How did People Vote? The Religious Breakdown
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America’s voters are overwhelmingly Christian: 78 percent of voters identified themselves as Christians in exit polls Nov. 6. That is down just 3 percent from 81 percent, the highest Christian participation in the previous three elections. Despite some of the pre-election rhetoric about the nation being overrun by non-believers of various stripes, this obviously did not happen.

Of the remaining 22 percent of voters, 9 percent followed other religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Twelve percent fell into the “unaffiliated” category, which includes atheists and agnostics, but primarily consists of people who are religious but did not choose to identify themselves with a particular religion.

Further study of this information from polls conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reveals several important conclusions.

First, white evangelical Protestant voters continue to punch above their weight. Even though they make up only 19 percent of the nation’s population, they accounted for 23 percent of the voters. The same held true for mainline Protestants, although to a lesser degree; their 15 percent of the population resulted in 16 percent of the electorate.

Both Protestant groups voted for Romney, the evangelicals by a margin of almost 4-to-1. Despite theological misgivings about Romney’s Mormonism, they actually gave him a higher percentage of their vote than they did to McCain four years earlier. This also was a point higher than he gained among the Mormon population.

Second, white Catholics voted for Romney in percentages similar to mainline Protestants. While mainline Protestants preferred Romney 55 percent to 44 percent, white Catholics voted for him by a margin of 59 percent to 40 percent.

Third, minority religious voters favored Obama. More than 75 percent of Hispanic Catholics voted for Obama, while 95 percent of black Protestants did so. Together, they accounted for 14 percent of the electorate, compared to 61 percent of the white Christian vote.

Nothing is particularly surprising in these numbers. They are similar to the voting preferences for Republican and Democratic candidates in the previous three elections.

One religious trend within the country’s population did not play out as expected. The role organized religion plays among the U.S. population has been decreasing. This year, for the first time, the number of people who report themselves as unaffiliated with any religion has hit 20 percent, according to Pew’s pollsters. While this group went overwhelmingly for Obama, they did not actually vote in large numbers. They made up only 12 percent of the voters on election day. This poor turnout indicates that neither party is addressing their concerns.

A third of young people (ages 18-28) belong to the unaffiliated crowd, those who check the “none of the above” box when it comes to religious identity. Many pundits have identified this as a problem for the Republican Party, fearing that this identification will continue as these voters get older. This will probably not be the case. College-age people, as a group, always rebel against their parents when they leave home and dropping out of church is part of that. When they marry and have children, they tend to join churches and other religious institutions again.

The real problem for the Republican Party is its identification with religious policies and views that are insensitive to women. The reopening of the debate over reproductive matters has alienated many female voters. The suggestion that workers at religious institutions should have fewer health-care rights than those employed at other businesses does not sit well with many women. Similarly, the views on rape expressed in religious terms by some male Republican candidates further damaged the party’s image among women.

In the end, it seems that people largely voted for the party that made them feel welcome. Republicans attracted those who were white, Christian and male, winning their votes by large numbers. Democrats attracted majorities among those voters who did not belong to all three of these categories. Add these results to the roughly 40 percent of the white male Christians who voted for Obama, and that explains the election’s outcome, at least from the religious perspective.