

# Running for Public Office:

## *A Humanist and Atheist Guide*

A PRIMER FOR NON-RELIGIOUS AND ALLIED CANDIDATES

PRIMA  
ELECTION  
TUESDAY, JUNE 6

**CENTER** *for*  
**FREETHOUGHT**  
**EQUALITY**



The Center for Freethought Equality is the advocacy and political arm of the American Humanist Association

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Humanists and Atheists in the Electoral Arena. . . . . 1

Who are the Candidates and Elected Officials that Identify with Our Community? . . . . . 1

Why Run as a Member of the Humanist and Atheist Community? . . . . . 1

Attacks Against Members of Our Community in the Political Arena. . . . . 2

The Role of Allies . . . . . 2

## Humanist and Atheists Running for Public Office. . . . . 3

Article VI Section 3. . . . . 3

Court Cases . . . . . 3

Breaking the Atheist Taboo . . . . . 3

## Issues Important to the Humanist and Atheist Community . . . . . 4

Protecting a Strict Separation of Church and State. . . . . 4

Addressing the Climate Crisis . . . . . 4

Advancing Human Rights and Civil Liberties . . . . . 4

Ensuring Health, Safety, and Dignity . . . . . 5

Promoting Religious Freedom Abroad. . . . . 5

## A Vision for the Future. . . . . 5

### About this Guide

*Running for Public Office: An Atheist and Humanist Guide* is a primer for non-religious and allied candidates to provide background on the humanist and atheist community, explore the challenges of humanist and atheist candidates in the political arena, and outline the issues important to our community. This report incorporates information current as of February 1, 2024.

This guide is authored by the Center for Freethought Equality, which is the political and advocacy arm of the American Humanist Association. The Center for Freethought Equality advocates for the interests of humanists and atheists and works to politically empower the humanist and atheist community. Affiliated with the Center for Freethought Equality is the Center for Freethought Equality PAC, which is a federal political action committee devoted to increasing the number of humanists and atheists, and religious allies, in public office.

MORE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND AT: [www.cfequality.org](http://www.cfequality.org)

**Thank you for reading this guide and for seeking public office.** Our democracy is only successful if all Americans participate in the electoral arena and are represented in our public institutions. Our hope is that this primer will encourage you to publicly identify or ally with the humanist and atheist community, make you aware of the issues you may confront, and provide you with resources to help you succeed.

There has been a powerful taboo in American politics with regard to atheists in the political arena. Fortunately, this taboo is dissipating. Prior to the 2016 general election, we knew of only five state legislators who identified with the humanist and atheist community—today we have over 70 state and federal legislators representing 29 states. Although this increase is impressive, we need an additional 1,500 state elected officials to reach parity with the percentage of our community in the general population. We have a lot of work to do and this work is incredibly important!

By increasing the political engagement of the humanist and atheist community, both as a voting bloc and as elected officials, we can counter the influence of the white Christian nationalists who are far too powerful and dangerous—as demonstrated in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol and the Dobbs decision that gutted abortion rights—in our current political culture. The rapidly growing humanist and atheist community is the constituency that can help stop their anti-democratic, bigoted, anti-science, racist, misogynistic, xenophobic, and homophobic crusade.

A politically empowered humanist and atheist community will make America safer, saner, stronger, and more secular.



# Humanists and Atheists in the Electoral Arena

## Who are the Candidates and Elected Officials that Identify with Our Community?

The candidates and elected officials who do not hold theistic or other supernatural beliefs and who seek to govern and advance public policy based on evidence, reason, and compassion use many identifiers: atheist, humanist, agnostic, skeptic, non-religious, freethinker, non-believer, religiously unaffiliated, and/or spiritual but not religious. Some use no religious identifier at all.

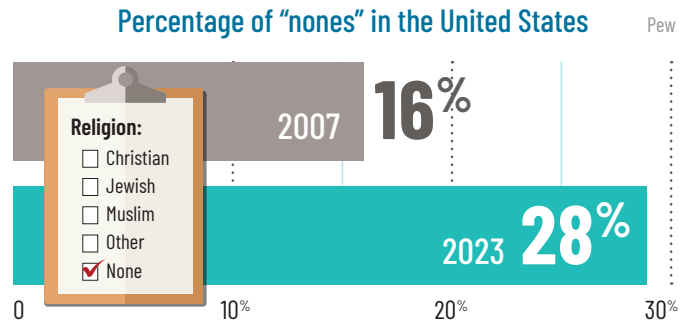
Please be comfortable with whatever identifier(s) you choose, and be prepared to answer questions. Whether you even get questions regarding your religious beliefs can depend on where you live. If you do get questions, we recommend answering in a way that emphasizes your values, not just your religious beliefs. Once you answer the religious question, move the conversation to issues that are important to your constituents and to your campaign. Practice your answer so that you have no delay in your response; a hesitation can indicate to your questioner or political opponent an area of weakness and an opportunity for attack.

