from 68% to 63% as did the proportion of Black non-Hispanics (17% to 13%). These declines were offset by rises in the percentage of Hispanics, from 10% to 15%, and Other Races and Refusals, from 4% to 9%.

Figure 1

Race and Ethnicity among Generation X, 1990 & 2008



**Marital Status**

The most significant change among this age cohort was in its marital status pattern. In 1990, the vast majority (74%) were single never married, 23 % were married and only 3% were separated, divorced or widowed. In 2008, 63% of the generation was married and another 6% was in a committed relationship (single living with a partner). The separated, divorced and widowed increased to 14% of the population. The single never married reduced to 15%, which means 85% of this cohort are or have been in a marriage or committed relationship.

**Children**

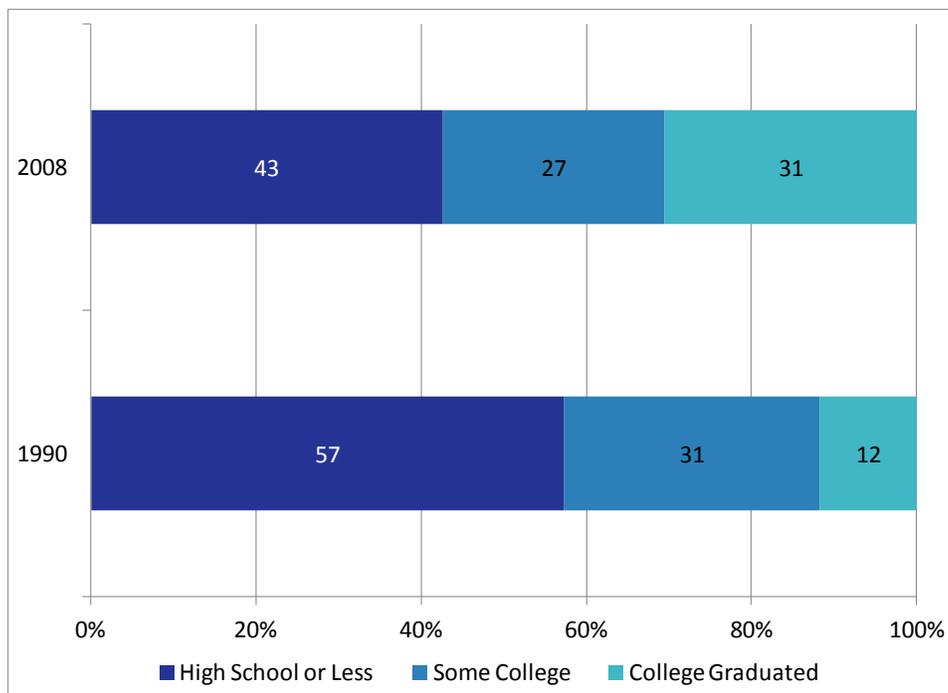
It is not possible to provide reliable data on the number of children this cohort had in 1990 since many of the children recorded in the home were probably younger siblings of Generation X respondents. In 2008, we discovered that 64% of the cohort had a child under the age of 18 years residing with them in their home. Since we also know that 85% had been married or had a partner we can calculate that nearly 80% of them had become parents. Half of the 64% of the cohort with children at home reported they had more than one child.

**SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE, 1990-2008**

**Education**

The profile of educational attainment among Generation X improved considerably between 1990 and 2008. The proportion of college graduates increased nearly threefold at the expense of the lower educational categories. This was to be expected considering that in 1990 this cohort was only 18-25 years of age and many had not completed their college education.

