Even before primary voting began nearly a year ago, media coverage of the presidential campaign was emphasizing religion and the role it plays in the contest for the top job. The religious views of every Republican candidate were featured and parsed, looking for clues to voter preferences. For several months, Mitt Romney’s Mormon beliefs were a visible problem for the party’s Evangelical voters, and at some moments, the primaries seemed to be a search for a candidate with a different religious identity.

Religion was less debated on the Democratic side, if only because President Obama’s record over the past four years provided so much more to discuss. Obama’s mainline Protestant identity has provided little fodder for debate this time around, even though it was featured in the 2008 election.

Since the conventions, the media interest with the candidates’ religious beliefs has continued. Time magazine’s Oct. 8 cover story featured “The Mormon Identity,” while many major news organizations used the debate between the vice-presidential candidates to discuss the Catholic beliefs of both contenders.

But, while the media have focused on the candidates’ religious character, they have missed the big story. Coming down the home stretch, the candidates’ religious identities are essentially irrelevant to the voters, no matter what their own religious persuasion.

Press reports have frequently observed that Republican voters are more “fired up” this fall than Democratic voters. This observation applies even to the party’s large Evangelical block. While a recent Pew Forum survey indicates that more than 90 percent of Evangelicals are “uncomfortable” with Romney’s Mormon beliefs, they will vote for him by a margin of more than three-to-one.

Polling this year further indicates that the decades-old block of Catholic voters has disappeared. Catholics are just as divided as the electorate, as a whole, with about a third of Catholics breaking for Romney, a third going for Obama, and a third in the “undecided” middle.

For both groups, Evangelicals and Catholics, views on abortion provide a better indicator of their vote than religious identity.

In the midst of all the election coverage, an important religious story has had only a little public play. The United States no longer has a Protestant majority, even though Protestants have made up the majority since European migration began centuries ago. According to this month’s Pew survey, people identifying themselves as Protestants have dropped from 53 percent in 2007 to 48 percent this year.

This is not an isolated development, but is accompanied by related trends. This year marks the first time that the Republican Party lacks a Protestant on its presidential ticket. Similarly, the Supreme Court no longer has any Protestant justices.

In part, the reason for this decline is the rise of people who are unaffiliated with any religion. Even though Catholics remain about 22 percent of the nation’s citizens, those checking “none of the above” on religious surveys now number 20 percent. And the trends indicate that the number of “nones” is growing, while the percentage of the other two religious groups is shrinking. This means that soon Catholics will only be America’s third largest religious group, behind the unaffiliated.

And how do they vote? It is unclear at this point. While there are some indications that the nones lean towards the libertarian side of social issues like abortion and gay marriage, they also are focusing more on economic matters in this election.

In the end, it turns out that roughly 40 percent of Americans do not know the religious affiliation of one or the other presidential candidates. That is a clear indication of the irrelevance of religion in this election.

Perhaps there is one exception to the unimportance of religion in this fall’s presidential election. The number of people who mistakenly believe that President Obama is a Muslim has risen from 11 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2010. This may be enough to impact the election. We will just have to wait and see.