

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# The Political Divide Between Lay and Elite Atheism

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A long-standing debate in atheist and secular humanist circles has been whether organized secularists should embrace a broader political agenda or steer clear of such commitments. The latter camp argues that atheism does not include a set of socio-political markers that sets it off from other movements; it is mainly a science- and reason-based philosophy challenging belief in the supernatural that can be adapted to a wide range of political orientations. We find this view increasingly reflected among both atheist and secular humanist leaders and publications, especially in the “new atheist” movement, which has drawn high proportions of atheists interested in science. In this paper, we will examine the political discourse and views of atheist leaders and opinion-makers and those of members of atheist-secular humanist organizations during and after the 2016 elections. We conduct a textual analysis of secularist publications and web sites as well as use a survey we conducted among 3,000 members of a prominent atheist organization to understand the political divide in American secularism and the prospects for greater unity in this diffuse movement.

A long-standing debate in atheist and secular humanist circles in the U.S. has been whether organized secularists should embrace a broader political agenda or steer clear of such commitments. This debate was brought front-and-center during the political ferment of the 2016 Democratic primary campaigns, where we saw the emergence of an outspoken secular political candidate in the person of Bernie Sanders. Yet atheist leaders and publications showed minimal, if any, interest in the campaign. Such leaders assumed that atheism does not include a set of socio-political markers that sets it off from other movements; it is mainly a science- and reason-based philosophy challenging belief in the supernatural that can be adapted to a wide range of political orientations. We find this view increasingly reflected among both atheist and secular humanist leaders and publications, especially in the new atheist movement, which drew a high proportion of atheists interested in science (Cragun 2014). This view also squares with the finding that as a secular population grows, it increasingly reflects the demographics of the broader population (Voas 2015). Evidence of this may be seen in the recent finding that the “nones,” or those who do not identify with any religion, do not necessarily represent a political bloc (Kurtzleben 2015).

In regard to social movements, it may be difficult to divorce atheism from social and political worldviews, or to argue that atheism is merely a lack of belief and does not carry values and beliefs of its own. Recent studies suggest class/economic-based atheist critiques, which identify

religion as a key factor in perpetuating a false consciousness that impedes social justice, are not getting attention in contemporary atheist discourse (Cimino, Smith, 2016). LeDrew (2016), for example, finds a pattern of conservative discourse on a whole range of issues, such as crime, war and peace, terrorism and broad support of the free market, among intellectuals and opinion leaders such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Steven Pinker, and Michael Shermer.

As organized secularism becomes a viable—if not always realized—alternative for the growing population of non-religious Americans, our study is one of the first to raise the important question of how this diffuse movement can maintain its identity in a sharply politically polarized society. While considerable attention has been paid to internal dynamics and issues dividing secularists, there has been a paucity of research on the role of external politics in the cohesion of this movement. In this article, we categorize secularist opinion leaders and authors as “elites,” although we acknowledge that in a generally intellectual and decentralized movement that places high value on individualism and free thought as atheism, the line between elite and “lay” activity and discourse can be blurry. There is also the fact that the core systematic ideological features of the secularist movement developed by these highly educated group members, or new atheists, in intellectual dialogue with prior ideas and cultural values, was arguably successful and internalized enough to be taken for granted by “lay” members. Nonetheless, one feature of elite atheist discourse is its reliance on science, which has high valuation in the secularist community and within society in general. There is also prestige associated with being a public intellectual in the case of Dawkins, Harris, and others, as well as celebrity status in the case of Bill Maher, that allows them more weight in terms of

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disseminating ideas. And as “the public thinkers” of the group, laypeople are more receptive to their ideas, and often develop their own ideas and knowledge by way of response, irrespective of whether they actually view them as any sort of “leaders.” It is for these reasons that we view the new atheism as largely an elitist enterprise and refer to these intellectuals as “leaders.”

We distinguish between secular humanists and atheists on the basis of the former’s emphasis on a positive set of ethics (such as democracy), as compared to atheists who emphasize debunking the belief in God and organized religion as a whole. It is obvious that strategically, secular humanists and atheists join each other’s organizations and make common cause on such a key issue as calling for the strict separation of church and state. When we refer to both atheists and secular humanists, or talk of collective action across any ideological differences, we use the term “secularists” or “secularism.”

Significant work has been done on the emerging internal politics of secularist organizations. Meagher (2018) argues that secularists have long lacked the resources to effectively pursue their goals, but in recent decades they have adopted “repertoires of contention” from other political movements, such as lobbying efforts, often with the help of new technology. Yet Meagher concludes that the internal differences among secularist movements “will challenge their ability to press their political claims” (Meagher 2018: 122). Cimino and Smith (2014) examined the role of media in allowing secularists to connect and mobilize in cyberspace. A confluence of media infrastructure and atheist discourses disseminated and popularized by the vital forces of the marketplace and associational activities organize secularists into networks that extend beyond their immediate territorial and social affiliations. Though the authors explored how such discourses provided political vitality and an imagined unity, in Benedict Anderson’s (1983) sense of the term, the authors did not explicitly explore the role this discourse dissemination had on formal and institutional politics. In their recent study, Fazzini and Cragun (2017) challenge the portrayal of organized secularism as a competitive and conflict-ridden world where cooperation between the different groups has been difficult. Instead, they argue that in recent years a new generation of secularist leaders have learned to cooperate and that the diversity in the movement shows its vitality rather than its disorganization and schismatic nature. But again, like Cimino and Smith (2014) before them, they do not extend this research on internal politics within the movement to institutional party politics outside it.

