

## **Religion in the 2008 Election**

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Military campaigns, it is said, are always shaped by the lessons of the last war. So it is with the politics of religion in the United States. Soon after the 2004 election, pundits concluded that religion had played a crucial role in President Bush's narrow victory over John F. Kerry. Exit polls showed that more voters picked religiously freighted "moral issues" as the reason for their choice than any other option. Although some experts quickly contested this interpretation, later analysis of voting patterns confirmed that religion did shape the result (Campbell 2007). Bush won large majorities among regular church-goers, a fact quickly dubbed "the God gap," but a deeper analysis showed partisan configurations that portended a narrow, long-term GOP majority, grounded in religious affiliation and belief.

Much of the resulting commentary revealed considerable confusion over the operative religious forces (Guth et al. 2006). Two approaches have competed in professional analysis of religious voting: *Ethnoreligious theory* emphasizes the influence of religious affiliation on electoral choice (Kleppner 1979). For example, nineteenth-century parties were warring coalitions of ethnoreligious groups, with the GOP representing historically dominant Mainline Protestants, such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Methodists, while Democrats spoke for religious minorities: Catholics, Jews, and Evangelical Protestants (especially in the South). These divisions survived the New Deal's class politics, but by the 1980s alignments had shifted, as Mainline Protestants dwindled in number, Evangelicals joined the GOP, some Catholics deserted the Democrats, and Black Protestants became a critical Democratic bloc, along with "new" minorities such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and secular voters. Many

observers still think primarily in ethnoreligious terms, referring to the “Evangelical,” “Catholic,” “Jewish” or “Muslim” vote.

An alternative is the *religious restructuring* theory, introduced into political parlance by James Hunter’s *Culture Wars* (1991). Hunter saw new theological factionalism emerging *within* old traditions: the “orthodox” accept an external, definable, and transcendent authority and adhere to traditional doctrines, while “progressives” create new religious understandings based on experience or scientific rationality (p. 44). The progressives are joined by secular Americans who reject religion but see morality in much the same way. The “God gap” was a crude indicator of these divisions, as the orthodox are more observant than the progressives, but the factions were rooted in competing theological worldviews. These perspectives not only undergirded disputes over abortion, feminism, gay rights and the role of faith in public life, but soon infused other policy attitudes as well. Some political scientists derided Hunter’s theory (Fiorina 2005), but others confirmed a modified version (Layman 2001; Green 2007).

Both approaches help explain the 2004 results, as illustrated by Table 1. We report both voting by religious traditions, emphasized by ethnoreligious theory (Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, White Catholics and so on), and those of theological factions. Unlike Hunter’s bipolar model, we divide the big religious traditions into four factions, with “traditionalists” on the most theologically orthodox and observant pole, and “nominals,” with only vestigial religious attachments, anchoring the other end.

[Table 1 about here]

Religious traditions differed dramatically in 2004. Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals were overwhelmingly Republican, followed by Latino Protestants. On the

other side, most religious “minorities,” including Jews, Black Protestants, Latino Catholics, other non-Christian faiths and the unaffiliated, were staunchly Democratic. Mainline Protestants and Catholics were “swing” groups, almost evenly divided. But the vote in the three largest religious traditions also varied enormously by theological orientation, with Evangelical, Catholic and Mainline traditionalists far more Republican than their modernist and nominal co-parishioners, who were overwhelmingly Democratic. Indeed, each theological faction resembled its counterparts in other traditions more than opposing factions within its own.

Thus, each party had a distinct religious “base.” Bush received four-tenths of his votes from Evangelicals alone, mostly from traditionalists and centrists. Adding Catholic and Mainline traditionalists, as well as Latino Protestants, gave the GOP a solid traditionalist majority, holding conservative positions on social, foreign policy, and even economic issues (Guth et al. 2006). Of course, Republicans still needed votes from other religious groups and unaffiliated voters, but no GOP presidential aspirant in 2008 could ignore this traditionalist base. The strategic problem from a religious perspective was to hold and activate those voters, while attracting others.

The Democrats had a more complicated situation, given greater internal diversity, and John Kerry’s minority showing. Their largest single bloc were the unaffiliated, over one-fifth of Kerry voters, but they were joined by many Mainline Protestants, white Catholics, African-American Protestants and, cumulatively, other religious minorities, including Jews, always an important financial and activist constituency. The Democratic loss convinced some party strategists that the presidency could not be won in 2008 without breaking into GOP-leaning religious groups. They also warned that too many

Americans saw the party as unfriendly to religion and that Democratic candidates must find their “religious voice,” to avoid Kerry’s uncertain tone when confronted with faith-related issues. Kerry had also been hobbled by criticism from leaders of his own Catholic Church and his campaign failed to match the GOP’s religious outreach.