**Figure 2**  
**Educational Attainment of Generation X, 1990 & 2008**

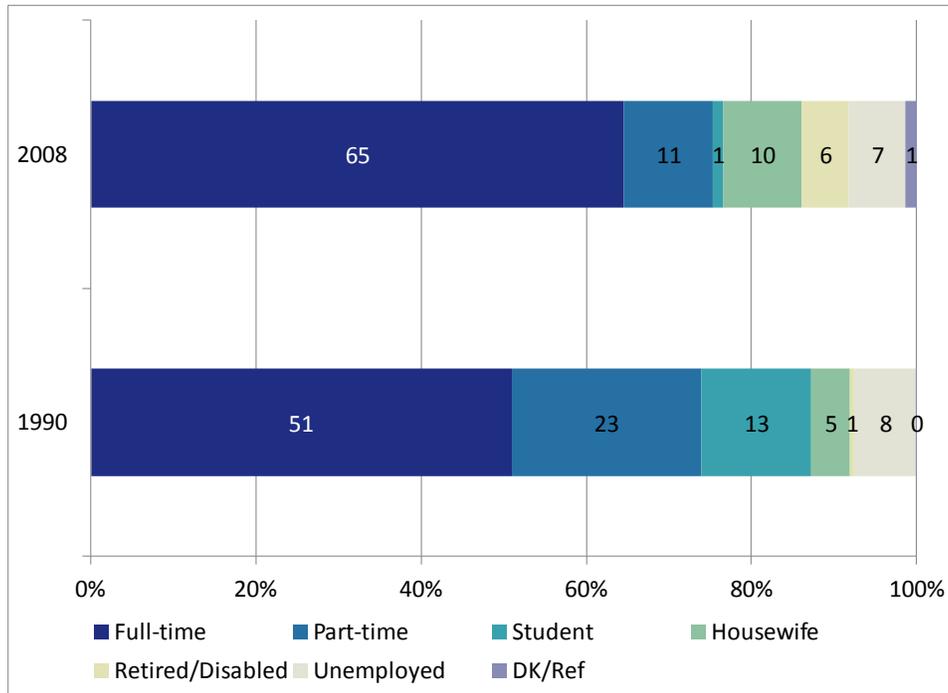


### Employment Status

The employment pattern of the cohort changed significantly between 1990 and 2008. As expected, the number of full-time workers and housewives increased while the number of full-time students and part-time workers fell.

Figure 3

Employment Status of Generation X, 1990 & 2008



### Home Ownership

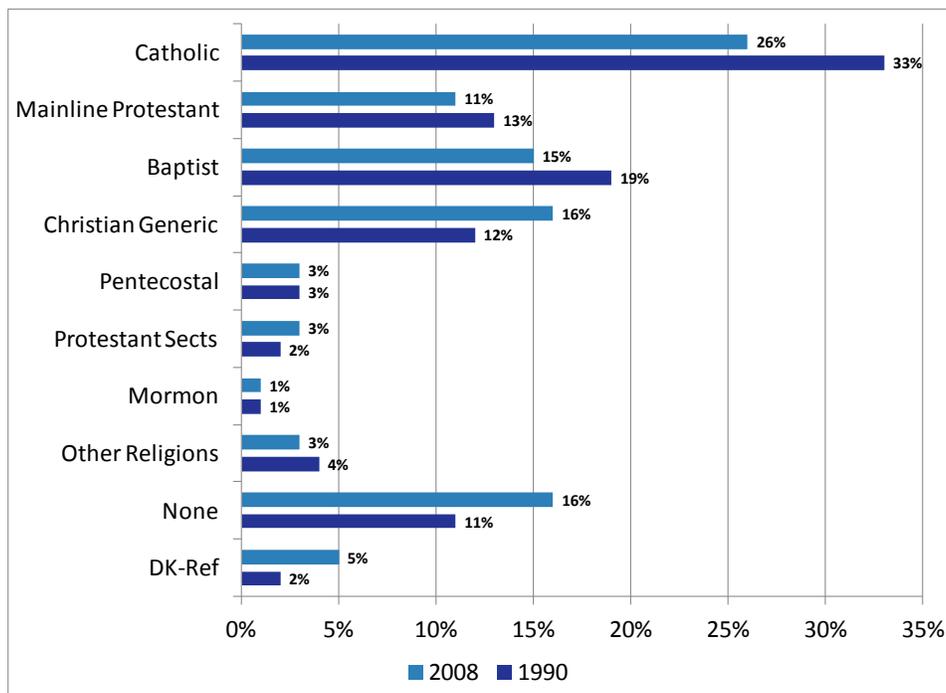
In 1990, many in this cohort were still living with their parents. In 2008, 70% were home owners, suggesting they were well-established in their neighborhoods and communities.