## Why Run as a Member of the Humanist and Atheist Community?

Although our community is growing dramatically, we are severely underrepresented in the political arena. By having the courage to use one of our community's identifiers, you will help dispel the prejudice against humanists and atheists, encourage other members of our community to run for office, make our democracy stronger, and allow yourself to be authentic about your strongly held convictions.

The Pew Research Center uses the shorthand of "nones" for the religiously unaffiliated, which includes people who identify as either atheist or agnostic and those who respond "nothing in particular" when asked their religious affiliation. According to Pew research, "nones" have grown from 16% of the U.S. population in 2007 to 28% in 2023. This percentage of "nones" is even higher in Millennial and Generation Z populations so the religiously unaffiliated community will continue to grow. If you just consider Americans who identify as atheists and agnostics, this community is as large as the Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Jehovah's Witness, and Hindu communities combined!

With the growth of our community, the level of prejudice against atheists and humanists is diminishing. An important way to further reduce this lingering bias is for members of our community to become respected elected leaders and for allies to defend our community.



“Although our community is growing dramatically, we are severely underrepresented in the political arena.”





## Attacks Against Members of Our Community in the Political Arena

Prejudice against the humanist and atheist community persists and attacks on humanist and atheist candidates have, and may continue, to occur. However, the few attacks that have occurred have been far outweighed by the positive response to humanist and atheist candidates and elected officials. Below are a couple of misperceptions that atheist and humanist candidates may encounter.

### *As a humanist or atheist, the candidate is automatically attacking Christianity*

The charge that being a humanist or atheist is an attack on Christianity stems in part from the fear many white Christians have about no longer being the dominant force in American politics. The attackers' doubts about their own religious beliefs and the harsh reality of our own mortality may also be in play. For some, the very existence of atheists is a threat to their religion's promise of an eternal and perfect afterlife—and that is very scary for many people. The key is to try to understand the attacker's motivation and perhaps attempt a dialogue if the situation is appropriate; however, do not allow yourself to be bogged down or discouraged by voters who you have no chance of bringing into your campaign's coalition.

**“Polling finds that being non-religious, agnostic, or atheist should no longer be considered an impediment to a candidate’s electoral success.”**

### *As a humanist or atheist, you can't be good without God*

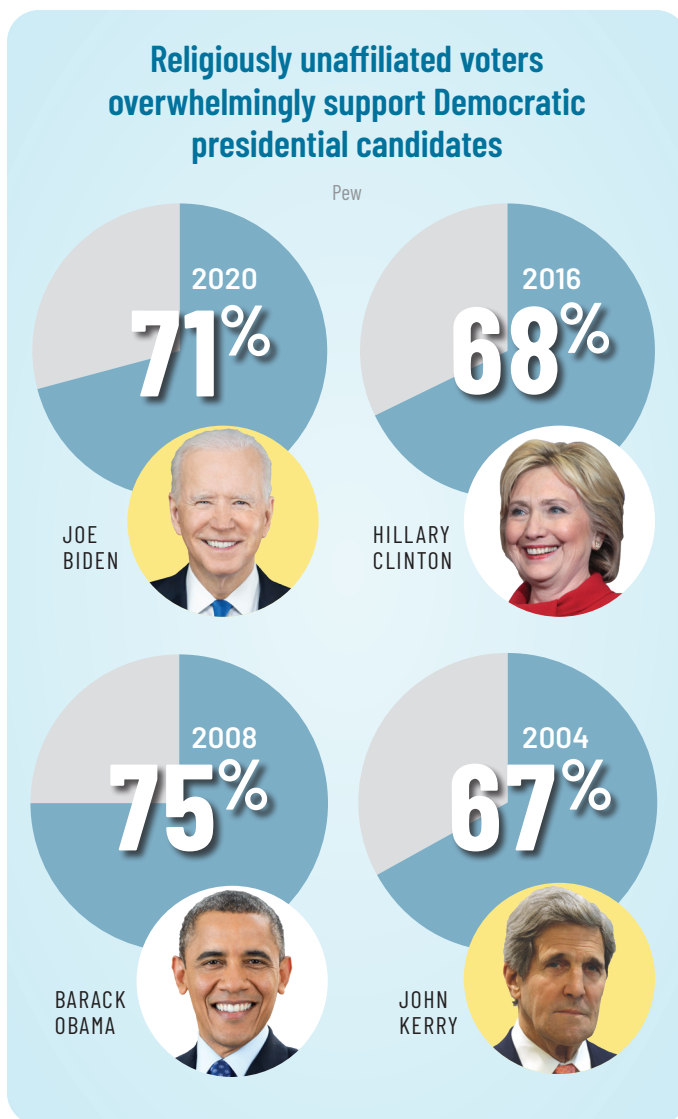
A 2018 Pew Research Center study found that 42% of Americans believe this to be true, a drop of 6 points from the results in their 2011 survey. Perhaps this decrease is a result of seeing humanist and atheist friends and neighbors behaving ethically and because of the many examples of religious people, especially religious politicians, not doing so. Research suggests that altruism and empathy are hard-wired into our brains. As members of a society, we establish norms, sometimes codified into laws, on how best to organize and run our communities. In fact, you are no doubt running for office to establish and modify laws and regulations to help improve our society.

