

Chapter 9

Religion in the 2012 Election

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Religion has always played a vital role in American politics. Although electoral tides often rise or fall on economic events, foreign policy crises or other “secular” concerns, contemporary partisan coalitions are characterized by remarkably stable religious alliances that shift only marginally from election to election. Those shifts do sometimes produce dramatically varied outcomes, with Republican victories in 2004 and 2010, and Democratic triumphs in 2006 and 2008. Although one journalist proclaimed that “God was remarkably absent” from the 2012 election, religion did in fact play a significant role in that contest.

This chapter considers that role. First, we outline two perspectives shaping expert interpretation of religious politics, the *ethnoreligious* and *restructuring* theories. Then we review the 2008 voting patterns that set the context for both President Obama’s approach to faith groups in 2012 and for the electoral prospects of his GOP challengers. We then focus on the 2012 Republican nomination, examining the cast of candidates, their religious strategies and the effectiveness of those strategies. Next, we turn briefly to Obama’s approach, arguing that he reluctantly abandoned his 2008 ecumenical appeal as a result of first-term political controversies and shifted to an emphasis on the Democratic Party’s core constituencies. Finally, we discuss “faith-based” mobilization in the general election campaign and look at the vote choices of religious groups.

Alternative Theories of Religious Coalitions

Two analytic approaches have long competed in professional analysis of religious voting: *Ethnoreligious theory*, originally developed by historians, emphasizes the combined impact of ethnicity and religious affiliation on electoral choice (Kleppner 1979). 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 ethnoreligious minorities: Catholics, Jews, and Evangelical Protestants (especially in the South). These alignments survived New Deal class politics, but by the 1980s had changed in composition, as Mainline Protestants dwindled in number, Evangelicals joined the GOP, Anglo-Catholics deserted the Democrats, and Black Protestants became a critical Democratic bloc, along with “new” minorities such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and secular voters. Despite these changes, many pundits still think in ethnoreligious terms, referring to the “Evangelical,” “Catholic,” “Jewish” or “Muslim” vote.

Religious restructuring theory, formulated more recently by sociologists, sees a crucial theological factionalism emerging *within* old ethnoreligious 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, joined by secular Americans who have abandoned religion but see morality in the same way (Hunter 1991, 44). The “God gap” beloved by journalists (between church-attending Republicans and secular Democrats) is a crude indicator of these divisions, as the orthodox are more observant than the progressives, but the factions are actually rooted in competing worldviews, not just religious behavior. These perspectives not only produce “culture wars” over abortion, feminism, gay rights and the role of faith in public life, but infuse other policy attitudes as well (Layman 2001; Green 2007).

Both approaches can help explain the 2008 results, reported in Table 9.1. First, note that ethnoreligious traditions differed dramatically. Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Evangelicals were overwhelmingly Republican in vote choice. Latino Protestants had also voted Republican in 2004, but four years later joined most other ethnoreligious “minorities,” including Jews, Black Protestants, Latino Catholics, other non-Christian faiths and the unaffiliated in the Democratic

camp. Mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics were “swing” groups, almost evenly divided—a pattern present in the last several presidential races. But theological divisions also mattered (rather than Hunter’s dichotomy, we prefer a threefold division of “traditionalist,” “centrist,” and “modernist” to capture these tendencies). In 2008 Evangelical, Mainline and Catholic traditionalists were far more Republican than their modernist co-parishioners, many of whom were strongly Democratic. Indeed, each theological faction resembled its counterparts in other traditions more than opposing factions within its own, with McCain relying on traditionalists and Obama, on modernists. Religiously unaffiliated voters were also Democratic, with agnostics and atheists holding that preference most strongly.

[Table 9.1 about here]

Each party, then, had a distinct religious “base.” Despite a lack of personal rapport with religious conservatives, McCain received four-tenths of his votes from Evangelicals alone, mostly from traditionalists and centrists. Adding Mainline and Anglo-Catholic traditionalists, Latter-day Saints, as well as Latino Protestants gave the GOP a solid traditionalist majority, holding conservative positions on social, foreign policy, and even economic issues (see Guth 2011). Of course, Republicans still needed votes from other ethnoreligious groups and unaffiliated voters to win a national election, but no GOP presidential aspirant in 2012 could ignore the party’s traditionalist base.