Just as political and social cleavages take place between and within specific religions in the U.S., we find that these conflicts can unfold among members and leaders of the same secularist organizations. However, irrespective of the ideological differences between groups, leaders, and laypeople that we highlight, our research also finds that pragmatically and politically there is a statistically left-leaning consensus forming—a consensus that is emerging as a self-conscious entity or social movement.

This article seeks to explore the politics of the secularist movement internally at the ideological, and cultural levels, but also as it applies to national party politics. Referring to politics in the formal sense of relating to social change and government policy directed at both church and state issues and wider concerns (such as social justice) implies an understanding of atheism as a social movement. Previous research considering atheism as a social movement has conceptualized it as linked loosely ideologically but decentralized organizationally (Cimino and Smith 2014; Kettell 2013). In other instances, the research has focused more heavily on the ideas of prominent figures and how those figures’ ideas helped constitute and congeal the movement in complex ways (LeDrew 2016). In not linking such ideals to politics proper, however, such research implicitly perpetuates the view of social movements as a “potential rival to the political representation system” (Jenkins and Klandermans 1995: 5); “necessarily extra-institutional” (Katzenstein 1998: 195); and as “outsiders” who succeed to the extent their challenges lead to being recognized institutionally without being co-opted (Gamson 1990; Tilly 1978).

Such a view of secularists as outsiders has been reinforced by the fact that American secularism has taken on a “rejection identity” by the atheists themselves (Smith 2011). This was furthered by the fact that much of the surge in research was conducted on the heels of the new atheism, which was portrayed in the media as a challenge to not only religious values but civility itself. To be sure, voting, lobbying efforts, and decisions of the Supreme Court are distinctly different than advocacy and awareness protest efforts off and online. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this article, in addition to looking at differences in strategies between the opinion leaders and followers of the movement, we wanted to look at differences in normal institutionalized politics occurring through party-identification and voting, attempting to tease out the ways that the secularist social movement may end up participating in and contributing to party politics in varied forms (e.g., voting, advocacy, etc.) in the years to come. This latter goal is admittedly in its infancy in this article. Nonetheless, we feel it is important to set the groundwork for future research in this regard, especially because the secularist movement has become part of the contemporary landscape that contributes to political parties and even gave rise to one, at least in name, in the form of the National Atheist Party, that “seeks to politically represent U.S. atheists and all who share the goal of a secular government by gathering the political strength of secularists nationwide while being guided by the values of secular humanism and evidenced-based reasoning” (National Atheist Party Website 2020).

In doing this, we refer to politics in the formal sense of the term relating to social change and government policy directed at both church-state issues and wider concerns. And in looking at formal, institutional politics in America, we accept the more traditional understanding of the Democratic Party as the more left-oriented and progressive party in comparison to the Republican Party.

## Methods

To understand the political differences among organized secularists (those who are involved in atheist and secular humanist organizations), we use both rich data from nationwide surveys with over 2,400 movement participants and textual analysis of one of their pioneering publications. We conducted two surveys of participants in atheist and secular humanist organizations as well as textual analysis of secularist publications and websites, particularly the secular humanist magazine *Free Inquiry* from 2010 to 2016 (32 issues), which included a total of 41 articles. Our first survey was a questionnaire sent to 100 participants in secular humanist groups conducted in May 2015. The respondents were drawn from a plurality of secular humanist and atheist organizations, such as local branches of the Center for Inquiry, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association. We sent the questionnaire to the leaders of 15 secularist organizations in every region of the U.S. (The West, Southwest, South, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and New England) who then distributed it to their members and participants. Although the questionnaire was not meant to be representative of secularists in the U.S., we believe the responses illuminate the range of economic views and statuses of secularists.

The second survey was conducted among members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) in 2016 with a sample size of 2,313. FFRF is one of the oldest and largest atheist groups that wields significant influence on secularist activism on strict church-state separation. The leadership of the organization agreed to publicize the survey to its membership base to support the data collection. To parse the differences between organized secularists, we focused on support for Democratic frontrunners Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. Because of the unprecedented standoff between two controversial candidates in the presidential race, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, we believe that a more accurate study of political preferences was to look at political preferences during the 2016 primary race.

We used a mix of closed and open-ended questions because of the complexity of some topics (e.g., changes in political affiliation, self-identification terminology). Afterwards, two independent researchers coded participants' responses to prepare for a quantitative data analysis. We were able to use the detailed descriptions and comments of the survey participants for an additional qualitative analysis. This allowed us to cite the respondents' reasons and motivations for their political sentiments as well as how they self-identify politically and personally (e.g. atheist, secular-humanist, Marxist, etc.). While this survey is not statistically representative of the membership, it does include one-quarter of the foundation's members and probes the political beliefs and attitudes of participants in this highly influential secularist organization. Judging from the organization's website and related publications critical of religious beliefs (and the expression of religion in public), the Freedom From Religion Foundation members would appear to be largely atheistic as opposed to humanistic in nature. However, we found over 200 of their members self-identifying as

secular humanist. On the other hand, while *Free Inquiry* magazine clearly embraces the secular humanist agenda, new atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens wrote for the publication before they became celebrated leaders of the movement.

We used a mixed-method approach for data analysis including textual analysis of *Free Inquiry* and statistical methods for the quantitative survey data. For the empirical analysis of the quantitative segment of our research we rely on a logistic regression model to be able to control for different covariates to reduce alternative explanations.