Of course, attracting a diverse array of religious voters was complicated, especially without angering secular ones. In fact, some party leaders and academics denied that the task was even necessary: Democrats could win with a strong appeal to working-class Americans, who had been seduced into voting against their economic interests by the GOP’s moralistic rhetoric (Frank 2004). Or the party could focus on Latinos and other ethnic minorities, highly educated professionals, and younger voters less connected to religious institutions (Judis and Teixeira 2002). These growing demographic groups might provide the base for a national majority without relying on religious appeals.

Despite such contentions, National Democratic Committee Chair Howard Dean launched a new religious strategy, commissioning studies, opening a liaison office for religious groups, sponsoring Web ventures for religious voters, working with religious consultants, and creating religious advisory committees (Gilgoff 2007). In concert with the congressional party committees, the DNC also recruited religious candidates for the 2006 elections, such as Congressman Ted Strickland, a Methodist minister elected Governor of Ohio, Robert Casey, Jr., a pro-life Catholic who won Republican Rick Santorum’s U.S. Senate seat, and Heath Shuler, an Evangelical NFL quarterback who captured a Republican House seat in North Carolina. Although Dean’s actions horrified many secular activists (Rosin 2007), they aided the recapture of Congress. Democrats

gained little ground among Evangelicals, but took a majority of white Catholics, always a swing group, and enhanced their totals among secular and minority religious voters. Democratic presidential aspirants quickly concluded that an astute religious strategy could mean success in 2008 (Sullivan 2008).

Religious strategies in 2008 would be shaped not only by past electoral patterns, but also by changes in the American religious landscape. First, there was some ebbing in public receptiveness to religious appeals by politicians. In 2004 most Americans wanted a president with a strong religious faith, thought religious groups should speak out on issues, and that the campaign had about the right amount of religious involvement, but by 2008 opinion was slightly less positive about religious politics (Guth et al. 2006; Pew Forum 2008b). Some attributed this to disenchantment with President Bush's overt religiosity, while others credited a growing secularity, as unaffiliated numbers inched up and some markers of religious practice declined. In addition, public opinion had liberalized on social issues such as same-sex marriage, civil unions and stem cell research. And, perhaps most important, the national agenda was dominated by the Iraq war and a slowing economy.

At the same time, two changes within the religious world received much attention: the political transformation of the Christian Right, and the emergence of a Religious Left. On the Right, old actors were passing from the scene. Jerry Falwell, founder of the original Moral Majority and continuing symbol of the movement, died in the 2007, as did D. James Kennedy, another founder. The Christian Coalition, created in 1991 by Pat Robertson and master strategist Ralph Reed, had finally imploded and although Robertson still made political pronouncements, most saw him as an

inconsequential sideshow. Even Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family complex was aging with him, although still generating mountains of letters and emails to Congress. Similar maladies afflicted other Christian Right groups, but religious activists remained a formidable cadre within the GOP.

Not only were old leaders disappearing, but some Christian conservatives were moving in new directions. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), led by Richard Cizik, now addressed issues long ignored by the Christian Right, including global warming, human rights, religious persecution, hunger and AIDs in developing countries, and international security. The NAE was echoed by a new generation of megachurch clergy, such Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church in California, Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, and Joel Hunter of Northland Community Church in Orlando, figures with national stature. Even the staunchly conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's largest Protestant denomination, at times seemed to move in more moderate directions (Gorski 2007). Although these trends were vigorously resisted by Evangelical hardliners and there was doubt as to whether these new leaders spoke for their largely Republican constituencies, the political ground was shifting, especially among younger Evangelicals (Fitzgerald 2008).

"New" conservatives were joined by a new Religious Left, spearheaded by liberal Evangelical Jim Wallis, founder of *Sojourners* magazine, whose appeals on poverty, disease, the environment and international peace were reaching a broad audience (Wallis 2008). Wallis and his allies were welcomed by the aging forces of Mainline liberalism as they sought to unite religious centrists and liberals into a political force, using the Internet

to overcome old barriers among potential constituents (Kellstedt et al. 2007). And although Wallis eschewed partisanship, the movement's agenda clearly tilted Democratic, presenting an opening for party leaders in 2008.

Developments within the large Catholic tradition were more ambiguous. The Catholic Church included a growing cadre (albeit still a minority) of bishops eager to confront pro-choice politicians, mostly Democrats, over what they saw as the central moral issue of the era. At the same time, competing Catholic activist organizations multiplied, reflecting the growing theological and ideological divisions in the Church. Even the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) walked a tightrope between emphasizing abortion as the true measure of politicians, which favored the GOP, and stressing historic Catholic social teaching, which meshed with Democratic welfare liberalism. And they faced the nagging issue of how actively to insert themselves into the electoral process (Allen 2008).