## The Role of Allies

Just as it takes courage to publicly identify with our community, our allies need courage to stand up to those who attack humanists and atheists.

We ask our allies to confront those who issue bigoted attacks, counter efforts to marginalize the humanist and atheist community, and support humanist and atheist candidates for public office.

Humanists and atheists are also good allies. According to the Pew Research Center, the religiously unaffiliated is a growing bloc of voters. In the 2020 election the religiously unaffiliated comprised 25% of all voters, up from 15% in 2016, and 12% in 2012. In the last five presidential elections the religiously unaffiliated have overwhelmingly supported the Democratic candidate: 71% for Biden in 2020; 68% for Clinton in 2016; 70% for Obama in 2012; 75% for Obama in 2008; and 67% for Kerry in 2004.



# Humanists and Atheists Running for Public Office

“...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” —US Constitution, Article VI, Section 3

## Article VI Section 3

Even though the US Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office, there has historically been a powerful political taboo against atheists in the electoral arena. Fortunately, this stigma is diminishing and the number of humanist and atheist elected officials continues to increase. This may be due to simple demographics—the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans is growing rapidly.

## Court Cases

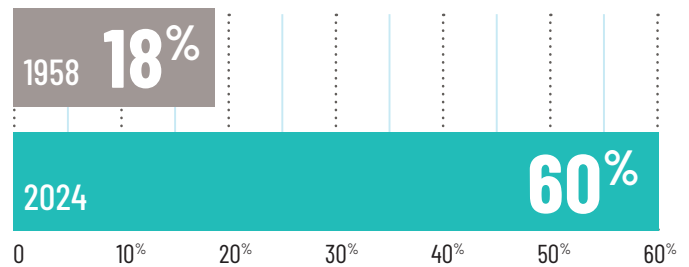
Unlike the US Constitution, seven states (Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) have provisions embedded in their constitutions that prohibit atheists from holding public office.

Although these restrictions exist, they are unenforceable thanks to the 1961 US Supreme Court case *Torcaso v. Watkins*, which was reiterated in 1997 at the South Carolina Supreme Court in *Silverman v. Campbell*—both successful cases were brought by American Humanist Association leaders.

## Breaking the Atheist Taboo

Since 1958, Gallup has asked Americans if they would vote for a well-qualified presidential candidate who was an atheist. In the first poll only 18% answered in the affirmative. Four decades later (1999), a slim majority said they would vote for an atheist. In their 2024 poll, 60% said they would vote for an atheist candidate.

