

15. THE RISE OF THE NONES IN ICELAND

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Abstract

The number of people that do not belong to a religious denomination – ‘nones’ is growing rapidly in the Nordic countries. The aim of this analysis is to predict non-affiliation in Iceland and other Nordic countries using logistic regression. The hypotheses tested are that people 1) who have little confidence in the church; 2) who are of immigrant background; 3) with left-wing political views, 4) who have more liberal worldviews (moral attitudes) are more likely to be ‘nones’. For this we used existing data obtained in the European Values Study (EVS) wave 5, and previous waves to look at the increase in non-affiliation since the first wave of the EVS in the early eighties. The results show that the strongest predictors for being a ‘none’ are lack of confidence in the church and being of immigrant background. Those who do not belong to a religious denomination have a somewhat more liberal worldview than those who do. Our results also suggest that a decline in confidence in the Icelandic church may explain the rapid increase of ‘nones’ in Iceland. A similar decline in confidence is not seen in the other countries.

15.1 Introduction

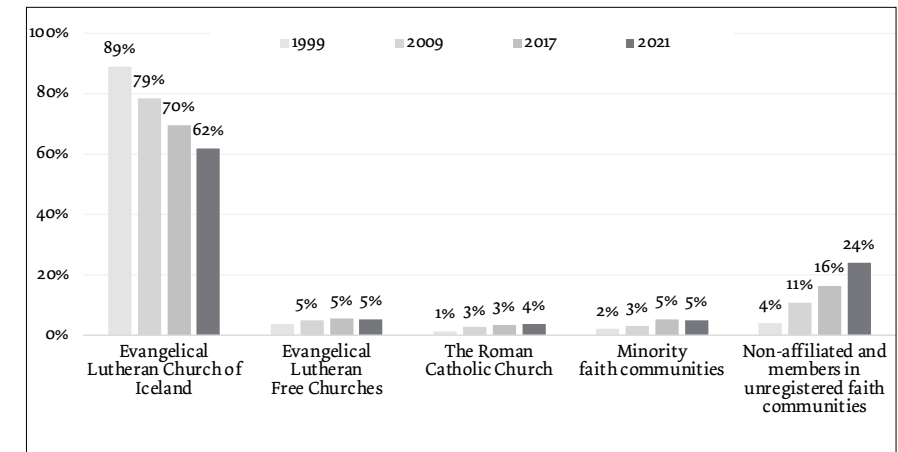
The growing number of the ‘nones’ is a feature observed in many European countries (Davie, 2015; Stolz *et al.*, 2016; Woodhead & Catto, 2012) as well as in the USA (Chaves, 2011: 13–17; Hout & Fischer, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2012; Pew Research, 2018; Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Burge, 2021). This development is reflected in results from the European Values Study (EVS), which was greatly coordinated by Loek Halman, and the General Social Survey (GSS), showing this trend clearly, with rising numbers of respondents claiming that they do not belong to a religious denomination. In 1990 around a quarter of all respondents in the EVS (EVS, 2020a) said they did not belong to a religious denomination, with numbers ranging from 2 percent in Iceland to 60 percent in the Czech Republic. Subsequently, in 2017 (EVS, 2020b), this number had risen to 30 percent overall. Similarly, although this development seems to happen a little later in the U.S., the GSS shows that while only 6 percent of respondents said they had no religious affiliation in 1991, this increased to 14 percent in 2000, 18 percent in 2010, and 23 percent in 2018 (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Davie’s (1994) ‘believing without belonging’ thesis stresses the importance of distinguishing between religiosity and religious affiliation, contending that believing is declining at a much slower rate than belonging. As Voas and Crockett (2005) and Tromp *et al.* (2020) explain, Davie (1994) defines the terms ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’ rather loosely, giving room to two different theories on religious change, namely de-institutionalization of Christianity on the one hand, and spiritualization of religion on the other (Tromp *et al.*, 2020: 519). The religious landscape in the Nordic countries has a high overall membership in the Lutheran state churches. The overwhelming majority of the populations in these countries have, until recently, belonged to the Lutheran state churches (Furseth *et al.*, 2018). However, some scholars suggest that these are very secular societies (Botvar & Schmidt, 2010; Furseth, 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Some even claim that the Nordic countries are among the most secular in the world (Zuckerman, 2008). This distinction has given rise to the thesis of ‘belonging without believing’ called the ‘Nordic paradox’ (Gustafsson & Pettersson, 2000). Sundback (2000) suggests that this paradox can be explained by the state churches having a power of unification and an important cultural role

in people’s life events. By being members of the church, people are in effect showing their support for their nation’s cultural symbols and tradition (Hugason, 2001).