### **The Winnowing of the Field: Republican Candidates and Religious Strategies**

The complex religious divisions appearing in recent years were not confined to voters. Indeed, politicians have aligned very similarly, as shown by studies of party activists (Green, Guth and Fraser 1991), national convention delegates (Green and Jackson 2007), and the U.S. Congress (Guth 2007). Not surprisingly, as we shall see, the initial field of candidates in each party reflected their constituencies, both in religious affiliation and theological orientation.

The Republican field included several Evangelicals, the religious core of the GOP. This was especially true of the "dark horse" candidates, hoping to ride the GOP's



social conservative base to the nomination. Former Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas started out as a Southern Baptist minister, becoming president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention before entering politics. Representatives Duncan Hunter (CA) and Tom Tancredo (CO), were staunch traditionalists, the former an independent Baptist and the latter an Evangelical Presbyterian. Representative Ron Paul's (TX) well-known libertarian streak often put him at odds with religious conservatives, but he was a committed Christian who attended both Evangelical Free and Baptist churches. Finally, Kansas Senator Sam Brownback's personal religious history touched all the core GOP constituencies: starting out as a traditionalist Mainliner (United Methodist), he converted to Catholicism in 2003, but still attended a non-denominational Evangelical church with his (unconverted) family, as well as his new Catholic parish (Olasky 2006).

Ironically, the GOP frontrunners were a tougher "fit" with the party's religious constituency (Vineis 2008). John McCain had wooed traditionalists early in his 2000 campaign for the GOP nomination, but once bested in that duel by George W. Bush, lashed out against Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as "agents of intolerance." Although McCain quietly mended fences with both, he was still suspect to conservatives, despite a pro-life record and attendance at his wife's North Phoenix Baptist Church. (He announced early in the campaign that he was now a "Baptist" rather than an Episcopalian, although he had not actually joined the church.) His sponsorship of campaign finance reform was a sore point, as was support for embryonic stem cell research. McCain always found it hard to use religious idiom convincingly and his staff was contemptuous of religious conservatives and reluctant to court them.

Mitt Romney had different problems. Although his fellow Latter-day Saints were solidly Republican and provided substantial financial help, they were too few to provide much of an electoral base (MacGillis 2007). And his faith was regarded as a “cult” or “heresy” by many Evangelicals and Catholic traditionalists. Even secular Republicans worried about poll reports that many citizens would not vote for a Mormon. Furthermore, although most Latter-day Saints are social conservatives, Romney had taken moderate stances on abortion and gay rights while seeking office in liberal Massachusetts. Thus, some traditionalists regarded his “conversion” on both issues with suspicion. To address these concerns Romney followed John F. Kennedy’s 1960 example by giving a formal address explaining the relationship between his faith and politics, an effort which mollified some Evangelical leaders, but did not start a stampede toward his camp.

The candidate most feared by religious conservatives was former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, favored by secular Republicans. As a “cradle Catholic,” he attended Church schools, considered becoming a priest and, as mayor, fought “blasphemous” art in public museums. But his three marriages, messy divorces, and support for abortion and gay rights angered Catholic traditionalists and Evangelicals, despite admiration for his strong leadership after the September 11, 2001 attacks. He was also at odds with Catholic leaders, who had asked him not to present himself for the Eucharist. An indifferent church-goer, Giuliani argued that his religious life was a private matter, a claim that alarmed religious conservatives (McFeely 2008).

A late entrant to the race was former Senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee. Thompson had a solid conservative record, although he occasionally deviated from Republican orthodoxy, often on the same issues as McCain. He had been baptized into

the conservative Church of Christ as a young man, but his observance had lapsed during a long political—and later, acting—career. (He reported that he did go to church when visiting his mother in Tennessee.) Although James Dobson warned that Thompson didn't seem to be a Christian, he had some appeal to Evangelicals, especially in his native South, based on endorsements from pro-life organizations, his skillful employment of religious rhetoric, and his perceived resemblance to another conservative hero, Ronald Reagan.

