



Chapter Four

Obama, Religious Politics, and the Culture Wars

James L. Guth

Barack Obama's religious story is not only unique among American presidents but has also intersected repeatedly with his political career. His ties to religious communities frequently constituted a political advantage, but just as often presented obstacles to his success. Often a masterful orchestrator of religious interests and sentiments, he has sometimes been frustrated in building bridges across the theological, ideological, and partisan gulfs that divide America's religious faiths. This chapter will analyze President Obama's fortunes in executing an "ecumenical" political strategy in the context of conflicting preferences among religious groups.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Any assessment of American politics must consider two competing interpretations of religious alignments. *Ethnoreligious theory* emphasizes the historic religious groups that migrated to America and often multiplied upon reaching its shores. Nineteenth-century party politics consisted largely of assembling winning coalitions of these groups (Kleppner 1979). Even into the twentieth century, the GOP represented historically dominant mainline Protestant churches, such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists, while Democrats spoke for religious minorities: Catholics, Jews, and evangelical Protestants (especially in the South). By the 1980s, these configurations had shifted, as mainline Protestants dwindled in number, evangelicals moved toward the GOP, the ancient Catholic-Democratic alliance frayed, and black Protestants became a critical Democratic bloc. Growing religious diversity added Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others to the equation, usually on the Democratic side, along with increasing numbers of "unaffiliated"



or “secular” voters. Still, even today many analysts think in ethnoreligious terms, referring to the “evangelical,” “Catholic,” “Jewish,” or “Muslim” vote.

An alternative view is the *culture wars* or *religious restructuring theory* introduced into political parlance by James Davison Hunter’s *Culture Wars* (1991). Hunter saw critical theological differences emerging *within* the old traditions: “Orthodox” believers accept “an external, definable, and transcendent authority” and adhere to traditional doctrines, while “progressives” replace old religious tenets with new ones based on personal experience or scientific rationality (Hunter 1991, 44). The progressives are joined by secular Americans who ignore or reject religion but see morality in the same way. These new religious divisions quickly congealed around abortion, feminism, gay rights, and the role of faith in public life but infused other political attitudes, as well. Such factionalism was most evident in the historic mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Anglo-Catholic traditions but sometimes extended to other religious communities, as well. As we shall see, Obama stands at the intersection of these perspectives; both ethnoreligious and culture war theories are useful in delineating his support and describing the battles over his policies.

BARACK OBAMA AND RELIGIOUS POLITICS

Learning from the two previous national campaigns, Democratic presidential candidates in 2008 sought to improve chances for victory by reducing the “God gap,” the propensity of religious voters to favor the GOP (Guth 2009b). Barack Obama seemed ideally suited for this purpose, as he embodied several crucial Democratic ethnoreligious constituencies. As David Remnick has noted, Obama’s own family was “multiconfessional.” Raised by an agnostic anthropologist mother and her lapsed Methodist-Baptist-Unitarian parents, Obama nevertheless grew up in contact with several traditions: his (absent) father and Indonesian stepfather were Muslim (he himself was registered as “Muslim” in a school in Indonesia, where he also attended a Catholic school) (Remnick 2010, 60–69). He later encountered the black Protestant (and Catholic) traditions as a community organizer in Chicago and eventually joined the Trinity United Church of Christ, a large, politically potent congregation affiliated with the predominantly white United Church of Christ (UCC), the most theologically and politically liberal mainline Protestant denomination. To round out his ethnoreligious connections, Obama even had an in-law who was an African American rabbi in Chicago (Chafets 2009).

Obama’s roots clearly situated him in the historic Democratic home of ethnoreligious minorities, but education and experience made him a “pro-

gressive” in the culture wars. Obama’s theology is difficult to pin down but is clearly based more on rational commitment than emotive attachments or doctrinal affirmation. In college he read Christian theology and was especially impressed by Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr, moved by “Social Gospel” thinkers of the early twentieth century, and was later impressed with the “black liberation” theology of his Trinity pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Above all, his own organizing experience demonstrated the efficacy of religious institutions and people in social reform, leading him toward a nondogmatic, ecumenical religious liberalism that meshed well with a basic ideological “pragmatism” (Obama 1995, 2006; Kloppenberg 2010).

His presidential campaign drew astutely on his understanding of religious traditions. His famous speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention asserted that “we worship an awesome God in the blue states,” drawing on evangelical language to deny the Republicans a monopoly on religious conviction (Remnick 2010, 399). Against secularists in his own party, he welcomed “people of faith” to the public square and assiduously wooed religious leaders, including evangelicals often associated with conservative causes, such as megachurch pastors Rick Warren and Joel Hunter. He campaigned not only in black churches but also evangelical and mainline Protestant ones. (His speech at the June 2007 meeting of the UCC, his own denomination, actually triggered an IRS inquiry over possible improper political use of religious resources.) Obama’s religious outreach staff was led by evangelicals but was quite ecumenical (Sullivan 2008).

During the early 2008 primaries, Democratic candidates regularly addressed faith-related issues. Although both Hillary Clinton and Obama cast an ecumenical net, the Democratic electorate quickly revealed worrisome religious cleavages. Obama steadily built support among black Protestants, obliterating Clinton’s early lead among black clergy and churchgoers, and did increasingly well among Latinos, both Catholic and Protestant. But despite his early appeal to evangelical and mainline Protestants, who were key to his victory in Iowa, this support steadily diminished, as did that of working-class Catholics, Jews, and white churchgoers generally. Even campaign brochures with Obama standing behind a pulpit and overshadowed by a cross did not reverse the trend. At the same time, however, he dominated the secular Democratic vote, a source of consistent electoral strength.