## Part II

### Religious Change, 1990-2008

The *ARIS 2008 Summary Report* noted that younger Americans are more likely than older cohorts to identify as having no religion. Accordingly, in *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population*, we found that young people comprise a large share of America's 34 million-strong population of Nones—those who do not self-identify with a religious tradition of any kind. However, our previous reports did not compare the religious identification across and between generations. This left an unanswered question: If young people in 2008 made up such a high proportion of the Nones population, are only young people driving secularity in America?

**Figure 4**  
Religious Self-Identification of Generation X, 1990 & 2008\*



\*For definitions see "Taxonomy of Religious Traditions," p. 13

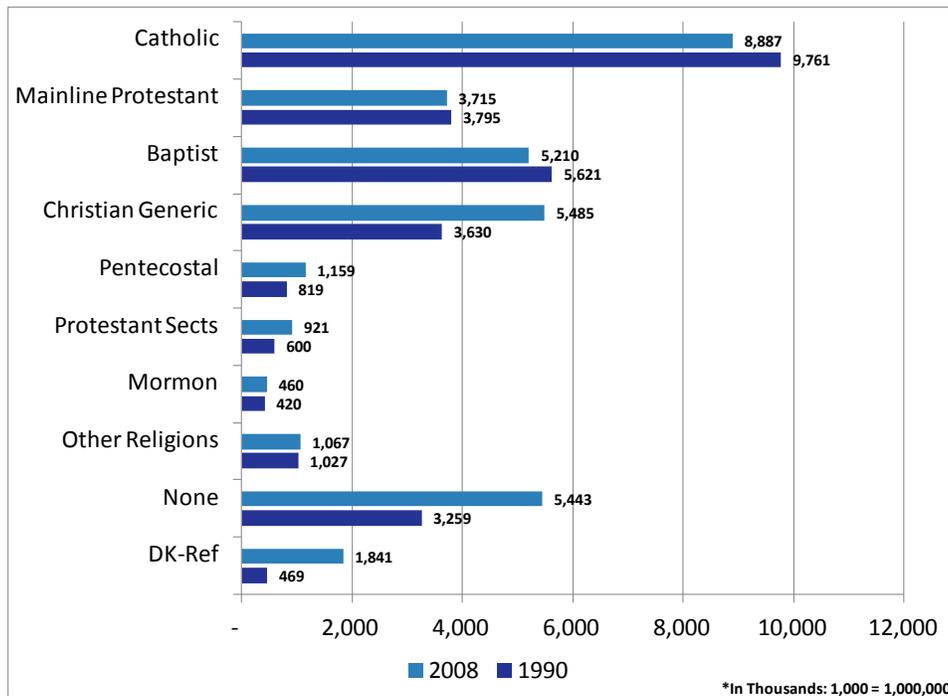
Figure 4 shows that Generation X became more secular and also less Christian (85% in 1990 v. 75% in 2008) as it aged and grew in size. However, the proportion of the cohort identifying with Other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions hardly changed. So the secularizing change mainly occurred at the expense of Catholic self-identification which fell from 33% in 1990 to 26% in 2008.

Figure 5 provides numerical detail on the actual population numbers of the religious groups in 1990 and 2008, with the Other Christian category broken out by denominational traditions. The largest numerical gain was the nearly 2.2 million new Nones. In addition, 1.8 million did not supply a religious identification. This was a big rise over 1990 and is probably another indicator of alienation

from organized religion.

At the same time, there was evidence of movement into more conservative religious groups. The Christian Generic group (Christian, Protestant, Non-denominational Christian, Evangelical/Born Again) grew by over 1.8 million, and the Protestant Sects (e.g. Jehovah’s Witness, Seventh Day Adventist, Church of Christ) and the Pentecostals each attracted 300,000 new identifiers.

**Figure 5**  
Size of Religious Traditions among Generation X 1990 & 2008\*



The Mainline Protestants, Mormons and Other Religions hardly changed in size among Generation X over this time period.