Although Christian Right leaders caucused repeatedly, they could not agree on a favorite, leaving each candidate with some high-profile religious support (Zeller 2007). McCain was backed by former Family Research Council president Gary Bauer, while Romney not only had solid Mormon support, but, surprisingly, that of fundamentalist leader Bob Jones III. Giuliani won the unlikely endorsement of televangelist Pat Robertson; Brownback was favored by prominent Catholic conservatives; and Paul, Tancredo and Hunter all managed to elicit their own blessings. Huckabee was pushed by Southern Baptist allies, but was distrusted by the SBC's conservative faction, and unable to mobilize much backing from other Evangelical leaders, who thought him too liberal on economic, immigration and foreign policy issues, or simply not electable. In the end, some movement leaders were so disenchanted by the GOP field that they considered a third-party movement

Although the GOP contest began with improbable poll findings that Giuliani and McCain were leading among Evangelicals, the numbers changed quickly as the campaign moved toward the first contests, especially after Huckabee's strong performance at the Values Voters Conference, a critical gathering of religious conservatives. Huckabee's

subsequent victory in the Iowa caucuses, driven by Evangelicals and home-schoolers, allowed him to expand a shoe-string budget and attract more media coverage and activists. As the race quickly narrowed to McCain, Romney and Huckabee, a clear voting pattern developed: Huckabee led among Evangelicals, especially in Southern Baptist territory, followed by Romney and McCain, who won smaller but significant shares. McCain did especially well among Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and secular voters. Romney benefited from Mormon support in the West, considerable backing from other religious conservatives everywhere, and a solid vote from “economic” Republicans (Pew Forum 2008a).

In the end, McCain won the nomination without strong appeal to the GOP’s largest religious bloc. Although he had tried to reassure Evangelicals as the campaign wore on, he actually profited from their divisions. In the end, the crucial juncture came in South Carolina, which McCain took narrowly with a third of the vote. Huckabee might have won and emerged as the favorite of religious conservatives had not Thompson made a last-ditch attempt to jump start his campaign, siphoning off Evangelical votes. (Of course, Huckabee had yet to demonstrate much appeal to Catholic and Mainline traditionalists.) As it was, religious conservatives split their primary votes among Huckabee, Romney and even McCain, allowing others to put the Arizona Senator over the top.

McCain won the nomination without most religious conservatives, but would need them in November, so he began the arduous process of repairing the GOP religious alliance. With the help of Gary Bauer, he held both publicized (with Billy and Franklin Graham) and unpublicized meetings with Christian conservatives, reassuring them on

abortion, gay marriage, sex trafficking and international religious freedom (Bumiller 2008). He capped off these efforts with a spirited performance at Rick Warren's candidate forum at Saddleback Community Church. McCain gave succinct (and "correct") answers on abortion and marriage, compared to the longer, more theoretical and perhaps evasive responses of Barack Obama ("that question is above my pay grade"). His performance "sealed the deal" with many religious conservatives, who abandoned talk of third-party defection or sitting out the election. Some former Christian Right leaders, such as Ralph Reed, even signed on to help the campaign.

But pursuing religious conservatives also had costs. In the spring McCain had proudly announced an endorsement by Pentecostal preacher John Hagee, a prominent Evangelical supporter of Israel. McCain was later embarrassed, however, when Hagee's sermons were widely reproduced, with their aspersions at the Catholic Church and assertion that the Holocaust was part of God's plan for the Jewish people (Frykholm 2008). Although Hagee apologized for any offense given Catholics and Jews, McCain quickly repudiated his endorsement and that of Rev. Rod Parsley, an Ohio megachurch political organizer who had repeatedly attacked Islam. McCain discovered what previous Republican nominees learned: generic religiosity may be desirable, but religious particularism presents a threat to party unity and electoral viability.

### **Winnowing the Field: The Democrat Candidates and Religious Strategies**

The initial Democratic field was surprisingly large, and also reflected the breadth of the party's religious coalition. Senator Hillary Clinton was a life-long United Methodist, and from her youth was influenced by its liberal activist wing (Kengor 2007).

Even as First Lady, her religious bent had elicited snickers about “Saint Hillary” from the elite press. In the Senate, she quickly joined a bipartisan weekly prayer group that included Republican candidate Sam Brownback. Among the first Democrats to take up the appeal to religious voters after 2004, Clinton even suggested that the party’s approach to abortion might be recast, alarming pro-choice activists. She also made a point of reaching out to religious conservatives, joining up with a Rick Warren forum on AIDS at Saddleback Church, where she was warmly received (Feldman 2007).

Senator Barack Obama embodied another crucial Democratic constituency: black Protestants. Raised in an agnostic home, Obama grew up in contact with several traditions: his (absent) father and Indonesian stepfather were Muslim (he battled rumors throughout the campaign that he was too); he attended a Catholic school for a time; and he encountered the black Protestant tradition as a community organizer in Chicago. Eventually he joined the Trinity United Church of Christ, a large politically active congregation affiliated with the predominantly white United Church of Christ, the most theologically and politically liberal Mainline Protestant denomination (Pinckney 2008).