Obama’s “religious problem” was exacerbated by two crucial events in the spring of 2008. First, the media finally highlighted controversial statements of Obama’s retired pastor and long-time ally, Jeremiah Wright, whose black liberation theology did not play well to white audiences. Obama quickly repudiated Wright’s most provocative claims and reacted to further inflammatory statements by resigning his membership at Trinity (Remnick 2010, 517–38).

But Obama himself added fuel to the fire by telling Democratic donors in San Francisco that white working-class Pennsylvanians were “bitter” about their situation and, as a result, clung to guns and religion, setting off a firestorm of criticism from both Clinton Democrats and, of course, Republicans. By the end of the heated nominating contest, the Democratic constituency was deeply divided along ethnoreligious lines.

Obama quickly patched the holes in his coalition, meeting privately and repeatedly with ecumenical groups of religious leaders, establishing “Catholics for Obama,” speaking to the African Methodist Episcopal Church convention, working with the “Matthew 25 Network” of religious liberals, and even advertising on Christian radio stations—usually the preserve of evangelical religion and Republican politicians. While remaining staunchly pro-choice, he emphasized a “common ground” objective of reducing the number of abortions. Most important, Obama endorsed a “faith-based initiative,” not unlike the Bush administration’s, appalling secular Democrats and liberal commentators, but pleasing many religious leaders, including some of the orthodox.

The Democratic National Convention provided additional opportunities for coalition building, oozing hospitality for the religious with an ecumenical prayer service, special sessions for faith groups, ample religious rhetoric, and a benediction by evangelical pastor Joel Hunter. Pro-life religious leaders on the Platform Committee, such as evangelical Tony Campolo, modified the usual pro-choice abortion plank with a pledge to support women taking a pregnancy to term, an achievement that did not prevent picketing by pro-life groups. Finally, Senator Joe Biden, an observant Catholic, was chosen as Obama’s running mate in part to appeal to religiously orthodox Democrats, the very group most likely to defect to the GOP. Although Biden soon ran into his own “religious” problems, the nomination probably had the desired effect (Guth 2009b).

Obama’s inaugural address may have quoted the Apostle Paul’s admonition to “put away childish things,” but his 2008 campaign exemplified that Christian missionary’s determination to “be all things to all people.” The campaign reached out not only to traditional Democratic religious constituencies, such as black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, Jews, and secular Americans, but also to evangelical Protestants, traditionalist Catholics, and other groups more often thought part of the GOP’s religious base. Although this approach did not shift large blocs of voters, it established Obama as a serious religious person and blunted the antipathy often directed at Democrats by religious conservatives. Although the “God gap” still appeared in November, Obama ran ahead of Kerry among frequent churchgoers and was actually seen by voters as more “religious” than McCain.

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S RELIGIOUS COALITION

Obama's decisive victory suggested to some the emergence of a "new Democratic majority." To consider possible religious aspects of such a majority, we draw on the National Survey of Religion and Politics, conducted by the University of Akron. In table 4.1, we have ordered ethnoreligious constituencies from most to least Democratic and divided the three largest Christian communities into theological or "culture war" factions. Obama clearly won strong backing from traditionally Democratic ethnoreligious minorities and secular voters, with large margins among black Protestants, agnostics and atheists, non-Christians, Jews, the religiously unaffiliated, and Latinos, both Catholic and Protestant. (The latter result reversed strong Latino Protestant preference for Bush in 2004.) Obama also benefitted from enhanced turnout among his strongest supporters, especially African American Protestants. Indeed, as the fourth column shows, these ethnoreligious groups collectively made up over half the Democratic coalition.

Obama also broke even in two critical "swing" groups, Anglo-Catholics and mainline Protestants, but did poorly among Latter-day Saints and evangelical Protestants. As in previous elections, culture war divisions appeared in the large white Protestant and Anglo-Catholic camps, as Obama won over religious progressives but fared more poorly among the orthodox (and often worse than Democratic congressional candidates). Nevertheless, a good many centrist and orthodox voters felt close to Obama, even if they didn't vote for him.

On balance, then, Obama's arduous religious strategy was a modest plus for his masterfully executed campaign—or at the very least, prevented religious factors from being a negative. But although he improved on Kerry's 2004 performance in several ethnoreligious communities, the continuity of religious voting is quite impressive: evangelicals remained entrenched as the core of the reduced GOP, and Democrats depended on ethnoreligious minorities, as they have throughout history, and the growing secular contingent also enhanced its role. Mainline Protestant and Anglo-Catholic voters, on the other hand, remained divided, with the orthodox supporting the GOP and progressives supporting the Democrats.

The 2008 election produced a Democratic majority, but President Obama would have to consolidate this coalition by accommodating both the party's usual religious constituents and some new ones. As ever for Democrats, this would not be an easy task, as they would have to pick their way through their constituencies' preferences on social, economic, and even foreign policy. To illustrate the problem, table 4.2 reports religious voters' views on several representative issues. As we might expect, culture war questions such as

Table 4.1. Religious Groups in the 2008 Presidential Election (in percentages)

<i>Religious Groups</i>	<i>Obama Two- Party Vote</i>	<i>Close to Obama</i>	<i>US House Democratic Vote</i>	<i>Democratic Party Identification</i>	<i>Percentage of Democratic Coalition</i>
Black Protestants	95	82	89	84	19.5
Agnostic/Atheists	81	68	80	79	4.1
Non-Christian	77	71	88	73	4.3
Jews	76	66	75	72	2.5
Latino Catholics	73	65	75	56	6.8
Unaffiliated (Secular)	68	63	67	59	12.6
Latino Protestants	66	51	75	71	3.2
Anglo-Catholics	49	51	52	46	18.6
<i>Progressives</i>	66	62	64	59	8.1
<i>Centrists</i>	40	45	47	41	7.6
<i>Orthodox</i>	41	47	45	38	2.9
Mainline Protestants	49	51	49	45	16.4
<i>Progressives</i>	59	59	56	54	6.8
<i>Centrists</i>	52	52	54	43	7.3
<i>Orthodox</i>	29	39	30	33	2.1
Latter-day Saints	28	33	23	22	1.6
Evangelical Protestants	24	31	24	25	10.6
<i>Progressives</i>	47	53	44	49	1.9
<i>Centrists</i>	41	40	43	38	4.4
<i>Orthodox</i>	14	25	18	17	4.3
Total	53	52	53	49	100.0