Percentage of voters who would vote for a well-qualified atheist presidential candidate



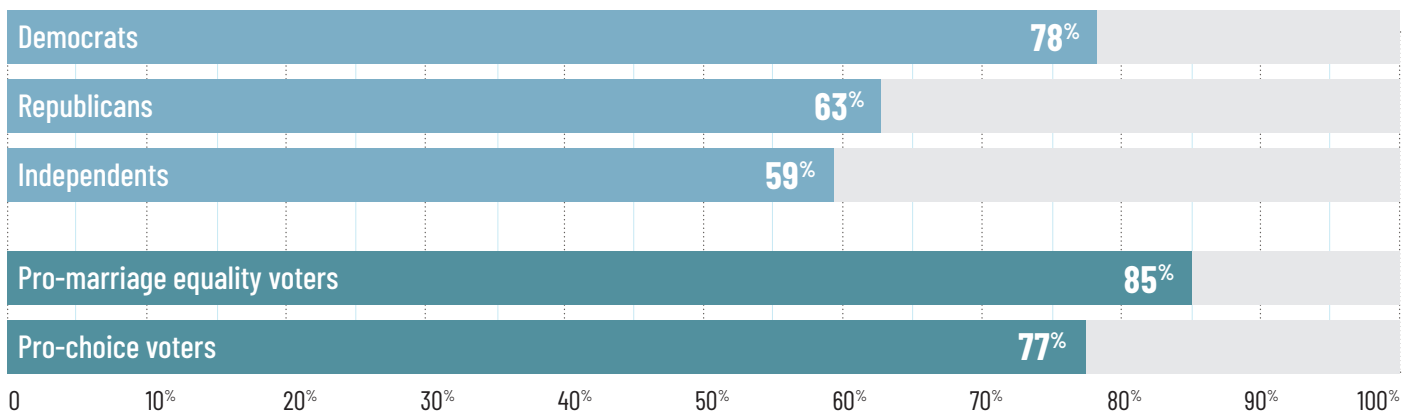
Polling in 2018 and 2022 conducted by Lake Research Partners for the Center for Freethought Equality expands on Gallup's results and finds that being non-religious, agnostic, or atheist should no longer be considered an impediment to a candidate's electoral success.

The poll results demonstrate that religious identification is a less important factor than policy stances when voters make their decisions about which candidates to support. Asked if they would vote for a nonbeliever or non-religious candidate who shared their policy positions, 78% of Democrats, 63% of Republicans, and 59% of independents said yes. The percentage of support is even higher with pro-marriage equality (85%) and pro-choice (77%) voters.

Humanist and atheist candidates in non-swing districts should no longer feel hesitant to be public about their religious identity. And while identifying as a humanist or atheist could still be a factor in swing districts, it's no longer the taboo it once was.

Percentage of voters who would vote for a nonbeliever or non-religious candidate that shares their policy positions

Lake Research Partners



# Issues Important to the Humanist and Atheist Community

The following issues, while not an exhaustive list by any means, nor one providing depth of perspective, do highlight concerns frequently and pressingly addressed by humanists and atheists today.

## Protecting a Strict Separation of Church and State

To ensure the integrity of both our religious and secular institutions, we must maintain a strict separation of church and state.

In our public schools we must not allow government-sponsored prayer, textbooks that suppress science and history based on religious prejudices, and taxpayer-funded voucher programs that are used for religious education in private schools. Our public schools must teach the science of evolution and age-appropriate, comprehensive sex education.

We must also make sure our government institutions do not favor religion over non-religion by allowing sectarian opening prayers at government functions and funding religion specific monuments.

Our diversity is one of our nation's greatest strengths. We must not exclude members of religious minorities and the non-religious in our public institutions or make them feel like second-class citizens.

## Addressing the Climate Crisis

Climate change is happening and we must act now to mitigate its effects. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reported in 2022 that there is a 50:50 chance of average global temperature reaching 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels in the next five years. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that breaching this threshold will cause significantly worsening effects for ecosystems, extreme weather events, coastal and river flooding, declining crop yields, and heat-related illness and death.

The climate crisis is real and we have to act now. In order for the United States to act, we have to vote out the elected officials who continue to deny that the climate crisis exists or who downplay its imminent effects.

## Advancing Human Rights & Civil Liberties

Human rights and civil liberties should enable everyone to participate in society without discrimination or limitations on their opportunities.

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, we have not yet made these protections real for everyone. From a criminal justice system with huge disparities in the incarceration rates of the African-American and Latinx communities to police violence against members of these communities, the prejudice and discrimination in our system that allows these violations of individual and group rights must be addressed.