## Findings

While there are other secularist publications that we could have chosen for our analysis, such as the *American Atheist* magazine, *Free Inquiry* magazine (from 2010 to 2016) clearly reflects the changes and history of secular humanism and how this movement differentiated itself from earlier forms of humanism that tended to embrace socialist economics and politics. Early on, the magazine sought to open its pages to those dissenting from the alliance between socialism and humanism, such as philosopher Sidney Hook, the mentor of founding editor Paul Kurtz. In 1989, an issue was devoted to the clash over libertarianism and socialism among secular humanists. (*Free Inquiry* 1989). The "open forum" approach on economic and political issues largely continues in the publication. Of the 41 articles we analyzed, 20 were categorized as "conservative," libertarian, or critical of liberal or progressive economics and politics, 13 as liberal and critical of capitalism and conservative politics, and 8 as neutral, with no discernable political orientation. Two regular columnists, the late Tibor Machan and Ronald Bailey, are among the prominent libertarian scholars and writers, while Robert Price reflects a distinct politically conservative position. Other columnists, such as Greta Christina and Shadia Drury, come from the political and activist left. The magazine has revisited the libertarian-liberal (or socialist) debate several times, although it has reached little consensus on economic issues. Current editor Tom Flynn published articles in a special section entitled "The Left is Not Always Right," where he acknowledges that while "unbelievers often lean left, secular humanism clearly has no necessary link between it and any particular social, economic, or political policy prescription" (Flynn 2013, 6). Worth noting is how Flynn traces the roots of postmodern philosophy, a school of thought strongly disavowed by secular humanists and other atheists for its "anti-reason" stance, to the political left. Drawing on the writings of Sidney Hook, he argues that Marxist-Leninism sought to limit science from its universal and objective standing to a form of knowledge subordinate to the ideologies characteristic of each nation and class (Flynn 2013, 6). Marxist ideas inspired noted postmodern philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, and paved the way for postmodernism's "cluster of ideologies that repudiated the Enlightenment, rejected the possibility of universal knowledge not colored by ideological or class biases, advanced an idiosyncratic understanding of power relations among social groups, promoted a divisive model of identity politics,

and lionized an approach to multiculturalism that would disempower any one group to form legitimate judgments about another's traditions" (Flynn 2013, 7).

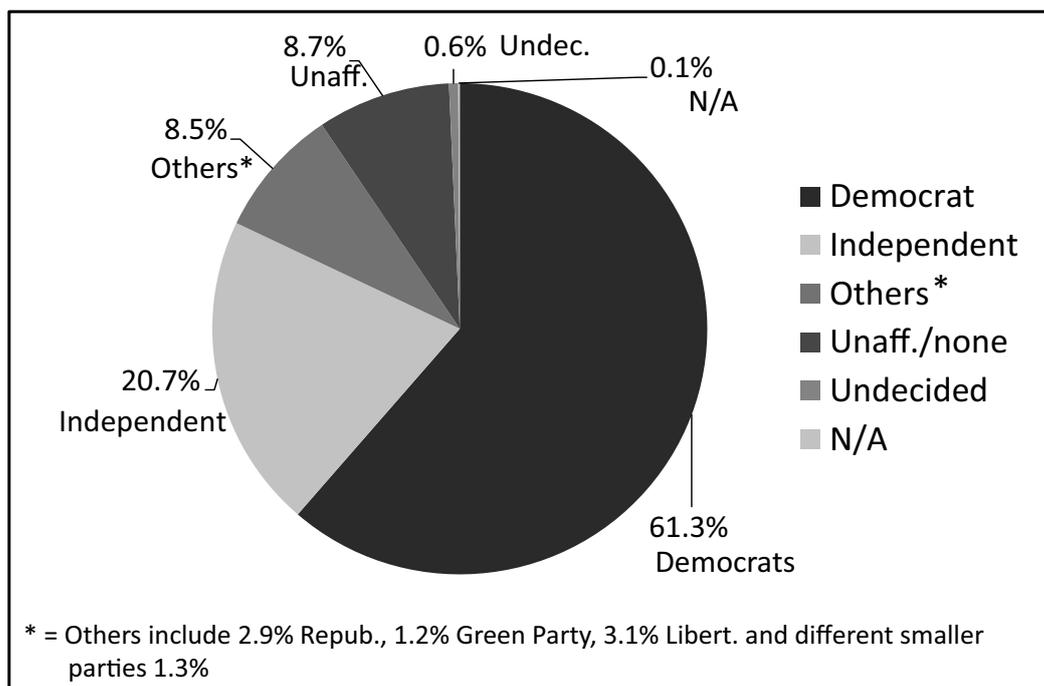
We found no articles in *Free Inquiry* that employed the Marxist critique of religion that links religion, like all ideology, to maintaining an oppressive society and economic system and only a few that cast a critical eye on capitalism. On the political level, during the 2016 election season, only one article favorably focused on Bernie Sanders, even though Sanders was the most secular candidate and highly favored by secularists (Drury 2016), a point our survey confirms.

We did find new atheist polemicist P.Z. Myers calling for a "third wave" of atheism that would uphold progressive politics and social justice (Myers 2012). Myers's joining of social justice concerns with atheism is part of a larger debate in secularist circles about the role of feminism and progressive politics within the movement. This is clearly on display in *Free Inquiry*, with special issues devoted to women and atheism. But most of the articles on feminism we analyzed tended to focus on fighting sexism and pressing for greater inclusion and leadership within secularist organizations. The reform movement Atheism + also includes "social justice" in its platform, including sexism, racism, political and criminal reform, and classism or the promotion of greater economic equality, even if in vague terms (Christina 2014). But these movements have faced opposition, at least rhetorically, within the broader secularist movement.