With the rapid increase in the number of immigrants in the Nordic countries in the last decades, their populations have become more heterogeneous, resulting in a more complex religious landscape than before with more diversity in faith communities (Furseth, *et al.*, 2018). Iceland remained homogenous with few immigrants until this century with the percentage of immigrants rising from 3% in 2000 to 9% in 2008 and 15% in 2020 (Statistics Iceland, 2021). At the same time, the number of people not registered in any religious organization or other unspecified has risen from 4% in 1999 to 16% in 2017 and up to 24% in 2021, as depicted in figure 15.1.

Figure 15.1 Populations by religious and life stance organizations 1999–2021



Source: Statistics Iceland, 2021

Although immigration may be a part of the explanation for the growth of ‘nones’ in Iceland, the more commonly referred to explanations are numerous problems and scandals connected to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ice-

land since the mid-1990s. These controversies and scandals are related to debates on same-sex church weddings and accusations against the bishop (who was in office from 1989-1997) of sexual harassment and child abuse, and the failure of the church to address these accusations (Spanó *et al.* 2011).

But who are the ‘nones’? As has been pointed out by, among others, Davie (2015), Putnam and Campbell (2010), and Tromp *et al.* (2020): non-affiliation does not necessarily imply non-religion. The non-affiliated may consist of immigrants who have not joined a religious community despite identifying with a religious tradition. They may be secular people, or they may be people who identify as spiritual. But do their values differ from the religiously affiliated, and will the growing number of ‘nones’ lead to a different society? Burge (2021) has studied the ‘nones’ in the U.S and found that the people who are not married and do not have children are the group most likely to be religiously unaffiliated — to be ‘nones’. Pew Research (2018) found that among the most important reasons for non-affiliation were opposition to the positions taken by churches on social and political issues and dislike of religious organizations. Schwadel (2020) argues that having no religious affiliation changes the way people move through the world, and it can dramatically alter their political views and participation. He suggests that having a liberal political perspective may lead some people to becoming ‘nones’.

Based on previous research our hypotheses are the following: People 1) who have little confidence in the church; 2) who are of immigrant background; 3) with left-wing political views, 4) who have more liberal worldviews (moral attitudes) are more likely to be ‘nones’.

15.2 Data and Analysis

We make use of all five available waves (1981, 1990, 1999, 2008 and 2017) of the European Values Study (EVS), a repeated cross-sectional dataset that covers a period of nearly four decades. Our sample comprises the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Three countries, Denmark,

Iceland and Sweden had data available for all five waves. Finland did not participate in the first wave, and Norway did not take part in 1999.

The main focus of the data analysis is to predict non-affiliation among the Nordic countries, using logistic regression using the most recent data set from 2017 (EVS, 2020b; EVS, 2020c). Data was collected by different modes, 3369 interviews were conducted in Denmark by face to face interviews (51.5%), a web survey (37.5%) and a postal survey (11.1%); in Finland, 1220 interviews were completed by face to face interviews (33.3%), a web survey (12.5%) and a postal survey (12.5%); in Iceland¹ 3229 interviews were conducted by face to face interviews (28%), a web survey (68%) partly based on a matrix design (see Luijkx, *et al.* 2021) with some respondents only answering part of the questionnaire; in Norway 1123 respondents answered the survey 86.6% in face to face interviews and 13.4% by telephone; all 1198 respondents in Sweden were interviewed face to face.

The dependent variable in our analysis is the question “Do you belong to a religious denomination?”. Predictor variables in the logistic regression are sex, age, marital status (those who are legally married, in a registered partnership or widowed are classified as married, others as single), whether people have children or not, education (lower, medium and higher), immigrant status (those with both parents born in another country are classified as immigrants), confidence in the church (a great deal/quite a lot, not very much, none at all), political view (left-right scale from 1-10). As measures of liberal moral attitudes, we use the questions of whether the following can be justified (scale 1 to 10 where 1 means never justified and 10 means always justified): taking soft drugs, homosexuality, abortion and divorce.

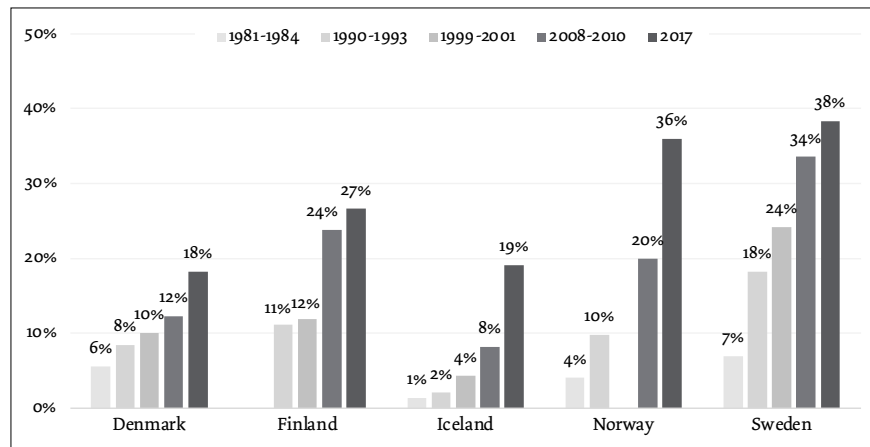
Data were weighted by the variable ‘gweight’ that has been computed using the marginal distribution of age, sex, educational attainment, and region (European Values Study (EVS) 2017).