The only religious traditions to show major losses between 1990 and 2008 were the Baptists, with 400,000 fewer identifiers, and the Catholics, who had a net loss of lost nearly 900,000. The Catholic decline is a surprising and significant finding. Due to immigration, Generation X grew from 29 million in 1990 to over 34 million in 2008, and this large influx of newcomers included over 1 million Catholic Latinos. Yet the influx of these Catholic Latinos during the 1990s and 2000s was not enough to offset 1.7 million losses among white Catholics. This phenomenon of wide-scale disaffection among white Catholics explains why the Catholic share of the total U.S. population remained constant at 24% despite the fact that a significant share of immigrants over these two decades were Catholics.

Figure 5 reveals a complex pattern of religious shifts among members of Generation X. There has been religious polarization as both the Nones and Christian conservatives grew. The flow to conservative Christianity appears to have come at the expense of the Baptists and Catholics but,

surprisingly, not at the expense of the Mainline Protestants.

A closer examination of the demographic profiles of Generation X in 1990 and 2008 provides some insight into the changes that occurred within this population of adult Americans. According to most conventional wisdom, as Generation X aged, we should have expected them to marry, have children and become more religious, but this may have occurred differentially across the religious traditions.

### **Marital Status**

As young adults in 1990, all members of Generation X were unlikely to be married; just above one in five were married. However, Other Christian (non-Catholic) identifiers were more likely to be married than other religious groups; over one in four of Other Christians were married in 1990. The next two largest groups (Catholics and Nones) had similar marriage rates.

In 2008, the Nones had the most unique marital profile among Generation X. Two-thirds of Catholics (65%) and Other Christians (66%), but just over half of Nones, (54%), were married. Further, Nones were more likely to be single never married (21%) than Catholics (12%). Also, the percentage of Nones who were single-living with a partner was slightly higher (9%) than other groups (7% for Catholics, 6% for Other Christians and 7% for Other Religions).

The percentage of Nones reporting themselves to be divorced or separated (15%) was similar to the other two major Christian groups (14% and 12%). Interestingly, the small population of Non-Christian religions had a somewhat similar profile to the Nones.

### **Children**

The proportion of Generation X who reported having children under age 18 living at home in 2008 varied by religious identification. While 69% of Catholics and 67% of Other Christians reported having children under the age of 18 at home, just 52% of Nones and identifiers with Other Religions did.

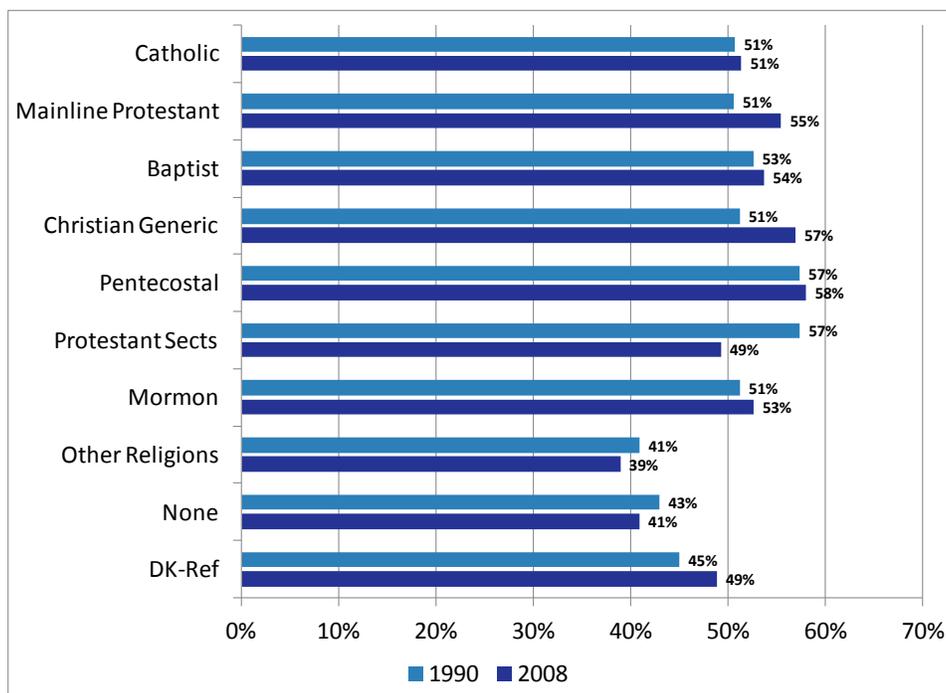
These findings suggest that Christian Americans tend to have more children and marry at higher rates than non-Christian and non-religious Americans or that non-Christian Americans and Nones start identifying as Christians when they marry or have children.

