



Running for Public Office:

An Atheist and Humanist Guide

A Primer for Nontheist and Allied Candidates

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EQUALITY



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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 increase the political clout of the nontheist community. Affiliated with the Center for Freethought Equality is the Freethought Equality Fund PAC, which is a federal political action committee devoted to increasing the number of nontheists and religious allies in public office.

More information can be found at:

- American Humanist Association www.americanhumanists.org
- Center for Freethought Equality www.cfequality.org
- Freethought Equality Fund PAC www.freethoughtequality.org

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Running for Public Office: An Atheist and Humanist Guide is a primer for nontheist and allied candidates to provide background on the atheist and humanist community, explore the challenges of humanist and atheist candidates in the political arena, and outline the issues important to the community. This report incorporates information current as of May 1, 2019.

Introduction

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 nontheist community, make you aware of the issues you may confront, and provide you with resources to help you succeed.

As will be discussed later, 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 nontheist community—today we have over fifty—a 900% increase. Although this increase is impressive, we need an additional 1,500 state elected officials to reach parity with the percentage of nontheists in the general population. We have a lot of work to do!

Nontheists in the Electoral Arena

Who are Nontheist Candidates and Elected Officials?

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

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

Please be comfortable with whatever identifier or identifiers you choose, and be prepared to answer questions regarding your worldview. Once you answer those questions, move the conversation on 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 Nontheist?

Although our community is growing dramatically, we are severely underrepresented in the political arena. By having the courage to use a nontheistic identifier, you will help dispel the prejudice against atheists and humanists, encourage other nontheists 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 23% in 2014. With a third of millennials in the “nones” category, 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 (see “Breaking the Atheist Taboo” on page 5); however, the best way to eliminate prejudice is for respected leaders to identify as members of our community and for allies to defend our community.

Nontheist Attacks in the Political Arena

Prejudice against the nontheist community persists and our political system is among the most active area in which this discrimination is applied.

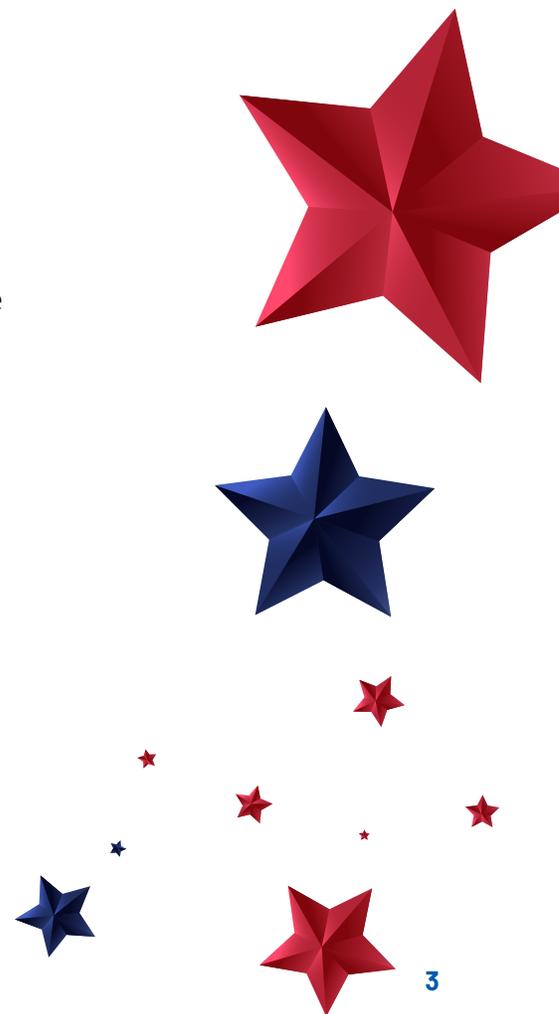
For example, in 2018 Gayle Jordan, running for the Tennessee State Senate, was attacked for being an atheist by the Republican Lt. Governor of Tennessee, the chairman of the Republican Party of Tennessee, and her Republican opponent's campaign. The core claims of their attacks were that as an atheist, Jordan did not share their values and was attacking Christianity through the expression of her convictions.