Even some friends saw this decision as politically motivated, but Obama soon demonstrated not only real commitment, but an acute ear for religious language. This was highlighted in his famous speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, where he noted that “Barack” means “blessed” and asserted that “we worship an awesome God in the blue states,” drawing on an familiar Evangelical praise chorus (Boyer 2008). From then on, he wrote and spoke eloquently about need to welcome people of faith in the public square. Obama also cultivated (and impressed) religious leaders from many traditions, including prominent Evangelicals such as Rick Warren and Joel Hunter. While

he continued to campaign in black churches, he also frequented both Evangelical and Mainline Protestant services. He was a featured speaker at the June 2007 meeting of the United Church of Christ, his own denomination (a speech which triggered a later IRS investigation). Like Senator Clinton's, his religious outreach staff was led by Evangelicals, but was quite ecumenical (Sullivan 2008).

The third front-runner, former Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, the party's 2004 vice-presidential nominee, grew up in a devout Southern Baptist home but now shared Clinton's United Methodist faith, if not her willingness to talk about it. Although Edwards eventually joined the Democratic rush to connect faith to policies, he remained more reticent than most. Religion had been an important comfort to his family in tragedy and he was quick to connect his populist economics to biblical imperatives to care for the poor. But he had reservations about too much religious talk in politics and his early campaign antagonized some religious voters when two staff bloggers posted remarks critical of religious conservatives, especially Catholics (Saber 2007).

Second-tier candidates embodied other historic Democratic constituencies. Especially numerous were the Catholics, a reminder of their historic role in the party. These included Bill Richardson of New Mexico (representing the growing Latino element in the Church), Representative Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, Senator Joe Biden of Delaware, and Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut (Marks 2007). Their faith ranged from the strong, if conventional Catholic observance of Biden and Dodd to the "New Age" version of Kucinich. Another outside candidate, former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel, grew up Catholic in a Jewish neighborhood, but joined the theologically and politically liberal Unitarian Universalists, and spoke for the party's humanist left.

During the early campaign, candidates repeatedly addressed faith-related issues, most notably in a far-ranging two-night discussion in June 2007 sponsored by Wallis's Sojourners and CNN. Although both Clinton and Obama consistently sought to cast an ecumenical net, once the primaries began religious gaps appeared among Democratic voters. Obama steadily built support among black Protestants, while Clinton's formidable early backing from black clergy and church-goers ebbed. And despite Obama's strong early appeal to Evangelical and Mainline Protestants, key to his victory in Iowa, such support diminished as the primaries wore on. Even campaign brochures with Obama standing behind a pulpit, overshadowed by a cross, did not reverse the trend. Clinton steadily improved her standing among white Protestants and working-class Catholics, especially regular church-goers, and also won handily among Jewish voters. The two fought a pitched battle for Latino Catholics and Protestants, and Obama added more and more secular voters to his increasingly monolithic constituency of devout black Protestants. Perhaps the only significant religious bloc not cultivated were Muslims: Obama went to extraordinary lengths to avoid fueling rumors that he was really Muslim, even moving women in headscarves out of camera range at his rallies.

The crucial Pennsylvania primary saw the culmination of these trends, crystallized by two events. In mid-March the national media finally highlighted sermon statements of Obama's retired pastor and long-time ally, Jeremiah Wright, whose black liberationist theology did not play well to white audiences. Obama quickly repudiated Wright's most sensational claims as "not only wrong but divisive," countering with a widely praised speech on race conflict and reconciliation. But the affair continued to dog the Illinois Senator, as both Clinton and putative GOP nominee McCain criticized his



remaining at Trinity Church. Eventually Obama reacted to further inflammatory statements from Wright by resigning his membership (Zeleny and Nagourney 2008).

Then, speaking in early April to Democratic donors in San Francisco Obama mused that white working-class Pennsylvanians were “bitter” about their situation and, as a result, clung to religion, guns and xenophobia. Characterized later by Obama as “my biggest boneheaded move” (Bai 2008), the remarks set off a firestorm of criticism from both Clinton Democrats and, of course, Republicans. By the time of Obama’s final triumph in June, the Democratic Party found its constituency deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines.

Obama saw the holes in his coalition and moved quickly. In June he met privately with forty religious leaders, including Evangelicals, in a “listening” session that produced ample praise from attendees. At the same time, he buttressed his appeal to liberal Catholics by establishing “Catholics for Obama,” backed by organizations such as Catholics United, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, Catholics for Choice and Network (Hudson 2008). Nor did he neglect black Protestants, speaking to the convention of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, pushing the theme of personal responsibility in the black community. At the same time, the “Matthew 25 Network” established both a website and a political action committee to support Obama, and advertised on Christian radio stations—usually the preserve of Evangelical religion and Republican candidates. And the campaign laid elaborate plans for local house parties for Evangelicals and Catholics, religious rock concerts, and conversations with traditionalist clergy.