### **Gender**

The religious-secular gender gap widened between 1990 and 2008. All the Christian groups became more female with the exception of the Protestant Sects (57% female v. 49% female in 2008). The largest shifts occurred among the Mainline Protestants (51% female in 1990 v. 55% in 2008) and the fast growing Generic Christians (up from 51% female in 1990 to 57% female in 2008).

The fast-growing Nones (57% male in 2008) and the small Other Religions group (59% male in 2008) both extended their male majorities by 2% over their 1990 sex ratios. These unbalanced gender ratios indicate that many Christian women are married to male Nones and so many children come from “mixed homes” which have religious mothers but secular fathers.

**Figure 6**  
**Percent Female by Religious Tradition Generation X 1990 & 2008**



### Geography

Between 1990 and 2008, there were considerable regional shifts both in overall proportions and in the internal distribution of the religious groups. As with the general U.S. population, Generation X moved southward. However, some earlier patterns remained. A plurality of Catholics (29%) still lived in the Northeast though their proportion of the regional total sharply declined from 50% in 1990 to 39% in 2008; the lion’s share of Catholic migrants moved to the South and the region now rivals the Northeast in its share of Catholics (27%). The Nones also moved southward (18% to 29%) but they became less Western (from 35% to 29%).

In terms of regional populations, the Nones was the only group that increased in the Northeast (from 9% to 18%), but it lost share in the West (from 18% to 16%). The Other Christians group lost its share of the population in the South (67% in 1990 v. 61% in 2008) but gained in the West (43% in 1990 v. 50% in 2008). The Other Religions group remained skewed towards the Northeast.

### Race

Due to immigration, all religious groups became more diverse between 1990 and 2008. In 2008, only 54% of Catholics in Generation X were white Non-Hispanic compared with 68% in 1990. As a result, Generation X Catholics became increasingly Hispanic, up from 22% to 35%. In contrast, Nones were 75% white in 1990 and 71% white in 2008. Nevertheless, the percentage of Hispanics

among Nones doubled from 6% in 1990 to 12% in 2008.

### **Education**

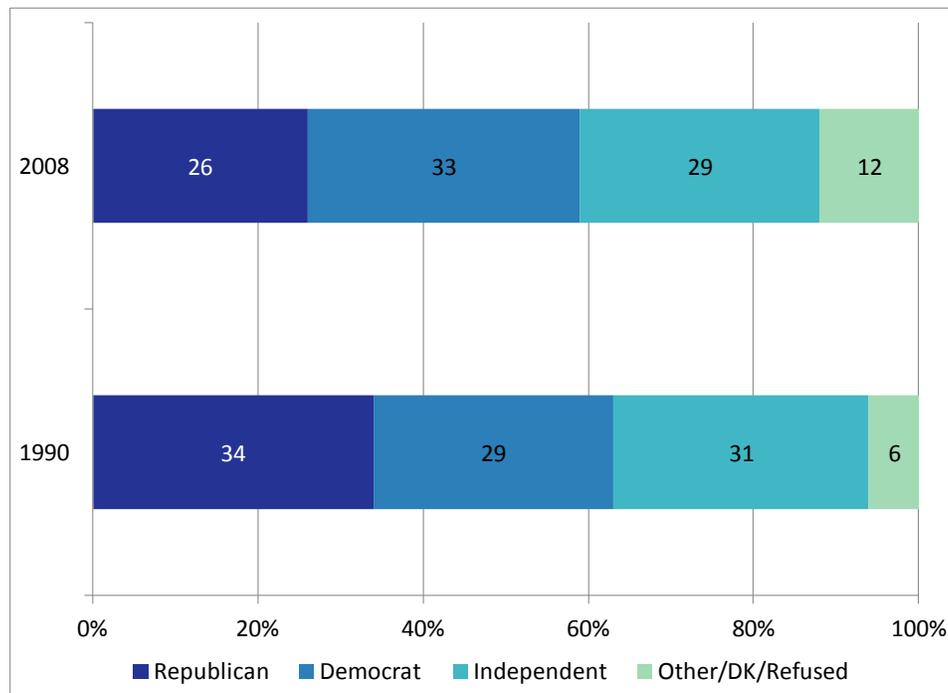
Many in Generation X were attending college in 1990. At that time, Generation X as a whole was more secular than the general population, but Generation X students were no more secular. Looking forward to 2008, we investigated whether members of Generation X with college degrees became more secular than those without a college education. Though it is common wisdom that higher education leads to secularization, this is not the case for Generation X. Secular members of Generation X are just as likely as religious members of Generation X to have a college education. Moreover, members of Generation X with a college degree are no more likely to identify as Nones than those without college degrees. Thus, education was not a factor in secularization among Generation X in 1990 or 2008.