Source: National Survey of Religion and Politics. University of Akron. 2008.

abortion and gay rights certainly differentiated Democratic and Republican religious groups, but they also split the Democrats to an extent. A narrow majority of the electorate rejected substantial restrictions on abortion, but there were massive differences between agnostics, atheists, secular, non-Christian, and Jewish voters on one side, and Latino and black Protestants on the other. In the larger Christian communions, abortion divided progressives and the orthodox in stark fashion.

Although the same pattern appeared on removing Bush's limits on embryonic stem cell research, support was higher in almost every religious group, reflecting perhaps the scientific community's drumbeat on the research's potential benefits. Similar intra-party cleavages opened on gay rights. Although culture war patterns appeared on whether gays should have all the same rights as other citizens, overall public support was quite high, with only black Protestants and orthodox evangelicals dissenting in large numbers. On gay marriage, however, the gaps within the Democratic coalition were wider when respondents chose between same-sex marriage, civil unions, and traditional marriage.

Religious divisions also extended to government welfare policies. At the time of the election, support for a national health-care plan was one issue that clearly united the ethnoreligious core of Obama's coalition, while attracting substantial support from religious progressives and centrists in the large white Christian traditions. Nevertheless, evangelicals, Latter-day Saints, and orthodox believers were firmly opposed, leaving the electorate closely divided, portending a major battle. And although a majority of black Protestants favored more government services, even if this required higher taxes, this idea was not popular among other Democratic religious groups, although some were more likely to accept tax increases to reduce poverty. Even here, evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Anglo-Catholics were less supportive, especially the orthodox and centrists. Responses to questions on tax cuts, aid to minorities, environmental protection, and global warming reveal similar lineups (data not shown).

Finally, religious divisions extended even to foreign policy. Despite considerable disagreement among Democratic religious groups over US military power, most gave it a lower priority than Anglo-Catholics, mainline Protestants, and especially evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. In the three large Christian communities, once again, the orthodox strongly backed military strength. On Iraq, Obama's ethnoreligious constituencies not only thought the war unjust (data not shown) but also strongly favored an immediate exit. In this preference, they were joined by many progressives from the larger traditions but opposed by centrists and the orthodox, who were willing to wait until Iraq was more stable. Finally, most Democratic ethnoreligious minorities favored an even-handed or even pro-Palestinian stance on the Middle East, while Jews, Latter-day Saints, and orthodox evangelicals tilted strongly toward Israel.

Of course, public opinion only sets the bounds within which a president strives to shape policy. Nevertheless, table 4.2 suggests that Obama would face religious obstacles in dealing with his agenda. In some instances, divisions within the Democratic coalition might prove troublesome. In others, the consistent conservatism of the orthodox on social, economic, and foreign policy would make his announced intention to construct new religious coalitions issue by issue more difficult. And these obstacles surfaced even as the new president began to build his administration and sought to set a new tone for public life through his inaugural activities.

RHETORIC, PERSONNEL, AND POLICY

During the transition, Obama and his aides held an unprecedented number of consultations with a broad spectrum of religious leaders, intensifying the

Table 4.2. Religious Groups and Policy Issues in 2009

	Pro-Choice	Lift Stem Cell Funding Limits	Back Equal Rights for Gays	Favor Gay Marriage	Favor National Health-Care Plan	More Public Services Even If More Taxes	Raise Taxes to Fight Poverty	Military Superiority a Top Priority	Bring Back Troops from Iraq	Favor Israel in Middle East
Black Protestant	52	66	51	18	63	53	57	50	85	37
Agnostic/Atheist	90	90	96	75	79	37	64	25	68	26
Non-Christian	87	70	80	58	71	44	75	23	63	25
Jews	91	86	88	55	78	46	68	44	55	81
Latino Catholics	58	45	59	32	55	17	49	56	54	35
Unaffiliated (Secular)	86	72	78	51	54	26	50	42	56	40
Latino Protestants	40	64	70	33	52	38	47	44	55	39
Anglo-Catholics	50	66	71	27	48	22	43	54	41	43
Progressives	79	78	82	45	66	24	52	44	52	39
Centrists	41	68	69	21	40	19	36	59	34	43
Orthodox	25	40	55	16	38	24	46	59	38	49
Mainline Protestants	67	77	70	30	44	20	46	47	38	44
Progressives	83	85	77	41	46	26	52	38	45	36
Centrists	70	78	73	32	47	16	44	49	40	41
Orthodox	37	61	53	11	34	17	40	59	26	61
Latter-day Saints	30	68	50	14	40	9	36	72	30	57
Evangelical Protestants	34	51	46	11	33	16	30	67	28	64
Progressives	87	72	62	35	47	13	32	56	42	42
Centrists	52	66	60	22	52	25	37	59	35	45
Orthodox	21	43	39	4	24	14	27	71	24	73
All Respondents	56	65	63	28	48	25	45	53	46	47

Source: National Survey of Religion and Politics, University of Akron, 2008.

ecumenical approach of his campaign. Religious historian Martin Marty argued cogently that Obama was trying to “enact the plurality that he embodies.” Indeed, these contacts were obviously not for spiritual sustenance but to “mobilize faith-based communities behind his administration” (Saslow 2009). This ambitious effort continued with inaugural events suffused with religious observances and people.