Perhaps the most audacious move was Obama’s endorsement of a “faith-based initiative,” not unlike that of the Bush Administration. Although he promised more

strings on federal money used by religious organizations for social services, many secular Democrats were appalled by this “move to the center.” Elite press commentary was also mostly critical, but the initiative was greeted warmly by parts of the religious community, including some traditionalists. Thus, by August the Obama campaign had resumed the religious coalition building interrupted by the divisive nominating contest. Although not all these initiatives would be executed with the precision that characterized the Obama campaign overall, they certainly did send a welcoming signal to religious communities.

Had the nominating contests reshaped religious alignments? Perhaps surprisingly, despite all the efforts by candidates in both parties to expand their constituencies, polls showed remarkable continuity as the national conventions approached. Religious groups that supported Bush in 2004 favored McCain in 2008 and those that supported Kerry now backed Obama. There were important marginal changes: Evangelicals were not quite as fond of McCain as they had been of Bush, but McCain actually did better among Mainline Protestants and even traditionalist Catholics than Bush, but had lost ground among centrist and modernist Catholics. Obama improved on Kerry’s showing in the Democrats’ strongest constituencies, such as Latino Catholics, black Protestants, secular voters and other religious minorities, but despite ardent wooing of Evangelicals, had made little progress there (Henry Institute 2008; Bliss Institute 2008).

### **Convention Time: Platforms, Running Mates and Religion**

The national conventions supplied new action points for religious strategies. The Democratic Convention almost oozed hospitality to people of faith, with an interfaith prayer service, special sessions for faith groups, ample religious imagery, and a

benediction by megachurch pastor Joel Hunter. Evangelical author Tony Campolo and other Religious Left figures on the Platform Committee rejoiced that the usual pro-choice abortion plank also pledged to support women taking their pregnancy to term, a provision inspired by Evangelical and Catholic members. Nevertheless, the convention was still picketed by pro-life groups, who (with some reason) regarded Obama as “the most extreme pro-choice candidate ever” (George 2008).

Obama chose his running mate, Senator Joe Biden, in part to attract the very working-class Catholic traditionalists who had preferred Clinton and might defect to the pro-life McCain in November. Biden’s selection would also demonstrate that the party was led by people of real faith. (He once threatened to shove his “rosary down the throat” of any Republican questioning his piety.) But Biden’s selection soon raised as many religious problems as it solved. In a *Meet the Press* interview, he accepted Catholic teaching that life began at conception and that abortion was morally wrong, but said that he could not legislate that perspective. He also stated that the Church’s stance had changed over time, echoing Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Both were quickly reprimanded by the U.S. Catholic bishops (NCR Staff 2008). Despite this, several prominent pro-life Catholics announced support for Obama as the candidate most likely to actually reduce the abortion rate and pursue welfare policies consistent with the Church’s social teachings—although not without attracting some unfavorable attention from Catholic bishops and priests (Dionne 2008).

McCain’s problem at the GOP Convention was different. Although he had formal Christian Right endorsements, there was little enthusiasm for his candidacy. So he allowed traditionalists to keep strong pro-life language in the platform, as well as other

planks important to religious Republicans, such as that on school choice. But the boldest move was the nomination of Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska as his running mate.

Although more prominent candidates were rejected to avoid adverse reaction from religious conservatives, Palin's religious traits apparently did not enter the deliberations over her selection. Her convention speech electrified traditionalists, however, and previously skeptical Christian Right leaders fell in behind the "McCain/Palin" ticket. (Indeed, traditionalist lawns soon sported campaign signs skillfully cropped to read only "Palin.") Part of the instant appeal was her strong pro-life credentials, based not so much on her official actions as governor, but on a decision to give birth to a baby with Down's syndrome, rather than terminate the pregnancy. That the governor's unmarried daughter was pregnant and also planned to carry the baby to term confirmed that commitment.

After a few days, however, media attention shifted from Palin's family to her religion. Baptized a Catholic, she grew up in an Assemblies of God congregation but did not engage in standard Pentecostal practices such as speaking in tongues, and she later moved to a non-Pentecostal Evangelical church. Her strong convictions excited religious conservatives, but also prompted an orgy of media scrutiny as journalists rediscovered, with the air of intrepid anthropologists, the distinctive beliefs and practices of Pentecostal Christians (Goodstein 2008a). They dissected Palin's boilerplate religious idiom and puzzled over her pastors' exposition of Scripture, extrapolating purported implications for foreign policy, global warming and gender relations (Braun 2008).