## Part III

### Political Party Preference, 1990-2008

As with their religious identification, the Generation X cohort underwent significant change in its political party affiliation between 1990 and 2008. As Figure 7 shows, the cohort's original five-point Republican Party advantage became a seven-point Democratic Party advantage, marking a substantial nine-point movement in political partisanship. The difference in party identification between 1990 and 2008 came from a combination of slight Democratic gains and very significant Republican losses.

**Figure 7**  
Political Party Identification among Generation X, 1990 & 2008



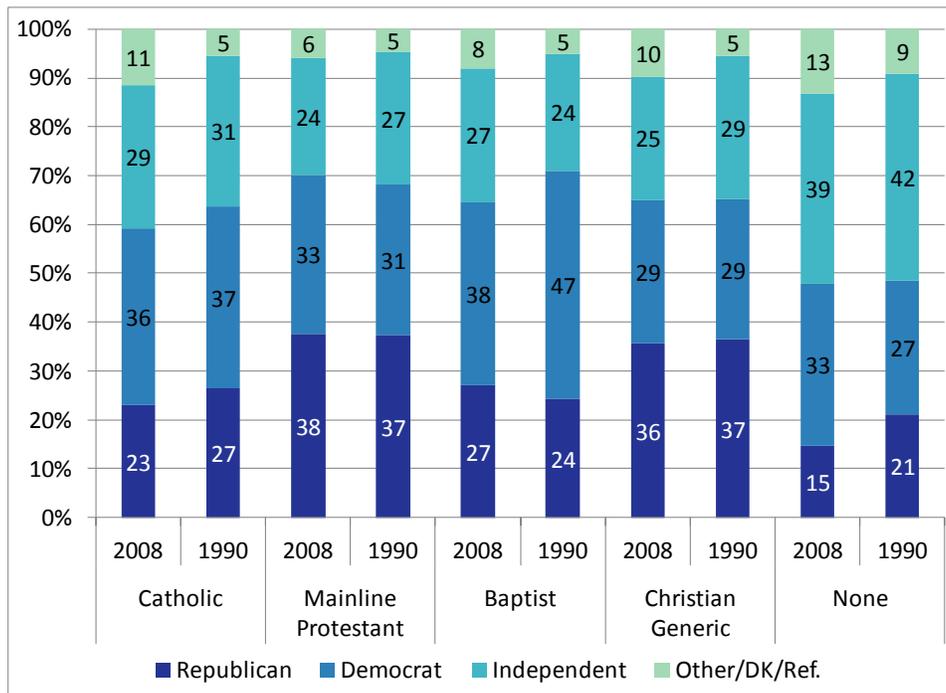
How this shift occurred is an even more interesting story. One religious group (Catholics) suffered major population losses while two groups accrued gains (Generic Christians/Evangelicals and Nones). As Figure 7 shows, the dynamics of these shifts sent shockwaves through the partisan alignments of Generation X. The Republican advantage among Catholics became a Democratic advantage as the Catholic Church lost white identifiers and gained Latino identifiers. Where those Catholics went religiously could well have depended on their politics since Evangelicals and Nones, the two groups that gained from Catholic losses, typically have different partisan alignments.