The Democrats’ strategic situation was more complex, given their greater religious diversity. In 2008 Barack Obama doggedly pursued an “ecumenical” approach, appealing to religious groups outside the usual Democratic coalition, making marginal but crucial inroads among usually Republican religious blocs, such as Catholic and Mainline traditionalists (for details, see Guth 2009). Nevertheless, Obama’s largest single constituency was Black

Protestants, who supplied one-fifth of his total vote, matched by Anglo-Catholics, and followed by Mainline Protestants. In these latter two constituencies, Obama's support was strongest among religious modernists. Unaffiliated voters of various sorts added a slightly smaller 16 percent to his total. Obama's remaining votes came from a wide scattering of groups, including Latino Catholics and Protestants, Jews (an important financial and activist constituency), and a few Evangelicals.

Changes in the American Religious Landscape

Candidate strategies in 2012 would be shaped not only by past electoral patterns, but also by changes in the broader religious landscape, some of them dramatic. First, there was a continued 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 felt that the campaign had about the right amount of religious involvement. By 2012 opinion was less positive about religious politics, although most still wanted the president to have a strong faith (Guth et al. 2006; Pew Forum 2012b). Some attributed these changes in the political environment to disenchantment with the Christian Right's politicization of religion, while others credited secularization, as religiously unaffiliated Americans grew steadily in number. Public sentiment had also liberalized on some religiously tinged issues such as same-sex marriage, civil unions and stem cell research. Most important, perhaps, the national agenda was dominated by the financial crisis of 2008-9, the economic recession, and controversies over the Affordable Care Act of 2010, concerns less immediately tied to religious faith.

On the Republican side, the party's Christian Right allies were suffering from organizational problems, as their old leaders passed from the scene and financial woes mounted.

Master Evangelical strategist Ralph Reed was trying to replace the moribund Christian Coalition with a new Faith and Freedom Coalition, with uncertain results, while James Dobson had retired from Focus on the Family as it retrenched financially and Jim Daly, its new leader, sought to return to a less political mission. Some Evangelical denominations that had buttressed conservative politics, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God, were also turning inward to deal with institutional problems. Meanwhile, a few prominent Evangelical leaders, such as Richard Cizik, Rick Warren, Bill Hybels and Joel Hunter, were seeking to draw the community toward a broader agenda and more moderate policies, even cooperating at times with liberal groups, a strategy with some appeal among younger Evangelicals (Seiple 2012). Despite all these challenging developments, however, conservative religious activists remained a formidable cadre within the GOP.

In 2008 the Democratic side had been bolstered by—and cultivated—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 Protestant 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). Although Wallis formally eschewed partisanship, the movement’s agenda and policy clearly tilted Democratic, allowing party leaders to create several auxiliary religious groups in 2008. And while the Obama administration had not always nurtured these allies as carefully as the Obama campaign had, most were still available for “remobilization” in 2012.

Developments in the large Catholic community were more ambiguous. The Church had a growing cadre of activist bishops eager to confront what they perceived as the moral evils of the

era. Although this traditionalist bloc previously focused on confronting pro-choice Democrats over abortion, in 2012 they added strong opposition to gay marriage to their agenda. Just as relevant to the presidential race, Catholic institutions were battling the Obama administration on several fronts, most notably the Health and Human Services Department's ruling that the Affordable Care Act required their health insurance plans to include free contraception. After failure to achieve satisfactory exceptions, Catholic institutions took the administration to court and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) instituted a "religious freedom" campaign to inform parishioners on these issues, initiatives that drew some support from Evangelical leaders and institutions as well. Many observers saw all these developments as a significant move toward the right, at least among the most vocal and influential prelates.