### **The General Election Campaign: Back to the Religious Base?**

Although the Biden flap over abortion and Palin's nomination led pundits to anticipate resumption of the "culture wars," the international financial crisis that hit in mid-September put faith-related issues in the background. True, Palin still addressed issues designed to solidify the GOP's religious base, attracting the ire of those on the other side of the abortion and gay marriage issues. Indeed, her crowds were much larger and more enthusiastic than Senator McCain's, but polls showed that her drive to activate religious conservatives put off other religious and secular voters. Her initial encounters with the national press produced widespread negative perceptions about her qualifications to serve as president. And although religious conservatives attempted to keep social issues to the fore, this proved virtually impossible as financial markets collapsed.

Voter mobilization by religious groups was probably less widespread in the 2008 campaign than in 2004 and, in any case, was mostly ignored by the media. On the Republican side, Christian Right and conservative Catholic groups still distributed voter guides in church settings, but these were less numerous than in the past (Drake 2008). Activity by conservative clergy was also less prominent, though still visible. One Christian Right group encouraged pastors to endorse McCain from the pulpit, challenging IRS and statutory restrictions on such activities. Several prominent Catholic bishops made clear their antipathy to the Democratic ticket on the weekend before the election (National Catholic Register 2008). But some potential for religious politicking went undeveloped: McCain refused to raise Obama's relationship with his former pastor as a wedge issue, although some state GOP groups aired election-eve TV ads featuring Wright's more incendiary statements, with the profanities bleeped out.

If anything, religious mobilization in 2008 (like other mobilization efforts) may have favored the Democrats. By all accounts, black churches were even more involved than usual in activating members, as Michelle Obama met with church leaders in key states and Obama participated in the customary pre-election conference calls with black clergy. The campaign also worked hard to mobilize Mainline Protestant and Catholic voters, as allied liberal organizations such as the Matthew 25 Network and Catholics United raised funds, ran media ads and sought to bolster the Democratic tally. Certainly, the Religious Left was much more in evidence than it had been in 2004 (Burke 2008).

Obama's decisive victory provided raw material for several perspectives on the "new Democratic majority." What did the results reveal about the religious coalitions underlying the two parties? Although the religious items in exit polls are too crude to compare with Table 1, a careful examination of Table 2 permits some conclusions, especially when supplemented by other surveys. First, Obama's religious outreach probably had some positive impact. Although the "God gap" still appeared, suggesting that religious traditionalists continued to lean Republican, Obama ran ahead of Kerry among frequent church-goers, having "chipped away at the values divide" (Kristof 2008). Indeed, he was viewed by voters as more "religious" than McCain, and they were now more likely to see the Democrats as the party friendliest to religion.

[Table 2 about here]

Obama also made inroads into critical groups that supported Bush in 2004. He won the always pivotal Catholic vote, primarily by improving on the usual Democratic majorities among Latino and less observant white Catholics and breaking even with McCain among the more traditionalist regular Mass-attenders among whites (Pew Forum

2008c). Just as important, Obama returned Latino Protestants to the Democratic fold, held or increased the Democratic margin among almost all other religious minorities, including Jews, and won even more secular voters. In most cases, he benefitted from increased turnout in these groups, especially among his fellow African American Protestants, where Obama's support verged on unanimity.

But Obama's wooing of Evangelicals had limited effect. Although Obama did better here than Kerry had, only in a few Eastern and Midwestern states was the shift toward the Democrats really significant, and then largely among younger Evangelicals (Goodstein 2008b). Indeed, the campaign did not even try to penetrate strong Republican groups such as Southern Baptists, who went overwhelmingly for McCain. And the most observant (and presumably traditionalist) Evangelicals were still the most Republican. McCain also held the line among Mainline Protestants, especially the more observant, carrying roughly the same proportion as Bush.<sup>1</sup> On balance, then, Obama's arduous religious strategy was a modest net plus for his masterfully executed campaign—or at the very least, prevented religious factors from being a negative.

After the election the inevitable discussion began as to whether Obama's historic victory represented a political realignment. There was certainly a higher vote for the Democratic candidate in many religious communities. And yet, the continuity of religious voting is just as impressive: Evangelicals remained (perhaps even more entrenched) as the religious core of the reduced GOP and the Democrats dominated among ethnoreligious minorities, much as they have throughout history. Mainline Protestant and Catholic voters remained closely divided, in large part by degree of adherence to

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<sup>1</sup> The results for Mainline and Evangelical Protestants here are not directly comparable to those in Table 1, as the exit poll questions do not really permit an accurate assignment to these two traditions (Silk 2008).

traditional doctrine and observance. And secular voters also had some claim on Obama's victory, enhancing their role in Democratic councils.