For the inauguration itself, Obama chose the veteran United Methodist civil rights leader, Rev. Joseph Lowery, to give the benediction. But it was his choice for the invocation, Rev. Rick Warren, that immediately revealed the pitfalls in religious coalition building. Warren was not only an emerging evangelical leader, but had also engaged Obama in conversation for several years, had invited him to the massive Saddleback Community Church for events, and had hosted an Obama-McCain “forum” during the campaign. Warren was increasingly controversial among evangelicals for extending his concern beyond social issues to hunger and poverty, AIDs in the developing world, and the global environment. His selection was thus a symbolic bridge-building statement for Obama but aroused strong suspicion from some evangelicals. On the other side, Warren’s traditionalism on abortion and homosexuality produced howls of protest from religious liberals. A prominent gay Episcopalian bishop, Eugene V. Robinson, an early supporter of Obama, said that the choice was “like a slap in the face” (Zeleny and Kirkpatrick 2008). Even some presidential aides were surprised and disappointed.

Obama adamantly resisted demands to “uninvite” Warren (but he did ask Bishop Robinson to pray at a pre-inaugural concert), and polls showed strong bipartisan public support for his choice (Cohen 2009). Inauguration Day began with the customary private services for the president-elect at St. John’s Episcopal, just across from the White House, at which T. D. Jakes, the black pastor of a multiethnic Dallas megachurch, preached. At the inauguration itself, Warren’s invocation reflected both the president’s irenic objectives and Warren’s own faith, as he emphasized compassion and love and used Jewish and Muslim formulations in referring to God. But he concluded “in Jesus’ name” and segued into the Lord’s Prayer, giving secular, non-Christian, and religiously liberal Democrats occasion for new complaints. After being sworn in with Abraham Lincoln’s 1861 inaugural Bible, Obama’s own address reflected a strong affirmation of civil religion, suitably modified for his own purposes. Although he quoted “the words of Scripture” in urging Americans to “put away childish things,” he also affirmed the nation’s religious “patchwork” as a strength: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and non-believers.” And he pointedly invited the Muslim world to join in seeking “a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.” Lowery’s closing prayer echoed these ecumenical themes, and in

the evening, several religious communities staked their claim for inclusion by staging their own inaugural balls.

The traditional National Cathedral prayer service the next morning was primarily Christian, but included newly written prayers to reflect Obama's personal religious liberalism and to ease participation by an unprecedented array of clergy from almost every imaginable group: evangelicals and Catholics, Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists (but not Sikhs, who expressed strong disappointment). The service also featured the first woman to preach, the Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, president of the liberal mainline Disciples of Christ (Knowlton 2009).

Despite the impressive display of religious leadership and rhetoric during the Inauguration, Obama still lacked one element of a full religious strategy: a church home. The Obamas had never been regular churchgoers, but aides sensed that he wanted to connect to a religious community, and there was no dearth of congregations wooing the chief executive. Ultimately, after one Sunday venture to a black Protestant church, Obama decided not to join any, citing normal presidential concerns about security and the inconvenience for the host congregation. For spiritual sustenance, he relied instead on a daily devotional sent to his BlackBerry by Joshua DuBois, his religious outreach director, phone conversations with clergy friends, and occasional Camp David services conducted by a military chaplain. Although seemingly insignificant at the time, this decision denied Obama the weekly opportunity to visibly reaffirm his status as a Christian believer, one that would soon be questioned (Parsons 2010).

FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE, OBAMA STYLE

Obama's early reach across the political divisions among America's religious communities aroused some controversy but was generally a well-received attempt to reduce culture war hostilities. The strategy continued at the National Prayer Breakfast on February 5, when Obama announced creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, a revision of the Bush administration's program which sought to enlist religious groups in the provision of social services. Bush had indeed expanded the access of religious groups to federal funds, but his broader objectives had been stymied by controversy over whether such groups could restrict staff to members of their own faith. Obama had endorsed faith-based programs during the campaign but had promised to ban restricted hiring. He also hoped to expand the initiative's constituency beyond religious groups and to encourage programs to strengthen family life and reduce abortion, attacking one source of the culture wars directly (Boorstein and Kindy 2009).

To oversee the new program, Obama appointed an advisory council of twenty-five which compassed the religious waterfront. The council included several evangelicals, including Rev. Joel Hunter and Rev. Frank Page, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a bastion of the GOP religious coalition. In addition, Joel Stearns, president of World Vision, a major recipient of federal grants for overseas relief and development work, and Jim Wallis, a liberal evangelical and friend of the president, were also named to the council. Eventually the full membership included Catholic, mainline, and black Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and gay rights leaders. The council was charged with finding ways to reduce poverty, minimize abortions, promote responsible fatherhood, and foster interfaith dialogue abroad—an ambitious agenda—and was headed by Obama’s religious liaison, Joshua DuBois, a twenty-six-year-old black Pentecostal pastor (Parsons 2010).

Although Obama got considerable credit for bringing religious groups together to address a range of problems, he still received flack from adamant culture warriors. On the progressive side, secular and religious liberals joined separationist groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Americans United in condemning Obama’s inclusion of “Religious Right” figures, such as Page and Stearns, and lamenting his failure to reverse immediately the Bush policy on religious hiring. Christian Right groups, for their part, saw the advisory council as a smokescreen for liberal policies on abortion, gay rights, and social welfare. Even some council members were skeptical of prospects for major achievements.