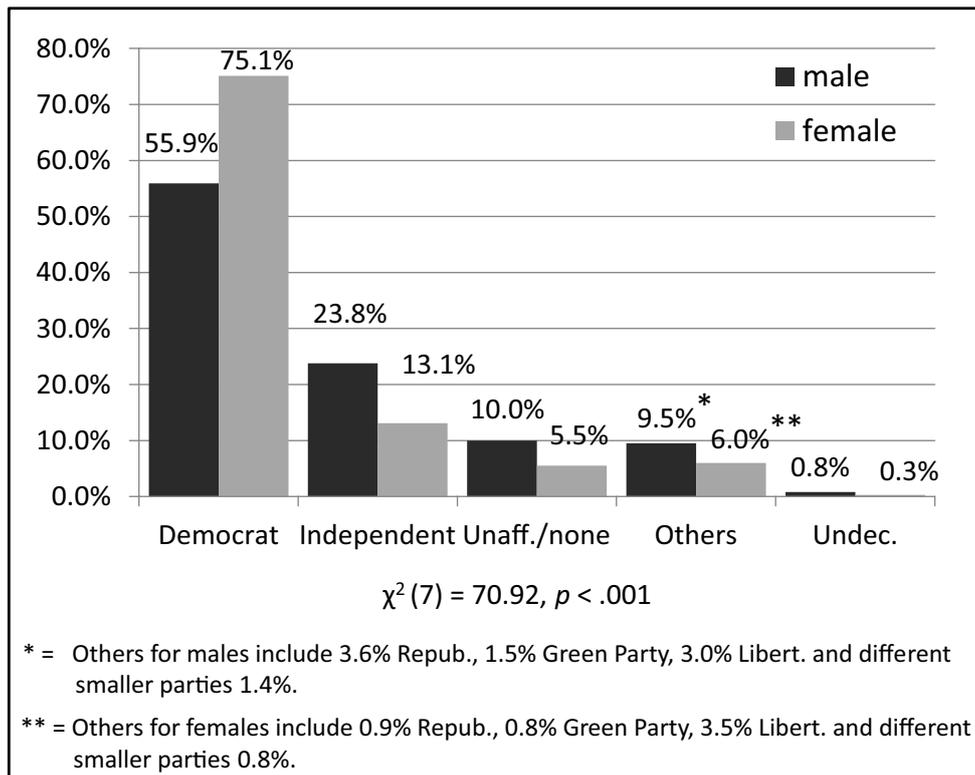
**Secularist Diversity and its Limits**

Our online surveys including 2,400 participants (28.7 percent females,  $M_{Age} = 61.58$ ,  $SD = 14.01$ ,  $Min = 15$ ,  $Max = 95$ ) in secular humanist groups as well as the more strictly atheist FFRF, finds a more consistently liberal or left-of-

center stance among atheists. The statistical analysis shows that the political affiliation of these members is largely democratic with 61.3 percent, followed by 20.7 percent independent, 8.5 percent others and 8.7 percent unaffiliated (see **Figure 1**). A multinomial logistic regression model with participants gender and control variables (age and region) as independent variables, and political affiliation as a dependent variable, shows that the stated affiliation is significantly different across males (e.g.,  $Democrats_{male} = 55.9$  percent followed by independents  $_{male} = 23.8$  percent) and females (e.g.,  $Democrats_{female} = 75.1$  percent followed by independents  $_{female} = 13.1$  percent) ( $\chi^2(7) = 70.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ), see **Figure 2**. Another multinomial logistic regression with age and the control variables (gender and region) as an independent variable and political affiliation as the dependent variable indicates significantly higher rates of political unaffiliation for young people ( $unaffiliated_{Age\ under\ 30} = 14.3$  percent) compared to older participants (vs.  $unaffiliated_{Age\ 71-80} = 6.1$  percent,  $unaffiliated_{Age\ over\ 80} = 4.8$  percent, ( $\chi^2(42) = 80.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ), yet still Democratic affiliation is in the lead. Furthermore, participants stated that they mainly supported Bernie Sanders in the primary campaign (47.7 percent) followed by Hillary Clinton (35.3 percent). Using another multinomial logistic regression model with gender and controls (age and region) as an independent variable and the support for a specific candidate as the dependent variable shows significant divergence between secularist men and women ( $\chi^2(5) = 49.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In particular, we further used a logistic regression model to focus on gender differences in the support of Hilary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. The analysis shows differences between males and females on the support for Hilary Clinton ( $Clinton_{male} = 34.2$  percent vs.  $Clinton_{female} = 44.5$  percent,  $B = .47$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $z(2313) = 21.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ), how-