Shifts in political partisanship within the other four religious traditions were more muted. Baptists showed the opposite trend to Catholics, becoming less Democratic and slightly more Republican. Generic Christians shifted slightly towards the Democratic Party, but among white Evangelicals partisanship remained constant, meaning that Democratic gains were the product of increased

Democratic identification among Black and Latino Evangelicals.

Political partisan change was most pronounced among Generation X Nones. In 1990, Generation X Nones were divided evenly between Democrats and Republicans. In 2008, Democrats outnumbered Republicans among the growing Nones population by more than a two-to-one margin (33% v. 15%). Nevertheless, the Nones remained the only religious tradition with a plurality of Independents.

**Figure 8**  
**Political Party Identification by Selected Religious Tradition**  
**among Generation X, 1990 & 2008**

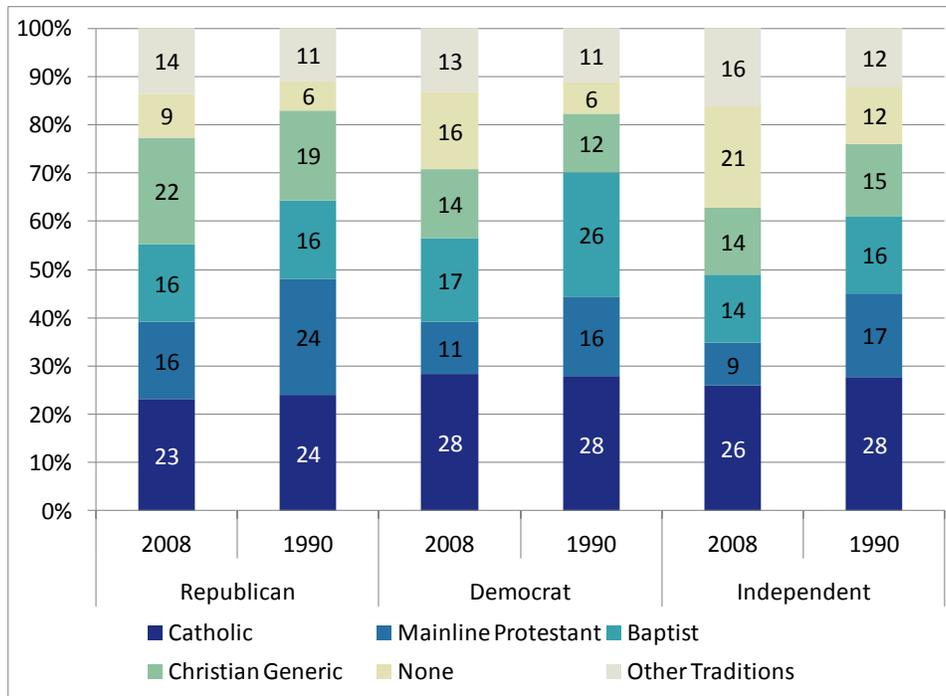


A more detailed analysis of the religious composition shifts (Figure 4) sheds additional light on the political shift shown in Figure 8. It is often assumed that the Mainline Protestant denominations' losses and Nones' gains led to a drop in Republicans among Generation X. However, the Mainline's actual population remained constant while they moved slightly toward the Democratic Party.

The overall balance of support within the political parties shown in Figure 8 is the result of both the population changes and shifts in the political alignment of the religious traditions. The main change in the Republican Party was the reduced presence of Mainline Protestants in 2008. This was offset by a greater proportion of Generic Christians (Evangelicals). The growing white Evangelical population (Baptists, Generic Christians, Pentecostals and Protestant Sects) gained an even larger share of the GOP's coalition. In 2008 the Evangelicals comprised over 40% of the Generation X's self-identified Republicans. The proportion of Republican Nones grew even though they trended

Figure 9

Religious Composition of Political Party Coalitions among Generation X, 1990 & 2008



away from support of the Republicans. This was because the Republican Party decreased in size (by 8%) among Generation X while the actual number of Nones grew dramatically by over 2 million.