That skepticism seemed warranted. The administration soon took the abortion mandate away from the council and also restricted discussion of the divisive hiring issue. After a year of conference calls and meetings, the body presented the White House with a 168-page report full of vague and relatively innocuous recommendations on government policies under its purview. The advisory council expired with a White House ceremony, which, like the report, received little public or administration attention. Although separationist groups continued to press the White House for a clear ban on “religious” hiring, they were frustrated when the executive order finally issued in November 2010 left most of the Bush administration rules intact (Gilgoff 2010).

At the same time that the administration was wrestling with these regulations, it quietly directed substantial funds from the 2009 economic stimulus package into religious charities and other “faith-based” enterprises. Although conservative and Republican critics had complained that language in the stimulus bill seemed to preclude such spending, one early analysis showed that Obama easily matched the Bush program in totals expended. The largest amounts went to Catholic groups such as Catholic Charities (at the very time that the bishops and administration were locked in battle over abortion in the health-care bill) (see

the following section). Protestant and Jewish groups received considerably less, as did minority traditions such as Muslims (Smith and Tau 2010). And although the administration admitted to aggressive “marketing” of available funds to religious groups, the Faith-Based Office denied charges that such efforts were politically motivated to build support for Obama.

ADMINISTRATIVE APPOINTMENTS

Although Obama clearly had major hopes for his experiment in religious coalition building, the economic crisis turned his attention in other directions, and the personnel and policy decisions of his first months reveal little evidence of the strategy. Although the attentive press emphasized the ethnic and theological diversity of the religious leaders with some connection to the new administration, Obama’s administrative and staff choices were generally confined to the core Democratic ethnoreligious, progressive, and secular constituencies. *National Journal* found that of the top 366 administration officials, only 31 percent were Protestant (even including black Protestants), 29 percent were Catholic (often Latino), 19 percent were Jewish, and 13 percent were unaffiliated (Barnes 2009). A perusal of the cabinet provides a more detailed religious assessment of top appointees, including three Methodists, one Chinese Baptist, one black Episcopalian, two Latino Catholics, one Lebanese Catholic, one Anglo-Catholic, and seven “secular” appointees. And even the nominees with religious affiliations had, for the most part, never been deeply engaged with religious institutions or even mildly observant. Similarly, Obama’s Supreme Court nominees, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, were raised in religious homes (Catholic and Jewish), but neither maintained regular religious practice. Both were warmly received by pro-choice and church-state separationist groups but greeted warily by pro-lifers and Christian conservatives.

Even nominees with active religious attachments ran into the very culture war battles Obama was striving to avoid. The nomination of Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius, a Catholic, as secretary of health and human services elicited a heated struggle over her strong pro-choice stance. Although this did not prevent confirmation, it did result in criticism from the Vatican and a reminder from her bishop to refrain from participating in the Eucharist. (Later the appointment of a centrist pro-life Catholic to another HHS post evoked similar protests from pro-choice groups.) Obama’s selection of Dr. Francis Collins as director of the National Institutes of Health aroused a different critique—from secular Democrats and scientists. Famous for his work decoding the human genome, Collins’s evangelical faith led to fears that he would

inject his religion into administrative decisions—such as funding for stem cell research—that should be made on scientific grounds. Collins was also confirmed (he actually favored such research), but this episode further illustrated the difficulty in surmounting the religious gulfs dividing Americans—or at least the American political elite (Boyer 2010).

INTO THE CULTURE WARS

Other confirmation skirmishes too numerous to mention almost invariably focused on abortion, gay rights, or related cultural issues, but these were merely a prelude for the inevitable confrontations on policy. On abortion-related issues, Obama played the role of “reverser” of GOP policies: lifting the “Mexico City” ban on federal funds for international organizations involved with abortion; modifying the Bush “conscience clause” protecting medical professionals who refused to perform procedures violating religious tenets; cutting funding for “abstinence-based” sex education; and, especially, removing limits on federal funding of embryonic stem cell research (Stein 2009).

Although Obama did not go as far as some supporters wanted on any of these decisions, all were applauded by secular Democrats and most religious liberals (the signing ceremony for the stem cell guidelines was witnessed by a bevy of mainline Protestant and Jewish leaders) but were deplored by Catholic officials and most evangelicals. Indeed, Catholic reaction was so strong that the University of Notre Dame’s invitation to Obama to give the commencement address aroused a heated national debate that spread far beyond the Catholic community. Thus, although *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (2009) exulted that “the culture warriors” had been “laid off,” a wiser observer saw these decisions producing “a reassessment of Obama by some Christian conservative and other religious leaders, who now charge him with inflaming the very cultural divisions he once pledged to heal” (Brown 2009).

If the Notre Dame imbroglio was not enough to show that religious divisions over abortion could not be papered over, that fact became evident in the health-care battle. Obama hoped that his careful coalition building during the campaign and early months of his administration would create a powerful religious army behind his plan. At first, the prospects looked good: a broad phalanx of religious leaders from the left and center endorsed action, as did the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Health Association, representing the large Catholic hospital sector. But the legislation still fell victim to the abortion issue. Pro-life Catholic Democrats in the House, led by Rep. Bart Stupak of Michigan, fought with pro-choice colleagues over inclusion of abortion services.

With Republican support, Stupak added an amendment prohibiting any possible funding of the procedure, a victory that later became the prime obstacle to House passage of a Senate bill with a weaker provision. In a serious intramural split, the Catholic bishops refused to accept anything except the Stupak amendment, but the Catholic Health Association and some religious orders supported the Senate bill. Under enormous party pressure to vote for the legislation, Stupak finally yielded, but only on the promise of an executive order implementing a restrictive interpretation (Alter 2010). Obama signed the order and the bill passed, but savaged by criticism from both pro-life and pro-choice groups, Stupak decided to retire. And the extent of permissible abortion funding quickly became a matter of administrative controversy, as did the Faith-Based Office's effort to use religious leaders to spread the word on the new health plan to their parishioners (Minnery 2010).