**Figure 1:** What is your current political affiliation?



**Figure 2:** What is your current political affiliation? (Gender differences).

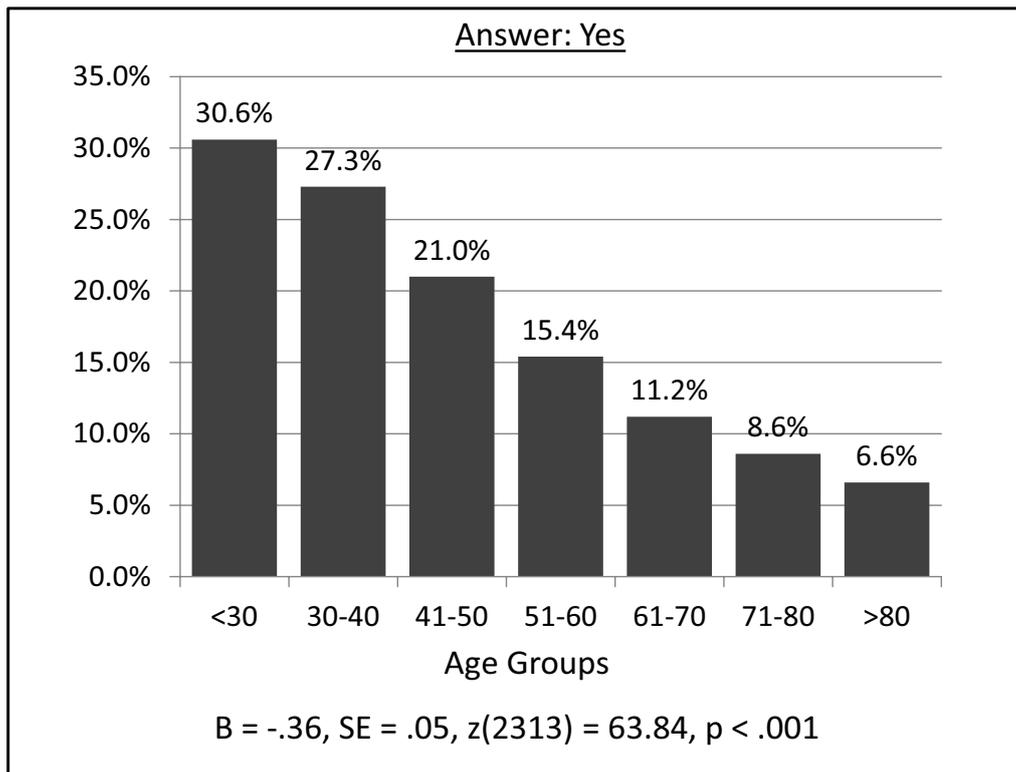
ever, we found no gender differences in the support of Bernie Sanders (Sanders<sub>male</sub> = 50.9 percent vs. Sanders<sub>female</sub> = 49.8 percent,  $B = -.07, SE = .10, z(2313) = .46, n.s.$ ). The multinomial logistic regression with age and control variables (gender and region) as independent variables and support of a specific candidate as dependent variable shows significant differences as well ( $\chi^2(30) = 82.51, p < .001$ ). Again using logistic regressions for a more specific contrast, the results reveal significantly higher preference for Bernie Sanders among young people (Sanders<sub>under 30</sub> = 75.0 percent) while older people show lower preferences for Sanders (Sanders<sub>Age71-80</sub> = 42.4 percent or Sanders<sub>Age over 80</sub> = 33.3 percent) ( $B = -.19, SE = .03, z(2313) = 35.23, p < .001$ ). In addition, the analysis shows significant differences in the support of Hilary Clinton between age groups with only 12.5 percent of supporters in the group of young participants (<30 years) but 47.7 percent supporters in the age group between 71 and 80 years and even 50.9 percent in the age group over 80 years ( $B = .25, SE = .04, z(2313) = 50.17, p < .001$ ).

It should be noted that we had a minority of respondents (39 in total, or 1.7 percent) identifying as Republican as well as supporting and voting for Trump. These same respondents reiterated many of the arguments of the elite secularists when it comes to political correctness regarding religion, especially around the defense of Islam, as well as seeing identity politics as manifested in feminism and campaigns like Black Lives Matter as a product of the “regressive left” in America. Such hard distinctions ideologically give credence to the notion that the new atheists, in spite of none of them identifying as right-wing, contribute to the “clash of civilizations” narrative (Huntington 1996) that LeDrew (2016, 2017) has captured in his work

and we capture in ours as well. This is particularly observable with respect to discussions of Islam and Muslims as well as identity politics more broadly.

We also were interested in the effect of participation in secularist activities and organizations. We found that 56.9 percent of the participants reported discussing politics in their meetings and secularist media and publications compared to 10.6 percent stating that politics were not discussed. The data also shows that only a minority report that their secular organizational involvement is affecting their level of political involvement (agree: 31.0% vs. disagree: 64.8 percent). However, the agreement rate is significantly higher for younger participants (agree<sub>under 30</sub> = 49.0 percent) compared to older ones (agree<sub>Age71-80</sub> = 24.3 percent or agree<sub>Age over 80</sub> = 17.5 percent) even when controlling for the covariates of gender, region and political affiliation in a logistic regression ( $B = -.29, SE = .04, z(2313) = 66.81, p < .001$ ). We found no differences for a change in political involvement between gender in the logistic regression analysis (agree<sub>male</sub> = 31.8 percent vs. agree<sub>female</sub> = 32.9 percent) ( $B = .01, SE = .11, z(2313) = .01, n.s.$ ).

Overall, the majority of participants reported that their political affiliation did not change after becoming involved in secularist groups (No Change = 80.1 percent vs. Change = 13.8 percent). However, a logistic regression shows that the under 30 years old respondents (in comparison to older ones) reported more change in political affiliation since becoming an atheist (change<sub>Age under 30</sub> = 30.6 percent vs. change<sub>Age 71-80</sub> = 8.6 percent, change<sub>Age over 80</sub> = 6.6 percent) ( $B = -.36, SE = .05, z(2313) = 63.84, p < .001$ ) (see **Figure 3**). Additionally, we found gender differences in the change of political affiliation with more males stating a change (change<sub>male</sub> = 15.0 percent) compared to



**Figure 3:** Since becoming involved in secular humanist/atheist groups, has your political affiliation changed? (Age differences).

females (vs. change<sub>female</sub> = 11.4 percent) ( $B = -.43, SE = .15, z(2313) = 7.75, p < .01$ ).