Although the bishops insisted that their protests were not designed to influence the 2012 election, liberal Catholic groups were not so sure. Based in the Church's extensive social welfare institutions, these organizations were preoccupied by prospective federal budget cuts for programs assisting the poor. Such sentiments were shared by many bishops and by the Church's growing Latino constituency, but were especially strong in women's religious orders, always a "liberal" force in Catholic politics. Indeed, a national tour by a few sisters ("Nuns on the Bus") attracted extensive media coverage and was lauded by secular liberal groups. This action, however, exacerbated the ongoing conflict between the religious orders and the NCCB on internal issues, rooted in the growing theological and ideological divisions in the Church, paralleling those in the larger religious world.

All these developments influenced partisan arguments over "religious" strategies. Although Obama had made aggressive appeals to religious traditionalists in 2008, other strategists still preferred to rely on a "new Democratic majority" based on ethnoreligious

minorities, such as Black Protestants and Latino Catholics, combined with secular Americans, concentrated in the highly educated and professional sectors of the electorate (Judis and Teixeira 2002; Teixeira 2010). Because all these groups were growing in size—as emphasized by several widely publicized surveys in 2012—this strategy would assure Democratic success. On the GOP side there was a parallel debate: some strategists saw victory based on effective mobilization of religious traditionalists and economic conservatives (groups with considerable overlap), while others, such as Karl Rove, hoped to attract socially traditionalist ethnoreligious minorities, such as Latino Protestants and Catholics, even if that necessitated ignoring Tea Party ethnocentrism and softening the harsh Republican line on immigration.

Winnowing the Field: Republican Candidates and Religious Strategies

The partisan religious alignments we have described are not confined to voters, but increasingly characterize party activists (Green, Guth and Fraser 1991), national convention delegates (Green and Jackson 2007), and members of Congress (Guth 2007). The reshaping of the Republican religious coalition finally reached the pool of GOP presidential candidates in 2012. As columnist Ross Douthat noted, the long-term dominance of Mainline Protestants ended and, considering both parties, the nation finally had “a presidential field that mirrors the diversity of American Christianity as a whole” (Douthat 2012). The initial GOP field did indeed reflect that party’s contemporary religious coalition for the first time, but also revealed potential fractures.¹

The putative front-runner, former Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, was a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Indeed, Romney was not only a faithful Mormon, but had held leadership positions in the Church. As we saw in Table 9.1, Mormons rival Evangelicals as the staunchest supporters of the GOP (and share many similar

political views). Indeed, a 2012 study showed that not only were Mormons and Evangelicals the most Republican religious groups (80 and 70 percent identifying or “leaning” Republican), but also that those preferences had intensified since 2008 (Pew Forum 2012a). Despite similar politics, however, the two groups were religious antagonists: Evangelicals often regard Mormonism as “a cult” and “not Christian.” Such sentiments had influenced their response to Romney in the 2008 Republican contest and polls still showed that a substantial minority of Evangelicals would not vote for a Mormon in 2012—at least not in the GOP primaries (Pew Research Center 2011). As Evangelicals constituted a majority of GOP caucus and primary voters in many states and a substantial minority in others, this resistance presented a major problem for Romney.

In 2008 Romney hit those concerns head-on with a well-publicized speech on religion and politics, but in 2012 he ignored the religious issue, hoping that his attacks on Obama’s economic policies would create common ground among all Republicans. Indeed, Romney’s staff vigorously discouraged reporters’ interest in his faith (Barbaro and Parker 2012; Horowitz 2012). Romney did profess conservative beliefs on social issues, but these commitments were still questioned by social conservatives who remembered his relative liberalism as governor of Massachusetts. Skepticism about Romney came into focus during the GOP debates. Although candidates such as Rick Santorum were eager to bring up family values, abortion and traditional marriage, Romney was typically on the defensive when it came to these topics—when his conservative credentials were being questioned (Bradberry 2012). Romney did have a staff assistant for relations with Evangelicals, but he made little effort to win their support during the primaries, preferring to rely on Mormon and business networks for fundraising and Mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics for votes.