The president made even less progress resolving gay rights issues. During the campaign, Obama had strongly advocated repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) policy on gays in the military, equal treatment under federal employee health plans, and repeal of the Federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed by a Republican Congress in 1996 and signed by President Clinton. Obama stopped short of supporting gay marriage, however, fearing that this might endanger his appeal to religious conservatives. Once in office, his focus on economic recovery and health-care legislation led to a "no distractions" policy on gay rights issues (Alter 2010, 79). Rather, Obama followed a low visibility, piecemeal strategy: appointing gays to important administrative posts, issuing an executive order providing some partner benefits for gay federal employees, preparing new rules to protect transgender federal employees, and formally inviting gay families to the White House Easter Egg Roll. But his continued verbal support for repeal of both DADT and DOMA, combined with the lack of action, only succeeded in frustrating both sides in the culture wars.

Events soon forced Obama's hand. As gay rights groups challenged DOMA in the federal courts, the Justice Department followed custom in defending the constitutionality of the statute. When the department's brief became public, gay rights leaders put enormous pressure on the White House to reverse this action. On June 29, 2009, at a White House gathering of gay rights leaders, the president reiterated his commitment to repeal DOMA, end DADT, and press for passage of hate crimes legislation. He lamented that congressional leaders saw little prospect for repeal of DOMA, but the Justice Department would amend its brief in defense of its constitutionality with a strong statement advocating repeal. Obama resisted suggestions to end DADT by executive order rather than statute (Hertzberg 2009), acceding to the wishes of Defense Secretary Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Mullen

to allow the military to ease into preparations for a change in policy with a comprehensive internal study.

These steps did not mollify gay rights leaders or religious progressives, but they did energize criticism from a coalition of religious conservatives, including some working with the administration on health care and other issues. The introduction of the Respect for Marriage Act by House Democratic liberals, continuing state battles over gay marriage, and a highly publicized same-sex marriage ordinance in Washington, DC, had activated conservative alliances comprising evangelicals, Catholics, black Protestants, and others. Now a national coalition was formalized by the “Manhattan Declaration,” signed by a host of evangelical leaders, Catholic bishops and archbishops, Orthodox clergy, and black Protestant ministers. The tone of the document was strongly critical of administration actions on both abortion and gay rights (Goodstein 2009).

Although Obama was still hoping to avoid dramatic action, events—mostly court decisions—continued to force his hand. A federal district court in July declared DOMA unconstitutional, and a month later, another federal district judge ruled that Proposition 8, a California referendum passed in 2008 prohibiting same-sex marriage, was an unconstitutional denial of equal protection. And while the Senate was unable to act on a House bill repealing DADT, a California federal district judge held the 1993 statute unconstitutional, rejecting Justice Department arguments to the contrary. Although a Court of Appeals action stayed this ruling pending appeal (and was sustained by the Supreme Court), the combination of these and later court decisions put gay rights issues high on the political radar scope and presented the administration with a dilemma going into the 2010 elections: take a strong stand on both issues and risk losing some conservative or centrist religious voters, or delay action and further discourage gay rights and liberal religious groups in a year when Democratic enthusiasm was already lagging.

Although the repeal of DADT had broader public support and faced less resistance from conservative religious groups and Republicans, the prospects for repeal were still clouded. The Defense Department’s elaborate review, released on November 30, after the congressional elections, recommended the repeal, as expected, but also noted strong objections to inclusion of openly gay military personnel on the part of a large section of the chaplaincy and soldiers in combat zones (Department of Defense 2010). Senate Republicans, led by John McCain, continued resistance during the lame duck session of Congress, but on December 18, the Senate passed the repeal, which the president signed on December 22 before a large and emotional crowd of invited gay rights advocates (Branigan, Wilgoren, and Bacon 2010). Although thorny administrative issues, especially involving the chaplaincy, remained to be

settled, this action left DOMA front and center on the cultural battle lines carrying over into Obama's second two years as president. Vice President Biden argued that recognition of same-sex marriage was "inevitable," even as Obama admitted publicly to be "struggling" with the issue, despite his support for repeal of DOMA (Kellman 2010).

INTO THE WORLD: RELIGION AND FOREIGN POLICY

Although religious groups have always been interested in American foreign policy and religious beliefs influence citizens' views, the interaction between religion and American foreign policy has intensified in recent years (Guth 2009a; Rock 2011). Religious organizations are more involved in US government programs abroad, events overseas often impinge on domestic concerns, and above all, international terrorism problems often have a clear religious component, even evoking a "clash of civilizations." Obama's membership in a "cross-national, cross-confessional" family seemingly gave him an edge in dealing with international issues with a religious component, and he immediately charged his advisory council to seek out interfaith programs that would advance mutual interests with foreign countries. His secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, was also attuned to the religious resonances of foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. Yet here as well the president confronted high barriers to using religious values as diplomatic leverage.

A prime foreign policy objective was to restore warmer relations with the Muslim world, which were depleted by the Bush's administration war on terror and its failure to make any advances in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. Obama immediately began a public wooing of the Muslim world, using his inaugural address, giving his first official interview to an Arabic news agency, and visiting important Muslim countries. In April 2009, he told Turkey's Grand National Assembly that the United States "is not and never will be at war with Islam," noting his own part-Muslim family. In June, he reiterated these themes at Cairo University, asking for a "new beginning" in relations. While extending the rhetorical olive branch, the administration took quiet actions to reduce tensions, starting programs to encourage entrepreneurship, business development, science education, and health and intellectual exchanges in Muslim nations (Packer 2010).