One measure to make systemic change is to ensure that all citizens have access to the ballot box. We must restore Section 5 (preclearance) of the Voting Rights Act to prevent efforts to restrict the voting rights of African Americans and other minorities, and implement changes to make sure that everyone has easy access to register to vote and cast a ballot. In addition, we must address economic, educational, employment, nutritional, health & safety, and infrastructure problems that perpetuate systemic injustices.

Gender inequality persists in our society largely due to "traditional values" promoted by the Religious Right. In addition to supporting the Equal Rights Amendment and the Violence Against Women Act, we must work to achieve pay parity and ensure women are not discriminated against when they plan families. Parents need workplace protections so that caring for their children does not result in lost promotion opportunities, or worse, loss of employment.

Attacks on women's equality are most visible in the fight against abortion and other reproductive rights. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court in the 2022 *Dobbs* decision must be countered with federal legislation restoring national abortion rights. Even in states where abortion rights are legal, reproductive rights can be restricted with legislation like state-mandated abortion counseling, waiting periods, parental involvement, "partial-birth" and gestational limits, onerous clinic regulations, and prohibiting public

funding of abortions. Because of the 2014 US Supreme Court case *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, companies with religious owners can refuse to provide employees with healthcare coverage that includes contraceptive care. We must combat these backlashes against progress and achieve full equality for women, including reproductive rights.

In addition, we must expand on the success of marriage equality and apply all civil rights protections to the LGBTQ+ community. This includes, but is not limited to, housing, employment, education, adoption, and military service. We must fight for full inclusion and equality for all.

## Ensuring Health, Safety, and Dignity

Knowing that this is our one and only life, humanists and atheists seek to ensure that this life is full of opportunities to pursue, that our health and safety is protected, and that we can live our lives with dignity.

To protect our communities and children, we must limit vaccine exemptions to only those that are medically necessary. Because of misinformation about vaccines, the number of people abusing non-medical vaccine exemptions has increased. This has resulted in outbreaks of dangerous diseases like measles that previously were almost entirely eradicated. The politicization of the COVID vaccine has exacerbated this problem.

Unfortunately, disease can rob us of our health and dignity. For individuals whose daily life is filled with pain and humiliation with no reason to expect improvement, our empathy and compassion dictate that we advocate for a release from this suffering when the individual requests it. Medical aid in dying exists in ten states (Oregon, Washington, Montana, Vermont, California, Colorado, Hawaii, New Jersey, Maine and New Mexico) and the District of Columbia. Laws in those jurisdictions allow mentally capable, terminally ill adults with six months or less to live the ability to request a doctor's prescription for medication the patient can decide to take to peacefully end their suffering. We support the expansion of medical aid in dying across the country.

## Promoting Religious Freedom Abroad

Religious freedom and freedom of speech are widely seen as basic human values. We must stand up for these values by condemning the use of blasphemy and apostasy laws to silence and harm the non-religious and religious minorities. The United States must be a leader in urging nations to repeal these laws and to work to free prisoners arrested for violating these laws.

# A Vision for the Future

With the growth of the humanist and atheist community and the increasing acceptance of our community by voters, the time has come for atheist and humanist elected officials to publicly identify with our community and for more humanists and atheists to run for office. Our democracy is impoverished and the quality of our political candidates is diminished if a third of the population is effectively removed from the electoral arena, and the stigma that still exists will only be eliminated when Americans see respected and ethical humanist and atheist leaders in public life.

We have already made progress. As mentioned we have dramatically increased the number of elected officials who identify with the humanist and atheist community in the last eight years. In 2017 Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA), with an endorsement from the Center for Freethought Equality PAC (political action committee), became the second member of Congress to fully identify with the humanist and atheist community (Pete Stark was the first in 2007). In April 2018 the Center for Freethought Equality and the American Humanist Association helped Jared Huffman and Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) found the Congressional Freethought Caucus, to foster science and reason-based solutions and to defend the secular character of government. Similar state caucuses have formed in New Hampshire and Minnesota. The Secular Democrats for America have created secular voter caucuses in Texas, Nebraska, Florida, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, and is working to replicate these successes across the country.

The democratic experiment that is the United States will be more successful when all Americans participate and are represented in our public institutions. The humanist and atheist community must be visible and welcomed participants in the electoral arena. As the humanist and atheist community becomes more engaged in the electoral arena, including serving in public office, our nation's public policies will reflect the values of our community to prioritize social, economic, and environmental justice using evidence-based solutions. Building political power for the humanist and atheist community will establish a more equitable and sustainable future for America.

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