The Democratic Party composition changed as well. The proportion of Democratic Nones more than doubled while the proportion of Baptists and Mainline Protestants among Democrats were reduced significantly. Similarly to the Republicans, the Catholic share of the Democratic Party hardly changed. The number of Independents increased and their profile changed.

## Conclusion: The Polarization of Generation X?

Several scholars and journalists have noted the temporal link between the rise of the Nones and the increasing influence of the Religious Right in American politics. The changing profile of a generation of young Americans surveyed before and after the rise of the Christian Right to national political prominence suggests that the changes in loyalties regarding politics and religion may be connected among the generation that came of age in the 1990s. Somewhat surprisingly, looking at the generation as a whole, religious polarization seems to be more prominent than political polarization. There is evidence of movement out of Catholicism into No religion and to a lesser extent into Evangelicalism. However, though there has been considerable defection from the Republican Party since 1990, it did not directly translate into support of the Democratic Party, even at its high-point in 2008.

Identification with religion declined among Generation X as they aged, particularly among men, which suggests that the secularization of Americans is not just about young people from the Millennial Generation abandoning religion because it has become too politicized. It is an on-going and wider process that involves other generations in American society, particularly Generation X. Though higher education is usually associated in the conventional wisdom with higher levels of secularity, the subset of college graduates among Generation X is no more secular than is the generation as a whole.

The findings of this report are also important for predicting future trends in American society as a whole. Generation X is the current parenting generation and according to many social commentators they should have become more religious as they began to marry, have children and settle down in their communities. They might also have been expected to become more conservative politically as they took on more responsibilities, became property owners and advanced in their careers. However, this prediction was not fulfilled among the majority. Religiously and politically, Generation X came to resemble the younger Millennial generation more than their own parents in the Boomer and earlier generations. These inter-generational and intra-generational trends have implications for the future since much of Generation X is raising its own children in less religious home environments than they experienced themselves when they were growing up.

Finally, we discovered a link between secularization and political shifts as a result of the increasing politicization of religion which is now directly tied to party politics. Most obvious are the parallel declines in religious identification and Republican Party identification among the growing demographic of Generation X Nones. The politicization of religion and the increased use of religious rhetoric by Republican politicians since 1990 are likely driving the rising numbers of secular people away from the Republican Party.

## Appendix A.

### The Taxonomy of the Religious Traditions

The long list of religious classifications supplied by ARIS respondents' calls for a shorter, more manageable list for most analytical purposes. Therefore, for Table 3 the ARIS respondents have been collated into the following 13 religious groupings of varying sizes:

1. **Catholic:** *Roman, Greek and Eastern Rites.*
2. **Mainline Christian:** *Methodist, United Methodist, African Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian/ Anglican, United Church of Christ/ Congregational, Reformed/ Dutch Reform, Disciples of Christ, Moravian, Quaker, Orthodox (Greek, Russian, Eastern, Christian)*
3. **Baptist:** *including Southern Baptist, American Baptist, Free-Will, Missionary, and African-American denominations.*
4. **Christian Generic:** *Christian, Protestant, Evangelical/ Born Again Christian, Born Again, Fundamentalist, Independent Christian, Missionary Alliance Church, Non-Denominational Christian.*
5. **Pentecostal/Charismatic:** *Pentecostal, Assemblies of God, Full Gospel, Four Square Gospel, Church of God, Holiness, Nazarene, Salvation Army.*
6. **Protestant Denomination:** *Churches of Christ, Seventh Day Adventist, Mennonite, Brethren, Apostle, Covenant, Christian Reform, Jehovah's Witness, Christian Science, Messianic Jews.*
7. **Mormon/ Latter Day Saints**
8. **Other Religions:** *Jewish/ Judaism, Eastern Religions (Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, Baha'i, Shintoist, Zoroastrian, Sikh), Muslim/ Islam, New Religious Movements and Other Religions (Scientology, New Age, Eckankar, Spiritualist, Unitarian-Universalist, Deist, Wiccan, Pagan, Druid, Indian Religion, Santeria, Rastafarian).*
9. **Nones:** *None, No religion, Humanistic, Ethical Culture, Agnostic, Atheist, Secular.*
10. **Refused:** *Don't Know.*

## The Authors

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