

Is the United States a Christian Nation?

Various politicians, religious leaders, and other groups embrace the idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. The Christian nation narrative of the United States holds that the early colonists and then the Founding Fathers were guided by the God of Christianity. Specifically, the early settlers and Revolutionary heroes entered into a covenantal relationship with God where the nation and society would receive protection and blessings if they followed God's commands. This learning module will explore the extent to which Americans espouse this belief, who is most likely to believe the United States is a Christian nation, whether the numbers of these Americans are growing or declining, and how differences in how researchers ask questions about the Christian nation narrative can influence how pervasive this belief appears to be.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (<https://www.thearda.com>).

1. In the Data Archive locate the Race, Class, and Culture Survey 2012. (Hint: Find it quickly by clicking on the "Browse Alphabetically" tab at the top of the Data Archive page). Using the information under the "Summary" tab, provide a brief description of the survey including the number of respondents and the data collection procedures.

2. Under the "Codebook" tab, find Question 42. It asks, "Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?" Provide the percentage of Americans that chose each possible answer.

America has always been and is currently a Christian nation	_____%
America was a Christian nation in the past, but is not now	_____%
America has never been a Christian nation	_____%
Don't know/Refused	_____%



3. Do these results support the claim that a majority of Americans believe the United States is a Christian nation, was at some time a Christian nation, or was never a Christian nation? Using these results, make a case **supporting** the claim that Christian nationalism is a widely held belief in the US population.

4. Now, using the same results, make a case **opposing** the claim that Christian nationalism is a widely held belief in the US population.

5. Next, click on the “Analyze Results” link directly below question 42 in the codebook of the Race, Class, and Culture Survey 2012. Here you can examine if worship service attendance, political party, or education influence how Americans answer this question. Choose two of these comparison variables and describe their relationship to Americans’ beliefs about whether the United States is, was, or never was a Christian nation.

Locate the General Social Survey 2014 – Instructional Dataset in the Data Archive.

Go to the → Data Archive → U.S. Surveys → General Social Surveys

6. Using the information under the “Summary” tab, provide a brief description of the survey including the number of respondents (Hint: respondents = cases) and the data collection procedures.

7. Now click on the Codebook tab. We will focus on the variable labeled “AMCHRSTN”. Once you have found it, reproduce the question’s wording below:

8. How do Americans respond to this question?

Very important _____%

Fairly important _____%

Not very important _____%

Not important at all _____%

9. Click on “Analyze results”. What characteristics seem make someone *more likely* to think it is “Very important” for true Americans to be Christian?

10. How does the question wording from the 2014 GSS differ from the question we examined above from the Race, Class, and Culture 2012 Survey? Are they measuring different types of beliefs? How might these differences in question wording influence the findings and our interpretation of those findings?

Now, let's take a look at two survey questions asked in 1996 using the data provided below. (For more information about these studies, click on the hyperlink of the survey name to examine it on the ARDA. Once there, go to the Codebook):

[Religious Identity and Influence Survey, 1996](#)

Do you think that the United States was founded as a Christian nation based on Christian principles, or not? (XIANNATN)

TOTAL	%
1) Yes	76.4
2) No	16.9
3) DK	5.9
4) Refused	0.8
TOTAL	100.0

[Religion and Politics Survey, 1996](#)

Do you consider the United States a Christian nation, or not? (USCHRSTN)

TOTAL	%
1) Yes	60.5
2) No	33.6
3) Don't know/Refused	6
TOTAL	100.0

11. Both surveys were fielded in 1996. Both were national, random surveys. Why do you think there is a difference in how people responded? What does this tell us about slight differences to question wording across surveys on identical topics?

Now, let's begin to take a look at how Christian nationalist beliefs might have shifted over time. The wording for the following question from the 2002 Religion and Public Life Survey is identical to the wording from the 1996 Religion and Politics Survey question listed above.

[Religion and Public Life Survey, 2002](#)

Do you consider the United States a Christian nation, or not? (USCHRSTN)

TOTAL	%
1) Yes	67.3
2) No	25
5) Never	0
9) Don't know/Refused	7.7
TOTAL	100.0

12. How do the percentages for each response compare across survey years? How might this difference be explained?

In the Data Archive, find the collection of General Social Surveys. Locate the [1996](#), [2004](#), and [2014-Instructional](#) dataset waves of the GSS (you can open these in different browser tabs to make switching between survey years much easier). Across each of these waves of the GSS, an identical question was asked. Find the question labeled AMCHRSTN in each wave. Complete the table below.

AMCHRSTN: Some people say the following things are important for being truly American. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is: E. to be a Christian.

Response Category	Percent (%)		
	1996	2004	2014
Very Important			
Fairly Important			
Not Very Important			
Not Important At All			

13. What percentage of Americans answer that it is “very important” to be Christian to be truly American? How do these numbers change over the years? Interpret those shifts. What might be going on? What can this data tell us about the support for Christian nationalist views over time?

14. Reflecting on the various surveys and questions discussed throughout this module, what might we conclude about Christian nationalism in the United States? Make three separate claims and back up each claim using the relevant data from this learning module.