¹ EVS 2017 in Iceland was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund, grant number 174181051-3.

15.3 Results

Figure 15.2 shows the growing number of religious ‘nones’ in the Nordic countries from 1981 to 2017 according to the European Values Study. The percentage of people that do not belong to a religious denomination is now approaching 40% in Sweden and Norway, close to 30% in Finland and around 20% in Denmark and Iceland. The number of respondents not belonging to a religious denomination has increased significantly between waves 4 (2008-2010) and 5 (2017) in Denmark, Iceland and Norway and to a smaller (non-significant) extent in Finland and Sweden.

Figure 15.2 Percentage not belonging to a religious denomination in the Nordic countries



Source: EVS 1981/1984 – 2017

Table 15.1 shows separate logistic regressions for the five Nordic countries predicting non-affiliation. As expected, (hypothesis 1) confidence in the Church is a strong, significant predictor in all the countries, especially in Finland and Iceland, where those who have no confidence in the Church are almost sixteen times more likely to be non-affiliated than those who have a lot of confidence in the Church in Finland, and almost thirteen times more likely in Iceland.

Being of immigrant background, with both parents born abroad (hypothesis 2) is another strong predictor in Iceland, Sweden and especially in Denmark, where immigrants are almost 15 times more likely than natives not to belong to a religious denomination. Only one respondent in the Finnish data reported having both parents born abroad, making it impossible to test whether immigrants are more likely to stand outside religious denominations. The effect was not significant in Norway.

Having political views to the left of the political left-right spectrum (hypothesis 3) increases the likelihood of not belonging to a religious denomination in all the countries except Sweden where no effect is found.

To test whether liberal moral attitudes were predictors of non-affiliation (hypothesis 4), four variables were included in the analysis. The variables measured whether the following can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between on a scale from 1 to 10: taking soft drugs, homosexuality, abortion and divorce. In all cases where a significant effect was found; it was in the predicted direction: the more liberal the attitude, the more likely that the respondent was a ‘none’. However, the effects found are in some cases very small, or not significant at all, such as in Sweden, where we see that there is not a significant difference in the moral attitudes, nor in political view of those who belong to a religious denomination, and those who do not. The only moral attitude variable with a similar and significant effect in all the countries apart from Sweden is whether it is justifiable to take soft drugs. A more positive stance on this issue goes hand in hand with an increased likelihood of non-affiliation. However, the overall mean for this variable is only, 3.1, which shows that this is not generally accepted in the Nordic countries, whereas the means for homosexuality, abortion and divorce are 8.6, 7.73 and 8.31, respectively, showing a general acceptance of these issues. Attitude to homosexuality has a significant effect in Iceland only; attitude to abortion has a small effect in Norway; attitude to divorce has a significant effect in Denmark and Finland.

Men are more likely not to be affiliated than women in all the Nordic countries, apart from Iceland, where there is no significant difference between men and women after other variables presented in Table 15.1 are taken into account. Al-

though younger people are slightly more likely than older not to belong to a religious denomination, this is only significant in Iceland. Marital status and having children or not have little effect, and is only significant in Finland. Education has a significant effect in Denmark and Iceland, where those with a university degree are more likely to be non-affiliated than those with lower education.

Table 15.1 Binary logistic regression predicting who are the Nones in the Nordic countries

	Denmark OR (95% CI)	Finland OR (95% CI)	Iceland OR (95% CI)	Norway OR (95% CI)	Sweden OR (95% CI)
Constant	0.03***	0.16***	0.18***	0.36*	0.18***
Sex					
Men (reference)					
Women	0.64*** (0.51-0.79)	0.57** (0.40-0.80)	0.93ns (0.73-1.20)	0.68** (0.51-0.90)	0.72* (0.54-0.95)
Age					
Age in years	1.00ns (0.99-1.00)	0.99ns (0.98-1.0)	0.99** (0.98-0.99)	0.99ns (0.98-1.00)	1.00ns (0.99-1.00)
Marital status					
Married (reference)					
Single	0.96ns (0.73-1.25)	0.63* (0.43-0.94)	0.78ns (0.58-1.05)	1.08ns (0.77-1.53)	0.83ns (0.61-1.14)
Children					
No children (reference)					
Children	0.91ns (0.68-1.21)	1.76* (1.14-2.73)	0.80ns (0.56-1.15)	0.87ns (0.58-1.29)	1.07ns (0.74-1.54)
Education					
Lower (reference)					
Medium	1.05ns (0.79-1.38)	0.59* (0.37-0.96)	1.23ns (0.88-1.69)	0.71ns (0.50-1.02)	0.90ns (0.60-1.33)