Our findings on political-economic identification of secularists are close to a reader poll conducted by *Free Inquiry* in 2010. It found that socialists, liberals, “progressives,” and moderates (only 10 percent) made up 85 percent of the readership, with conservatives and libertarians representing 10 percent (*Free Inquiry* 2010). Overall, however, the majority of our sample from the first survey—86 percent—fell firmly on the side of government intervention in the economy as well as allowing some capacity for the redistribution of resources, at least in terms of necessities such as healthcare, housing and regulating corporations, all hallmarks of the type of social democratic Scandinavian countries that American progressives, atheists included, have long valorized but have yet to see develop in the U.S. (Zuckerman 2008). As one Michigan respondent stated: “I would consider myself center-left. Government is not the solution, but it has to be part of the solution as corporations cannot be allowed to do as they want. The free market has shown itself to self-corrupt and needs regulation.” In the first questionnaire, we found significantly more agreement with the Marxist critique of religion than is expressed in the pages of *Free Inquiry*, with slightly over fifty percent of those surveyed seeing religion as something that will never end until the social, material need for it is eradicated.

When moving from merely surveying political positions to asking about the influence of their personal unbelief on such political positions in our larger survey, which allowed respondents to write in responses, the views were more diverse. There were those, for example, for whom

becoming an atheist was an important component of their becoming more liberal politically. As one 43-year-old man from Michigan said: “Since joining American Atheists I have become more liberal. However, my move to the left started when I first decided that I was an atheist and no longer a Catholic.” Another 38-year-old female from Virginia mentioned how they “used to affiliate with the Republican Party ... [but that] the Democratic Party tends to support issues that have become very important to [them], especially separation of church and state.” With one 24-year-old male from New York going so far as to assert that “Atheism is a gateway drug to anarchism. No gods; no masters.”

On the other hand, there were those, such as Jill from Florida, for whom the causal arrow was reversed, with her politics informing her atheism. As she said,

“I think that it’s the other way around—my involvement in politics and learning about Republican and Christian-right policies, caused me to become involved in secular groups. But then reading secular magazines [of] the Freedom From Religion Foundation and Americans United for Separation of Church and State made me more aware of how important involvement in politics is.”

In a similar vein, some respondents were forthright in stating the connection between their secularism and their economic and political views. Robert from Illinois, for example, stated, “My belief in government policies that are rational, secular, and scientifically informed leads me to support a separation of church and state. My belief in

the value of scientific discovery leads me to support environmental protection and research funding, and my sense of non-judgmental secular morality leads me to support social programs and oppose wars.” But others were more uncertain about making clear connections between their secularist positions and social issues. Bill from Alaska stated simply, “Atheism does result in habitual rational thought, but I don’t think it’s specific to any one [political] point of view.” The most antagonistic response we received came from Charles, the contact person for a small rural group that did not wish to participate in our research, writing, “If you really WANT my opinion here it is: Surveys such as these are useless. Atheism is simply lack of belief in God or gods. In my community ... we have libertarians, conservatives, and liberals. In short, you’re trying to manufacture controversy where there doesn’t need to be any.”

As the case with Charles above, we have heard the refrain that “atheism simply means this and nothing more” since the inception of our research over a decade ago, but it should be noted that the same view is rarely, if ever, extended to believers—that religion only means a belief in God or gods. Atheists and believers alike understand that belief in God or gods has the potential to influence behavior and carries the potential for consequences in the world. As a case in point, many of the new atheists placed the cause of 9/11 squarely at the feet of religious belief and cited the event as a turning point, or impetus, for their social activism. The new atheists, along with cultural personalities such as Bill Maher, have made a point of highlighting the importance of the war of ideas. It is obvious to atheists that religious beliefs in the form of religious movements have had and continue to have political ramifications. That atheism as a movement—constituted by individuals with values and beliefs about themselves, others, and society—could have the same impact seems beyond dispute. Just as religion has been employed across the political spectrum, atheism can be called upon to justify as well as oppose and challenge the status quo using scientific evidence to justify their politics in a way not unlike the way religionists use religious texts and theories to justify their politics (Reed 2011).

The issue of Islam is something that we did not ask about explicitly in our larger, more recent survey, but it was nevertheless commented on by several respondents. “I believe in a much more inclusive society, so I don’t agree with the new atheists on Islam being worse than any other religion,” asserted one respondent. In contrast, a 51-year-old white female from Virginia said: “I used to be more tolerant of Islam simply because the right seemed to be against them. Being involved in secularism has opened my eyes to the realities of life in the Muslim world, and now I fight against it. The ‘regressive left’ still supports Islam—I do not.” Overall, the responses were fairly evenly split when discussing Islam, with some arguing that American society needs to be more inclusive and fight against Islamophobia and others citing radical Islam as one of the biggest threats to American society. What was noteworthy was seeing how both sides of the issue were arguing for a more inclusive and unified society, with

those of the anti-Islamic persuasion also often mentioning identity politics as something that is working to divide Americans. Those who cited the “bigotry” of Islam as an important social issue also often mentioned the rights of the LGBTQ+ community as well as the inequality along class, gender, and racial lines in the U.S. as something important to fight against. As one example, when JoAnn was asked about political involvement, she said: “I participated in city council meetings when a nondiscrimination ordinance was being considered. I attend special events put on by the local Democratic office, the local PRIDE committee, Black Lives Matter and Drinking Liberally.... I do not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance as I feel it should be returned to its original writing.”

