

Weighting up the number of Republicans may not solve systematic partisan nonresponse

Why I chose to weight by religious affiliation rather than party ID

The Centerline national poll methodology includes a surprise for many pollsters and poll watchers: I weighted the data by religious affiliation, not party identification. Let me explain why.

Over the last 10 years, education has become a standard weight for most pollsters after post-2016 research demonstrated the Democratic bias of samples with too many college graduates. I'm old enough to remember when pollsters thought it was wrong to weight a poll by respondent education level because we didn't have a concrete benchmark for likely voters. We still don't, although we do at least have benchmarks in Census data for all adults and for registered voters, and estimates are better than they used to be.

Weighting or setting quotas (specific numbers of interviews to collect) by partisanship has also become more common since 2020 to adjust for systematic nonresponse among Republicans. Partisan nonresponse tends to be worse when a party is down in the polls, or bad things are happening on its side. Things are unquestionably bad for Republicans right now.

We don't have any Census-level benchmarks for party identification weights, though. Pew Research Center released a [report last month](#) investigating three different ways to weight a survey to partisanship. The conclusion was that **"No one approach is clearly superior in all contexts."** The emphasis is theirs. They detail the advantages and pitfalls of each: party-identification benchmarks such as their own National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS), which might be out of date; past vote recall, which may be inaccurate; and voter file models that are estimates, not certainties.

Party weighting and quotas help get close to the right number of Republicans, but even if polls get *enough* Republicans, do we get the *right kind* of Republicans, especially in this environment? For example, MAGA Republicans and non-MAGA Republicans sometimes have dramatically different views. Getting the right mix is critical, especially in a midterm year where we may see GOP defections or low turnout among less satisfied partisans.

We can't know whether these patterns are playing out in the 2026 data until after the election, if then. That said, **I don't want to wait for another big polling error before innovating and challenging our thinking.** I'm not at all saying that's what will happen. I'm just saying I want to think about the next challenge before it happens rather than fighting the last battle.

How religious affiliation helps

Religion helps balance the type of Republicans by providing a benchmark for the religious right. White evangelicals are a huge bloc of staid conservatives within the Republican Party who turn out more reliably than the newer voters in the Trump coalition. Critically, unlike “MAGA” vs. “non-MAGA” Republicans, we know how many of them there are: White evangelicals make up about 13 percent of the U.S. adult population (this moves to 14 percent among registered voters).

I suspect white evangelicals are systematically not responding. In the unweighted data for this survey, the group made up only 8 percent of the sample, and neither demographic weights nor party weights using Pew’s NPORS fixed that: both left the group at 7 percent. In my likely voter testing, the group started at 9 percent and dropped to 8 percent with party weights.

Exit polls from the last few midterms show white evangelicals consistently make up 23 to 26 percent of the *entire electorate* – not just of Republicans. Those figures are likely overestimates, as exit polls tend to distort the proportions of some groups, so let’s say their high turnout means they are maybe 15-18 percent of the electorate. If you want to believe that a bloc that consistently turns out at that rate is suddenly cut in half, that’s your prerogative. To me, it is clearly survey nonresponse.

Why religious affiliation can serve as a weight

Religious affiliation is a good weighting variable because it is a very stable identity. When it does change, that typically happens before age 24 and involves [leaving a childhood religion](#). Young people disaffiliating drove up the proportion of religiously unaffiliated people, but that trend has leveled off, and affiliation has been [stable since 2020](#). Religious affiliation benchmarks – large-scale national surveys conducted by [PRRI](#) (n=40,000) and [Pew](#) (n=35,000) – produce nearly identical estimates.

Meanwhile, [Gallup estimates of party affiliation](#) swung from a 4-point Republican advantage at the end of 2024 to an 8-point Democratic lead at the end of 2025. Its latest quarterly estimate gave Democrats an 11-point advantage. Pew’s NPORS from 2026 shows a 1-point Democratic advantage without accounting for independents who lean toward a party, and 4 points with leaners added to the party. Using either benchmark risks either overstating changes that might just be nonresponse bias or missing real recent movement.

Weighting by religious affiliation offers the best of both worlds: a stable identity that is [correlated with partisanship](#) but does not lock partisanship to a specific value, so real variation and recent shifts can still show up.

How weighting choices change the sample

Composition of registered voters in the Centerline national poll under three weighting schemes, in percent

	Demographics	Demographics and party	Demographics and religion
Religious affiliation by race			
White evangelical	7	8	14
White protestant	15	14	15
White Catholic	15	15	14
Black protestant	8	9	7
Hispanic protestant	4	4	4
Hispanic Catholic	4	4	6
Other Christian (any race)	15	15	10
Jewish	2	2	2
Muslim	0	0	1
Other religions	1	1	1
Unaffiliated	28	28	26
Party identification			
Democrat	37	32	36
Independent, other or not sure	31	37	30
Republican	32	31	34
Party identification with leaners			
Democrat or lean Democratic	47	48	46
Independent, no lean	13	10	13
Republican or lean Republican	40	42	41
2024 presidential vote (among those who voted)			
Donald Trump	43	44	45
Kamala Harris	51	51	50
Someone else	4	4	4
Trump job approval			
Approve	33	34	35
Disapprove	65	64	64
2026 congressional ballot			
Democratic candidate	50	50	49
Republican candidate	37	38	39

Shaded figures are set by that scheme's weighting targets. "Demographics" means gender, age and education within race, race, region and area type; every weighted column includes them.

Some weight values vary slightly from the benchmarks so that no weight more than doubles or less than halves the unweighted value.

Source: Centerline Research & Strategy national poll, September 26–October 1, 2026. Registered voters, n=1,239.

The table shows what happens to partisan metrics under different weighting scenarios. The yellow shading shows where weights were applied. Weighting on demographics alone (second column) results in a heavily Democratic sample. Adding party weights based on Pew's NPORS survey (third column) obviously pulls that back to a narrower gap.

Taking partisanship out and adding religion instead (fourth column) changes very little in partisanship compared to the party weight – without leaners included in the party groups, it widens by a point (Democrats +1 to +2); with leaners in the party groups, it narrows by a point (Democrats +6 to +5). It moves the 2024 presidential vote to 6 points off the real margin (Harris +5) rather than 7 or 9. Trump's approval is 35% rather than 34%; the congressional ballot is Democrats +10 rather than +12.

These are small changes, but given the stronger benchmarks for religion than partisanship, I have more confidence in the final weight that uses religion.

We won't know whether my hypothesis worked this year because (1) the poll was conducted five weeks before the election, and (2) my topline numbers are not all that different from many other polls. A real test requires repeating the approach across many polls and elections. And, as with partisanship, the religion benchmarks work well at the national level but are less reliable for states and smaller geographies.