Higher	1.65** (1.24-2.20)	1.18ns (0.73-1.19)	1.44* (1.05-1.97)	0.89ns (0.61-1.29)	1.34ns (0.89-2.02)
Immigrant					
Non immigrant (reference)					
Immigrant	14.66*** (10.24-21.0)	- 1)	3.93*** (2.48-6.23)	1.11ns (0.70-1.76)	4.21*** (2.83-6.28)
Confidence in the church					
A great deal/quite a lot (reference)					
Not very much	2.32*** (1.84-2.94)	4.38*** (3.10-6.20)	3.40*** (2.47-4.69)	2.22*** (1.65-2.97)	2.34*** (1.74-3.14)
None at all	10.48*** (7.6-14.47)	15.75*** (9.34-26.58)	12.52*** (8.80-17.82)	7.57*** (4.41-12.99)	5.47*** (3.51-8.53)
Political view – Left-Right					
1-10 (mean=5.33)	0.91*** (0.87-0.96)	0.91** (0.84-0.98)	0.85*** (0.80-0.90)	0.93* (0.87-0.99)	1.00ns (0.94-1.07)
Justifiable: taking soft drugs					
1-10 (mean=3.10)	1.11*** (1.07-1.16)	1.14*** (1.07-1.23)	1.66*** (1.42-1.94)	1.10** (1.03-1.16)	0.95ns (0.89-1.01)
Justifiable: homosexuality					
1-10 (mean=8.60)	1.03ns (0.96-1.09)	0.94ns (0.87-1.01)	1.32*** (1.15-1.51)	1.04ns (0.97-1.11)	1.07ns (0.99-1.15)
Justifiable: abortion					
1-10 (mean=7.73)	1.02ns (0.95-1.08)	1.06ns (0.97-1.15)	1.05ns (0.99-1.12)	1.08* (1.00-1.16)	0.99ns (0.91-1.07)
Justifiable: divorce					
1-10 (mean=8.31)	1.12** 1.03-1.21)	1.14* (1.03-1.27)	0.94ns (0.88-1.00)	0.98ns (0.92-1.08)	1.04ns (0.95-1.14)
Number of respondents	N=3067	N=1030	N=2581	N=1046	N=1042
Cox & Snell R2	0.18	0.24	0.25	0.15	0.13
Nagelkerke R2	0.30	0.35	0.40	0.20	0.18

Statistical significance: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

1) Only one respondent in Finland had both parents born abroad

15.4 Discussion and Conclusions

Not surprisingly, lack of confidence in the Church seems to be one of the strongest predictors of non-affiliation. Whether this lack of confidence in the Church can be argued to be the cause of the increase in the number of ‘nones’ in the Nordic countries over the last forty years, however, is doubtful. Looking at the changes in confidence in the Church over the years reveals that only in Iceland has the trust to or confidence in the church declined since the start of the EVS. In the first wave of the EVS back in the early eighties, only 29% of respondents reported having not very much or no confidence at all in Iceland, compared to around or above 50% in the other countries. Since then, confidence in the Church has increased or remained the same in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, but significantly decreased in Iceland and in the latest wave of the EVS in 2017 there is less confidence in the Church in Iceland than in any of the other countries with 54% of respondents saying that they have not very much or no confidence in the Church at all. Thus, it seems very plausible that this lack of trust contributes to the rise of the ‘nones’ in Iceland. The model yields a fairly high R^2 in Iceland (Nagelkerke $R^2=0.40$), in Finland (0.35) and in Denmark (0.30) but only 0.20 in Norway and 0.18 in Sweden suggesting that there are other explanations for the increased number of ‘nones’ than we assessed in the model.

The results presented in Table 15.1 do not give strong support for the hypothesis that an increase in the number of the ‘nones’ will lead to a value shift in society. There is a difference between those who belong to a religious denomination in the Nordic countries and those who do not. The latter have a somewhat more liberal worldview, but that is a matter of degree and not of a kind.

As for the limitations, different modes of data collection may have an impact on comparison between countries and needs to be analyzed further. Response rates among immigrants are generally much lower than among natives in general population surveys (cf. Font & Méndez, 2013). This may undermine diversity in value orientations, especially in countries where the number of immigrants is high.

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