This overture was complicated by other foreign policy objectives. Blue-ribbon reports from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the president's own Faith-Based Advisory Council had encouraged Obama to emphasize religious freedom in foreign policy, but he showed little inclination to do so. For many religious leaders, his attitude was epitomized by the

delay in filling the post of ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom until June 2010, when he nominated a diplomatically inexperienced pastor but failed to press for quick Senate confirmation. Secretary Clinton's verbal shift from "religious freedom" to "freedom of worship" convinced advocacy groups that the administration was not only deemphasizing this policy objective, but narrowing it, as well (Farr 2010). Obama's evident reluctance to stress religious freedom in diplomacy with Muslim nations, China, and Vietnam raised serious concerns within the ecumenical alliance of evangelicals, Catholics, and Jews that had grown up around the issue (Hertzke 2004).

At least initially, Obama's Muslim outreach improved evaluations of the United States, but these gains were quickly limited by the continuing US role in Iraq and the decision to bolster military commitments in Afghanistan. These policies not only antagonized Muslims around the world but also divided Obama's ethnoreligious and progressive constituency at home. Most minority religious groups strongly opposed these ventures, as did religious liberals and seculars. But it was above all the administration's failure to make progress in settling the Palestinian-Israeli controversy that prevented much long-term improvement in relations with Muslim nations.

This continuing problem not only presented Obama with a diplomatic nightmare but threw him into a whirlpool of domestic religious conflicts, as well. The influential Jewish community was always sensitive to any hint that he was sacrificing Israel's safety or essential interests to achieve a "two-state" solution. Although Obama had old and close relations with Jewish Democrats (with many on his campaign and White House staffs), some Jewish groups had been suspicious of Obama's Muslim ties and had supported Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic contest. And Jewish lobbies were credited with blocking Obama's nomination of Charles W. Freeman as chair of the National Intelligence Council on the grounds of his purported hostility to Israel (Smith 2009). While mainline Protestant officials, black Protestant leaders, and Catholic bishops favored an "even-handed" or even "pro-Palestinian" policy, evangelicals were, for the most part, vocally pro-Israeli. Thus, administration moves to prod Israel for concessions met strong resistance from Jewish groups and evangelicals, even as they were applauded by parts of Obama's core constituency. In the end, few religious groups were satisfied with US policy, even as negotiations remained stalemated (Lexington 2010).

Events at home further complicated relations with Muslims abroad and divided religious groups at home. Continued terrorist plots, the shooting of soldiers at Fort Hood by a Muslim officer, and above all, the proposed construction of an Islamic center a few blocks from the site of the 9/11 attacks in New York City revived anti-Muslim sentiments and hurt America's image

in the Muslim world. Anti-mosque demonstrations in New York and well-publicized threats by a Florida preacher to burn the Quran threatened to undo the administration's work. When Obama commented that Muslims had a right to build the New York center but reserved judgment on the expediency of doing so, he angered both sides. By the end of 2010, international polls showed that America's image in Muslim countries (except in the president's boyhood home of Indonesia) had retraced 2008 levels (Pew Research Center 2010).

Ironically, Obama's Muslim initiative produced an undesired byproduct in domestic politics. By 2010, polls were showing increased public uncertainty about Obama's own religious identity, with large minorities, especially among Republicans, now seeing him as a Muslim. As surveys showed that Muslims were among the least-liked religious groups, such suspicions became a political albatross. Although nursed along by the conservative media and some Republicans, this perception also owed something to Obama's early decision not to attend a Washington church. Perhaps recognizing this mistake, soon after the release of one poll the Obamas attended Easter services at Allen Chapel AME in Washington with appropriate press coverage. Not only did the Obamas begin to attend religious services more regularly but also religious references began to reappear in presidential speeches with much greater frequency (Lee 2010).

RELIGIOUS GROUPS EVALUATE OBAMA

How did religious groups react to the Obama administration? Table 4.3 traces the trajectory of assessments, based on data from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Although the Center's religious measures are not as detailed as those in tables 4.1 and 4.2, we can still get some purchase on trends. To produce sufficient numbers for smaller groups, we have combined two adjacent monthly surveys from the early administration, two from summer 2009, and three from February through April 2010, the latest available as of this writing.

The president began with almost two-thirds of the public approving his performance. Not surprisingly, his core ethnoreligious constituency gave him the highest marks, ranging from 90 percent among black Protestants to 65 percent among the unaffiliated. A solid majority of white mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics also approved, but evangelicals were more critical, with their average weighed down by very negative scores among their large orthodox contingent. By his second six months, Obama was slumping toward 50 percent overall, but religious patterns remained largely the same, with rock-hard support among black Protestants and significant declines among

Table 4.3. Religious Groups and Support for President Obama, 2009–2010

	February/ March 2009	August/ September 2009	February/ March/April 2010	Change in Approval
Black Protestant	90	91	88	-2
Latino Catholic	85	53	68	-17
Jewish	79	68	54	-25
Agnostic/Atheist	76	70	60	-16
Latino Protestant	73	49	54	-19
Other Christians	71	57	59	-12
All Non-Christian	68	77	65	-3
Unaffiliated (Secular)	65	56	48	-17
Mainline Protestant	55	47	42	-13
<i>Progressives</i>	55	49	40	-15
<i>Centrist</i>	59	47	47	-12
<i>Orthodox</i>	50	43	34	-16
Anglo-Catholic	54	53	42	-12
<i>Progressives</i>	52	57	51	-1
<i>Centrist</i>	53	58	39	-14
<i>Orthodox</i>	55	48	41	-14
Latter-day Saints	56	27	24	-32
Evangelical Protestant	43	28	26	-17
<i>Progressives</i>	57	43	33	-14
<i>Centrist</i>	50	34	25	-25
<i>Orthodox</i>	38	23	24	-14
All Respondents	62	51	47	-15

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Latino Catholics and Protestants, Latter-day Saints, and evangelicals. And in the three large white Christian communities, the orthodox were clearly most negative. By spring 2010, his support had slipped a little more nationally, although black Protestants remained loyal and he had recovered some ground among Latinos. Ominously, Jewish evaluations had dropped substantially and Obama had also fallen well below 50 percent among mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics (groups he split evenly with McCain in 2008), and unaffiliated citizens were also turning against the president.