The 2008 election produced a majority Democratic religious coalition, but President Obama will have to consolidate these gains by accommodating both the party's usual religious constituents and the new ones. As ever for the Democrats, this will not be an easy task, as they pick their way through the varied preferences of their constituents on social, economic and even foreign policy issues. Indeed, the election results themselves hint at forthcoming problems. For example, the massive turnout of black Protestants and Latinos, both Protestant and Catholic, boosted the ranks of social conservatives within the party, as illustrated by their role in passing California's Proposition 8, outlawing same-sex marriage. And candidate Obama also promised to reverse President Bush's executive order against funding of international aid organizations that promote abortion and to sign a "Freedom of Choice" Act to insure access to abortion at home. Such actions may not only revive the interparty "culture wars," but fracture the Democratic religious coalition itself. Can President Obama overcome such divisions by fostering inter-religious cooperation on less divisive issues, such as the environment, social welfare programs, and fighting poverty abroad? Perhaps, but that's the story for the next installment.



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<b>Table 1. Religious Groups and the 2004 Presidential Vote</b>				
<b>Religious Group</b>	<b>Percent of Potential Voters</b>	<b>Bush Percent of Two-Party Vote</b>	<b>Proportion of GOP Coalition</b>	<b>Proportion of Democratic Coalition</b>
<b>Latter-day Saints</b>	1.4	97.0	3.7	.1
<b><i>Evangelical Protestant</i></b>	<b>25.1</b>	<b>77.5</b>	<b>39.7</b>	<b>12.0</b>
Traditionalist	10.7	87.9	23.4	3.4
Centrist	9.7	70.4	11.9	5.2
Modernist	3.3	57.1	2.9	2.2
Nominals	1.5	56.6	1.5	1.2
<b><i>Latino Protestant</i></b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>62.9</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>1.6</b>
<b><i>Mainline Protestant</i></b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>19.2</b>
Traditionalist	4.5	65.6	7.0	3.9
Centrist	5.5	49.1	6.5	7.1
Modernist	4.4	43.1	3.3	4.6
Nominals	2.0	31.0	1.5	3.6
<b><i>White Catholic</i></b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>18.8</b>
Traditionalist	4.2	73.9	7.7	2.9
Centrist	7.4	52.3	8.0	7.6
Modernist	3.8	38.1	2.9	4.9
Nominals	2.1	28.9	1.3	3.4
<b><i>Latino Catholic</i></b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>31.4</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>4.4</b>
<b><i>All Unaffiliated</i></b>	<b>17.4</b>	<b>28.1</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>21.7</b>
Believers	4.8	37.0	2.0	3.6
Seculars	9.0	29.5	4.6	11.6
Atheists/Agnostics	3.5	20.0	1.5	6.5
<b><i>Jewish</i></b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>26.9</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>4.1</b>
<b><i>Other Christian</i></b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>29.7</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>3.2</b>
<b><i>Other Faiths</i></b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>17.9</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>1.7</b>
<b><i>Black Protestant</i></b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>13.2</b>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>51.2</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: 2004 National Survey of Religion and Politics, Bliss Institute, University of Akron

<b>Table 2. Religious Voting in the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections</b>					
	<b>2004</b>		<b>2008</b>		<b>Democratic</b>
	<b>Kerry</b>	<b>Bush</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>McCain</b>	<b>Gain</b>
<b><i>Worship Attendance</i></b>					
Weekly+	35	64	43	55	+8
Every Week	41	58	43	55	+2
Few Times a Month	49	50	53	46	+4
Few Times a Year	54	45	59	40	+5
Never	62	36	67	30	+5
<b><i>Religious Group</i></b>					
<b><i>White Protestants*</i></b>	<b>32</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>+2</b>
Evangelical	21	79	26	73	+5
Mainline	44	56	44	54	0
Latino**	37	63	58	42	+21
<b><i>All Catholics</i></b>	<b>47</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>+7</b>
White	43	56	47	52	+4
Latino**	65	33	70	30	+5
<b><i>All Unaffiliated</i></b>	<b>67</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>+8</b>
<b><i>Other Faiths</i></b>	<b>74</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>-1</b>
<b><i>Jewish</i></b>	<b>74</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>+4</b>
<b><i>Black Protestant</i></b>	<b>86</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>+8</b>

Source: NEP as reported by Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, supplemented by other surveys.

\*This category includes Latter-day Saints and a variety of other small Christian faiths.

\*\*Figures for Latinos in 2008 estimated from other surveys.