Where JoAnn sees acts of civil disobedience, e.g. not standing for Pledge, and identity politics as a path for unity in the form of equality, other respondents see such activism and politics as divisive. Consider this response from William. “There’s Black Lives Matter, etc. There’s no Vegan Lives Matter movement. There’s no Atheist Lives Matter movement. Media’s sole interest is in promoting the idea that because I am an educated white male, the ills of the world are my fault. I’m judged not on my behavior but by my gender, etc.” A few respondents went so far as to refer to the Black Lives Matter movement as a form of domestic terrorism and pointed towards the inconsistency of those on the left, which the media is assumed to be, who will bash Christianity in one breath and defend Islam in the next. “The media ignores the growing threat of domestic terror groups like Black Lives Matter and downplays the threat Islam is to secular values,” asserted a younger female named Caitlin. Or, to quote Kenneth, a middle-aged man from the Midwest: “Often liberally leaning [media] sources pander and apologize for Islamic ideology while holding nothing back when criticizing Christianity. I feel that needs to change.” Although many respondents praised the importance of social media for outreach, we found a segment of them complaining about bigotry and others criticizing tribalism on the left. Consider this response from John: “I have noticed on websites (particularly Facebook) that there are a number of atheists who hold particularly reactionary, particularly bigoted and misogynist views on Muslims and women, and who use derisive terminology to discuss the left (e.g. SJW, libtard, loony liberal).” A similar sentiment is expressed by Nora:

“Most of the secular humanist/atheist activity I have observed takes place on YouTube, where the quality of the discourse regarding politics is generally exceptionally low. Specifically, many high-profile YouTube atheists seem to have taken up right-wing or otherwise retrograde banners, most notably anti-feminism, but also anti-SJW. I realize that this is not necessarily a fair or indicative representation of atheists in general, but it is a portion of our public face, like it or not (and I don’t).”

Several respondents mentioned a growing tendency to use social media to deride, shout down, vilify, and even harass any atheist that “doesn’t march lockstep with certain

viewpoints (such as the Social Justice Warrior opinions).” In contrast, however, there were those few, such as Earl, an older gentleman residing in a rural area of the Midwest, who spoke about being closeted as a conservative atheist:

They are all very liberal/progressive, even socialist, and politically and socially I am conservative. I know I am an exception, and I do not “come out” to other humanists/atheists. They would rebuke me as strongly as religious fundamentalists rebuke humanists/atheists.

These controversial discourses around Islam and identity politics highlight the ways the discourse of atheist leader opinions is both incorporated and rejected by lay atheists, with a significant majority of our respondents speaking supportively of the sort of leftist multiculturalism and tolerance that secularist spokesmen such as Sam Harris, Bill Maher, and the late Christopher Hitchens have publicly criticized as being supportive of Islam and evidence of a “regressive left” informed more by the tribalism of identity politics than rational thought/reason.

### Discussion

Our research conforms with past research on American secularists that shows they are politically left-of-center. A statistically significant portion of our respondents reported moving further left away from the Republican Party insofar as it is perceived as more likely to use religiosity in an attempt to legitimize policy, asserting how they feel that the policies of the Democrats are more fact- and evidence-based than those of the GOP. The only responses that went against the grain of this left-leaning emphasis were those that complained about the divisiveness of identity politics, and how such politics care more about political correctness and collective tribalism than using reason and rational thought to inform political decisions. These responses suggest that identity politics has become a major source of division in organized secularism.

These statistical patterns also suggest that, to quote a respondent, “there is a strong correlation between atheism and liberal political views....” While our early research, specifically on the use of social media (Smith and Cimino 2012), showed a high prevalence of an independent political orientation informed by Enlightenment ideals and a strong reaction against any talk of being a collectivity that made easy political classification difficult, it is clear now that there is a positive relationship, or an elective affinity, between atheism and left-leaning politics in the U.S. (Pew 2015)—a unity that is based not only on things they agree upon but also that which they oppose, namely a critique of a close relationship between religion and the Republican establishment. In this, we can see how they mirror the general liberal, or “solid liberal,” population of the U.S. in many ways (Pew 2014; Pew 2017), being statistically highly educated, politically engaged, predominantly white, less likely to be religious than any other political type/group, and overwhelmingly disapproving of Trump. This affinity is present, though in a weaker relationship, among non-affiliated populations (Pew 2012) as well. A recent survey of members of the American Humanist Association

(Brockway 2017) found not only a prevalence of left-oriented sentiment but also that its members occupy the far left and activist wing of the Democratic Party. They express more liberal values and beliefs than the Democratic Party membership and the non-affiliated population. These members are more likely to get involved in activism that aims to steer the party further leftward towards the type of social-democratic parties one might find in Western European or Scandinavian countries and that a political candidate like Sanders would symbolize for an American audience. This is illustrated by the fact we had over 150 respondents refer to themselves outright as socialists, ten refer to themselves as democratic socialists, two refer to themselves as Marxists, and one respondent refer to themselves as “a European-style socialistic-capitalist [that would] nationalize our natural resources and banking (including credit cards).”

As Carmen, a female interviewee from the Northeast put it: “Liberal topics are embraced in these atheist communities (abortion, gay rights, science-based issues), but most atheist-affiliated 501c3’s are reluctant to be partisan. The liberal slant is unescapable though.” This “liberal slant,” conflating atheism with progressive politics, has only increased among atheists in recent years, especially as their influence has grown with the Internet and stronger institutional networks at the turn of the millennium (Cimino and Smith 2014; Cragun and Fazzini 2017; Meagher 2018). The self-confidence and social capital gained through online and offline activism solidified a previously weak social movement. The mimetic isomorphism existing between institutional actors may be evident in the way that lay atheist activists have borrowed the identity politics of progressive social movements (such as the gay rights and multicultural movements), as well as in the formation of a stronger feminist caucus, wherein one can find feminist atheists drawing on science-based arguments for atheism as well as feminist-left critiques of both established secularist institutions and wider society (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Christina 2016). In other words, the network ties and social movement involvement of secularists have moved them further to the left of center.

