

Majority in new Congress identify as Protestant Christians

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The 117th session of Congress got off to a testy start Jan. 3, including an opening prayer from an ordained member whose pairing of “A-woman” with the traditional “Amen” raised both hackles and questions about the meaning of the word.

But what is rarely at question is the religious composition of Congress, as the House and Senate remained overwhelmingly Christian (88 percent), and heavily Protestant (55 percent), the [Pew Research Center](#) found.

A total of 294 House and Senate members are Protestant Christians, out of a possible 535—nearly the same as the last Congress.

Whereas about a quarter (26 percent) of U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated—describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or having no particular religion—Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., was the only member of Congress to identify as religiously unaffiliated. Rep. Jared Huffman, a California Democrat, describes himself as a humanist. Both Sinema and Huffman have said they do not consider themselves atheists.

Pew found a growing number of congressional members do not identify with a particular denomination, with 96 members of Congress simply identifying as Christian or Protestant. By contrast, in 2009, during the 111th Congress, only 39 members described themselves this way.

The Pew analysis relied on CQ Roll Call data on the religious affiliations of members of Congress.

It found several religious groups are overrepresented in the new Congress compared to the general population. Jews make up 2 percent of the U.S. population but 6 percent of the new Congress—33 members. Catholics, who make up about 20 percent of the U.S. population, comprise 30 percent of the new Congress—158 members. Likewise, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists also were overrepresented.

Others were underrepresented. Pentecostals make up 0.4 percent of Congress but 5 percent of all U.S. adults. Nondenominational Christians represent 2 percent of Congress but 6 percent of adults in the United States. Baptists make up 12 percent of Congress but 15 percent of the U.S. adult population.

Among other findings:

- There are nine Mormons, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in the 117th Congress.
- The new Congress, like the old, has three Muslim representatives—Reps. André Carson, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib.
- It also has two Buddhists, Rep. Hank Johnson and Sen. Mazie Hirono, the same two who served in the previous Congress.
- There are two Hindus in Congress—Rep. Ro Khanna and Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, both returning members. (Washington state Rep. Pramila Jayapal, was among those who refused to identify a religious affiliation.)

Nearly all the non-Christian representatives (with the exception of three: two Jews and one who declined to state his religious affiliation) were Democrats.

Invocation sparks social media firestorm

Rep. Emanuel Cleaver II, D-Mo., delivered the opening prayer for the 117th Congress, riffing on the priestly blessing from the biblical Book of Numbers.

He caused a Twitter-storm when he closed his prayer in the name of “God known by many names by many different faiths—amen and a-woman.”

That closing drew the ire of some conservative pundits. The president’s son, Donald Trump Jr., tweeted that the use of “a-woman” was “insane.”

“Amen means ‘So Be It’ in Latin. It isn’t a gendered word, but that didn’t stop them from being insane,” he tweeted.

“Amen,” a word “used to express solemn ratification,” according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, comes to English from Hebrew. It has no etymological connection to the English word “man.” It is most likely connected to the Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*.

Others have pointed out that kind of wordplay is common in many religious traditions and Cleaver, who earned a master of divinity from St. Paul’s School of Theology of Kansas City, likely knows the meaning of the word “amen.”