While Jordan indeed does not share the political values of her bigoted Republican attackers with regard to religious freedom, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ equality and many other issues, the first allegation about Jordan not holding values consistent with her community is demonstrably false since she shows herself as compassionate, trustworthy, and ethical.

The charge that being an atheist is an automatic attack on Christianity is an interesting one. In addition to being driven by basic bigotry, this prejudice 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.

Although Jordan did lose her 2018 campaign for the Tennessee Senate, she received a higher percentage of the vote in 2018, when she was attacked for being an atheist, than she did in 2016 when her religious beliefs were not raised as a campaign issue.

In addition, a common canard is that you “can't be good without God.” A 2018 Pew Research 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 nontheist friends and neighbors behaving ethically and perhaps because of the many examples of religious people, especially religious politicians, not doing so.



As for being good without God, scientific research suggests that altruism and empathy are hard-wired into our brains. And as members of a society, we establish norms, sometimes codified into laws, on how best 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 as a nontheist, our allies need courage to stand up to those who attack atheists, humanists, and agnostics.

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

Atheists and humanists are also good allies. According to Pew Research, the religiously unaffiliated is a growing bloc of voters. In the 2018 elections the religiously unaffiliated comprised 17% of all voters, up from 15% in 2016, and 12% in 2014. In the last four presidential elections the religiously unaffiliated have overwhelmingly supported the Democratic candidate: 68% for Clinton in 2016; 70% for Obama in 2012; 75% for Obama in 2008; and 67 % for Kerry in 2004.

“...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

Atheists and Humanists Running for Public Office

Article VI Section 3

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The US Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office, however, being an atheist in the electoral arena has been a powerful political taboo in our nation. Fortunately, this stigma is diminishing and the reason may be 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 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 the 2015 poll, 58% said they would vote for an atheist candidate.

In recent years a dramatic shift in thinking occurred. A 2018 poll conducted by Lake Research Partners for the American Humanist Association and the Center for Freethought Equality suggests that being nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist should no longer be considered an impediment to a candidate's electoral success.

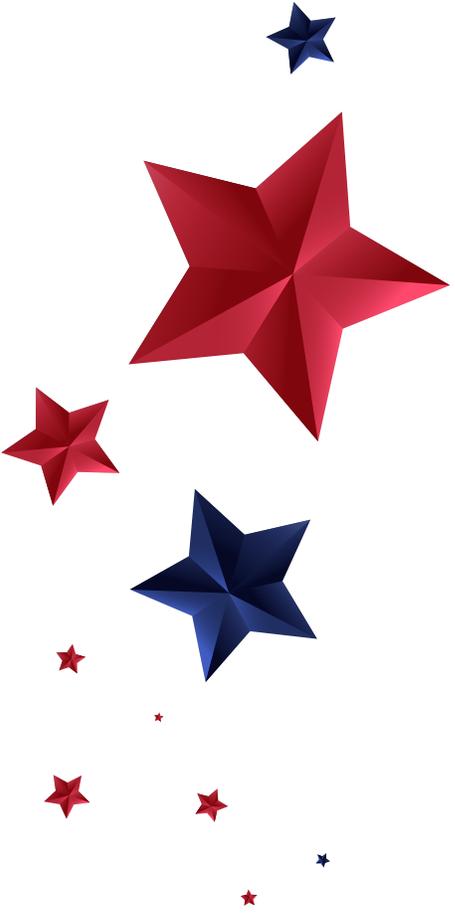
The poll results demonstrate that religious identification is a less important factor than policy stances when voters make their decisions about which candidates to support. Asked if they would vote for a nonbeliever or nonreligious candidate who shared their policy positions, 72% of respondents said they would and only 16% said they would not (11% said they didn't know).

When just asking voters who already support Democratic candidates who are pro-choice and pro-marriage-equality, 74% said that a candidate being “nonreligious” or “agnostic” would make no difference in their vote. An additional 14% said that they would be even more likely to vote for the nonreligious or agnostic candidate. When the term “atheist” was used, support for the candidate only dropped marginally (72% no difference in their vote and 10% more likely to vote for the candidate).