### Leaders, Followers, and Party Politics

On these related issues of Islam and identity politics, it is evident that our survey respondents line up to the left of the leadership and “knowledge class” of opinion-makers in organized secularism. Unlike many liberal religious denominations, where the clergy and officials often stand to the left of their members in the pews, in organized secularism we found the reverse pattern; the intellectual and organizational elite are more right-of-center than rank-and-file participants (Wuthnow 1988).

We argue that the reason for this distinction could be related to the higher-class status of secularist leaders and intellectuals than “laypeople.” Only one-quarter of respondents to our questionnaire identified as upper-class or upper-middle class. The recent Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study (2015), however, as well as past research (Pasquale 2010), found that self-identified atheists and agnostics tend to be relatively wealthy, with

about six-in-ten in each group making \$50,000 or more per year. By contrast, those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” and who say religion is unimportant to them closely mirror the general population as a whole. The logic of secularism through much of American history was to distance itself from capitalism and the business class, partly because of their religious associations—a pattern that is still evident among many secularists, if not their opinion leaders. Sociologists such as Daniel Bell and Peter Berger have argued that capitalism and business elites have embraced secular values and some aspects of progressive culture and distanced themselves from social conservatism. Citing the example of the strong corporate support for gay marriage, Berger (2015) writes that a “new configuration is coming into shape: *The cultural elite and the business elite are in process of merging... combining [the business elite’s] old Protestant work ethic with a very un-Protestant liberality in all matters south of the navel...*” Although it may no longer be advantageous to disassociate atheism and secular humanism from capitalism and the business class, it is not clear whether such a configuration can take root and find a place at the organizational level of secularism when so many of its participants are leaning left and the business class remains strongly loyal to the Republican party—if for economic more than cultural reasons.

In several ways, our research is similar to LeDrew’s identification of atheist ideological values that could be said to be (neo)conservative in orientation, contributing to a clash of civilizations narrative and critique of identity politics (2015:2). Simmons’ (2019) more recent research of Canadian atheists also shows a prominence of such conservative views. Yet, more recent treatments of the new atheism, which we consider as largely synonymous with the elite wing or knowledge class of the secularist movement, have suggested that its distance from the left has only grown in the Trump era. Hamberger writes that there may even be a division within atheist elites, with one side linking atheism to progressive politics, represented by media figures such as *The Young Turks’* Cenk Uygur and Kyle Kulinski, and the other side, including prominent New Atheist celebrities, “who felt that the emphasis on feminism, diversity and anti-imperialism distracted from the fight against religious extremism” (Hamberger 2019).

Our earlier research found a strong emphasis on new atheism, with almost every respondent in our earlier survey mentioning the so-called new atheist texts as an integral component of their atheism. In our more recent study, however, although lay “followers” still respect the new atheists for their accomplishments, we find that they take only what they need, being more than willing to disagree among themselves on particular points. And irrespective of whether they agree ideologically or not, pragmatically they have started to view themselves as a collective identity with legitimate political clout. Consider what Dominic stated when asked about the political legitimacy of atheism and whether or not he could envision an atheist presidential candidate:

“I think I have seen the [public’s] opinion of atheists improve in recent years (thanks, I suspect, to the

“New Atheists”). I think we could have a president who happens to be an atheist...[Bernie] Sanders was pretty much an atheist, even if he didn’t use the term, and I think enough people might have voted for him.”

Further research is required in order to understand what this may mean for organized secularism going forward. Social movements are dual-sided, having a universalist side interested in equal rights and inclusion within given institutions and an identity-based side interested in creating new values and modifying societal institutions and associational forms. Our study of the secularist movement shows that such influence has developed in both directions and on both sides. While there has been greater institutionalization, with atheists tempering more identity-based concerns in compromising to participate in party politics as atheists, (as one respondent said, “My politically liberal views are more important than my secular views in the current election.”), this has neither excluded or replaced more identity-oriented concerns, both in terms of individuals as well as secular organizations.

The Trump era of politics has strengthened the progressive-identity politics thrust of organized secularism. As one might expect, there has been little to no public defense of Trump and his administration in secularist media. At the same time, “The issue of political correctness has only become more pressing for many prominent New Atheists. Increasingly central to their arguments today is the idea that American liberalism has in fact become illiberal, obsessed with the primacy of group identities over the individual” (Hamberger 2019). New alliances, such as the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW), have formed as many of those associated with New Atheism have taken up the fight against political correctness. Thus, the old debate about postmodernism and identity politics and the role of rationality and science in atheism from the 1990s has been revived in recent years but this time it has become an in-house battle. The IDW includes both believers and atheists, and thus it is telling that such secularist opinion-makers as Harris and Pinker find more in common with their traditional enemies than with many of their fellow non-believers whom they now view as tribalists in revolt against true science and rationality. That some prominent atheists, such as Dawkins and Harris, have recently argued that at least the cultural forms of Christianity can have positive benefits for society may represent another emerging cleavage in secularist ranks (Van Maren 2019).

It may be the case that the turn to conservative populism may again even fortify the countercultural elements of atheism and secular humanism (as was the case during the height of the influence of the New Religious Right) and the drive for political influence may be put on hold. It could also be the case that coalition-building with religious liberals may find a new hearing among secularists trying to challenge the populist right on a host of non-church-state related issues. But the divide between lay and elite secularists will likely persist into the future because they highlight the contending strategies of pragmatic political versus academic intellectual mobilization that has marked this movement from its early years.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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