Although we cannot connect these ratings precisely with reaction to Obama policies, an April 2010 Pew Center survey asked respondents to score his performance on specific issues: handling the economy, health care, immigration, Afghanistan, Iran, and energy policy. Although these evaluations are naturally correlated with the president's overall rating, they do vary considerably. Looking at religious groups' deviations from national trends can give us some insight into their assessments. As one might expect, groups giving the president above-average ratings across the board were his strongest ethnoreligious

constituencies: black Protestants, non-Christians, and agnostic/atheists. But the opposition varied. On economic management, for example, Latter-day Saints and evangelicals were far more critical than the national average, followed distantly by mainline Protestants. On health care, once again Latter-day Saints and evangelicals led the critics, followed more closely by mainline and Latino Protestants. On immigration, evangelicals were most critical, followed by mainline Protestants, Latino Protestants, and Anglo-Catholics. On Afghanistan, however, ethnoreligious differences were muted, with only black Protestants deviating much from the national average (in a positive direction). On Iran (and probably other Middle East issues), Jews were most critical, followed by Latter-day Saints, evangelicals, and Latino Protestants, all strong supporters of Israel (data not shown). Whatever the variations, however, traditional religious patterns appeared to be reasserting themselves.

RELIGIOUS CONSTITUENCIES IN THE 2010 ELECTIONS AND BEYOND

Although old religious alignments seemed to be reappearing as the 2010 campaign began, explicitly religious mobilization was remarkably modest. Although a few liberal Catholic groups fought (unsuccessfully) to protect several new Catholic House members who had backed the Obama agenda, Democratic religious leaders almost universally lamented the absence of the broad outreach that had worked so well in 2006 and 2008. The Democratic National Committee (and the “Hill” committees) left religious liaison posts unfilled and directed little money to religious appeals (Burke 2010). On the GOP side, conservative religious groups took a back seat to the Tea Party mobilization, which absorbed at least some religious activism, despite its libertarian bent. Pulpits were also relatively quiet, although 56 percent of Catholics and 31 percent of evangelicals did report clerical discussions on abortion, perhaps prompted by the health-care battle. Few other issues received much clerical attention (Jones and Cox 2010).

Despite the lack of religious activism and the campaign focus on economics, health care, and the role of government, religious alignments basically reverted to their pre-2008 form, with Obama’s gains in most sectors rolled back. Combining reports from exit polls (conducted only in some states), a Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey (Jones and Cox 2010), and a few other sources, we can get a reasonably detailed picture of religious voting. By various estimates, evangelicals gave 71 percent to 78 percent of the vote to Republicans, compared to 56 percent to 59 percent by mainline Protestants and white Catholics, up in both the latter communities from 2008 and 2006.

Unaffiliated voters favored the Democrats with 57 percent to 66 percent, down considerably from 2008 and 2006. Black Protestants and Latino Catholics remained Democratic bastions (although with lower turnout), but Latino Protestants inched back toward their 2004 Republican preferences. Overall, the “God Gap” persisted, as 60 percent of regular churchgoers voted Republican, compared with 44 percent of the less observant.

Thus, Obama’s first two years not only failed to alter the basic religious configuration of American political parties, but the modest 2008 Democratic gains in some religious constituencies—especially among white Catholics, mainline and Latino Protestants, and the unaffiliated—were “given back.” PRRI’s survey (Jones and Cox 2010) also confirmed that the president’s religious identity was problematic, as increasing numbers of Americans concluded that his religion was substantially different from their own, leading to more negative evaluations. This perception was most common among evangelicals (65 percent) but somewhat less prevalent among white Protestants and white Catholics (52 percent). Such assessments no doubt derived in part from the mistaken belief that Obama was Muslim. As a solid majority of evangelicals and white Catholics thought that Islam was incompatible with American values (57 and 53 percent, respectively), as did large numbers of mainline Protestants and minority Christians (47 and 45 percent, respectively), this misperception certainly contributed to poorer ratings. Indeed, two scholars argued that religious intolerance was now combining with racial prejudice to produce hostility toward Obama (Tesler and Sears 2010).

In the aftermath of the 2010 elections, Obama and the Democratic Party appeared uncertain about future religious strategies. The party’s left renewed its call for a thorough-going liberalism on economic, social, and foreign policy, one that would appeal primarily to ethnoreligious minorities, religious progressives, and seculars. Indeed, Obama seemed to follow part of this strategy, meeting for the first time with officials of the National Council of Churches, representing the liberal mainline, and African American Protestant churches that had long constituted the religious partners favored by Democratic administrations (Dart 2010; Tipton 2007). And the revival of evangelical opposition and the drift to the right at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops might also seem to encourage reversion to old alliances.

Still, Obama’s own convictions and instincts favor revival of his “ecumenical” strategy and a continuing reluctance to return to the rutted tracks of established religious politics. Perhaps, in the fashion of his post-election compromise with Republicans on tax policy (Bai 2010), Obama will renew his quest for a “grand religious coalition,” chastened but not discouraged in his effort to tamp down the culture wars.

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