Not surprisingly, poll results did vary by political party. Forty-eight percent of Republicans said they would be less likely to vote for an atheist candidate who shared their political positions. However, most younger Republicans (68% of those under thirty-five and 54% of those under fifty) said that a candidate's atheism would make no difference to them.

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

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Issues Important to the Atheist and Humanist 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 atheists and humanists 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 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 nonreligion by allowing sectarian opening prayers, faith-based programs, and religion specific monuments.

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

Addressing Climate Change

As President Donald Trump and his Republican allies in Congress continue to deny that climate change is a pressing problem, a 2018 report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that we have a mere dozen years to act before global warming will increase beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) from pre-industrial levels. Such a rise will cause significantly worsening effects for ecosystems, extreme weather events, coastal and river flooding, declining crop yields, and heat-related illness and death.

Climate change 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 climate change 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 unprovoked and unpunished 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 loss of reproductive rights across the country is seen in 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. With recent appointments to the Supreme Court, the landmark ruling in *Roe v. Wade* is now in jeopardy. We must combat these backlashes against progress and achieve full equality for women, including reproductive rights.

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

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

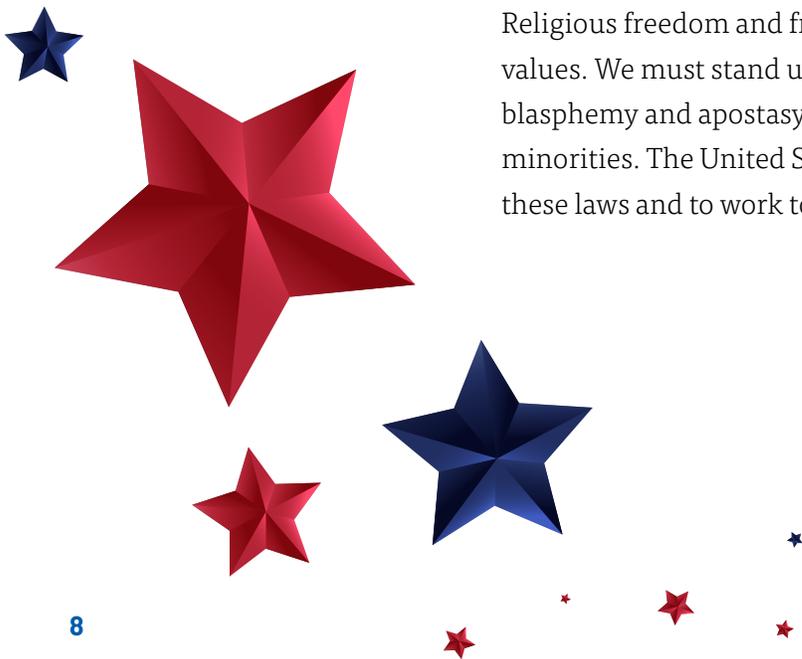
Knowing that this is our one and only life, humanists and atheists seek to ensure that this life is full of opportunities to pursue, that our health and safety is protected, and that we can live our lives with dignity.

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 nonmedical vaccine exemptions has increased in recent years. This has resulted in outbreaks of dangerous diseases like measles that previously were almost entirely eradicated.

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 seven states (Oregon, Washington, Montana, Vermont, California, Colorado, and Hawaii) 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 nontheists 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 nontheist community and the increasing acceptance of atheists by voters, the time has come for atheist and humanist elected officials to publicly identify as nontheistic Americans and for more atheist and humanist candidates to run for office. Our democracy is impoverished and the quality of our political candidates is diminished if a quarter 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 nontheist leaders in public life.

We have already made progress. As mentioned we have seen a 900% increase in the number of elected officials who identify with the nontheist community in the last two and a half years. In 2017 Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA), with an endorsement from the Freethought Equality Fund, became the second member of Congress to fully identify with the nontheist 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. The Secular Coalition for America facilitated the creation of secular caucuses within the Texas, Utah, and Nebraska Democratic Parties and the national Libertarian Party 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 atheist and humanist community must be visible and welcomed participants in the electoral arena.