Not surprisingly, Romney's challengers included several Evangelicals, emerging from the party's religious core. Congresswoman Michele Bachmann of Minnesota belonged to the traditionalist Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), attended law school at Oral Roberts University (rooted in Pentecostalism), and helped run her husband's "biblical world-view" counseling service. During her campaign she faced criticism on WELS' anti-Catholic posture, ultimately resigning her membership and joining the Eagle Brook Church, an Evangelical megachurch. Her meteoric campaign drew avid support from Evangelical pastors, parishioners and social conservatives in Minnesota and Iowa, but her erratic pronouncements sapped her early momentum and she withdrew from the race after a poor showing in the Iowa caucuses.

Former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty started with strong Evangelical credentials, combined with a mainstream electoral appeal. Raised a Catholic, Pawlenty converted to Evangelicalism in 1987 and was an active member in Eden Prairie's Wooddale Church, pastored by his friend Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Although Pawlenty was reliably conservative on abortion, same-sex marriage and embryonic stem cell research, he joined Anderson in deviating for a time from Republican orthodoxy on global warming (and taxes), citing religious grounds. Although he later recanted, his campaign failed to catch fire, and after losing the Ames Iowa Straw Poll to Bachmann, he withdrew from the race, soon endorsing Romney and serving as a surrogate for his campaign.

Two other GOP hopefuls shared Bachmann's experience of rising to "front-runner" in the polls prior to the Iowa caucuses but quickly falling back to earth. Former Godfather's Pizza magnate Herman Cain briefly tickled Republicans' fancy with his personal charm and catchy Tea Party-inspired slogan on tax rates ("9-9-9"). Cain also claimed a strong religious connection,

but one typically associated with Democrats. A long-time member of Atlanta's Antioch Baptist Church, part of the historically black National Baptist Convention USA, Cain was a licensed preacher and served as an associate minister, although often at odds with the congregation's political leanings. His campaign imploded when confronted with sexual harassment and infidelity charges.

Governor Rick Perry of Texas was the next hope of social conservatives, offering a candidacy appealing to business conservatives and the Tea Party as well. With an untarnished electoral record, Perry had stronger political credentials than many other contenders. After spending most of his life as a United Methodist, by 2010 he had migrated to the Lake Hills Church, a non-denominational Evangelical congregation. Encouraged by Christian Right leaders such as Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, and Gary Bauer of American Values, Perry kicked off his campaign with a prayer rally in Houston's Reliant Stadium, drawing over 30,000 participants. Perry was unabashed in use of religious appeals during his governorship and presidential campaign, but despite considerable fundraising prowess, his poor performances in debates and miserable showings in Iowa and New Hampshire forced him out of the race.

Perry's failure left religious conservatives without a candidate, at least one who shared both their broad theological and social perspectives, as Evangelical voters in Iowa and New Hampshire had scattered their ballots among most of the contenders. Rick Santorum carried a plurality in Iowa but Mitt Romney accomplished the same feat in New Hampshire, albeit among a smaller Evangelical constituency. To stop Romney, social conservatives needed to unite behind a single champion, but which one? Although Representative Ron Paul of Texas was a committed Christian who attended both Evangelical Free and Baptist churches, he was usually (though not

always) adamant about keeping his faith out of the campaign. Paul did have Evangelical supporters, but traditionalist leaders did not regard him as a serious possibility, doubting his electability and distrusting his libertarian streak. Two other GOP aspirants were not options for religious conservatives (or any other kind). Former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman was, like his relative Mitt Romney, a Mormon, but a non-observant one with unsettled religious views and former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson, a nominal Lutheran, had not practiced his faith since childhood and also had strong libertarian leanings.

That left two Catholics: former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. Both were religious “traditionalists,” but Santorum was a life-long Catholic by heritage and personal commitment, while Gingrich had converted from nominal Lutheranism as a youth and Southern Baptist affiliation as an adult. For social conservatives, each had liabilities. Although Santorum credited his adult recommitment to his faith to participation in a largely Evangelical prayer group on Capitol Hill, not all Evangelicals resonated to the candidacy of a very traditionalist Catholic, whose pronouncements on abortion, gay marriage and related issues often seemed extreme even to them. Santorum’s wooden campaign style was also compared unfavorably to that of Mike Huckabee, the 2008 Evangelical favorite and Fox News talk show host. Gingrich’s problems were different. For social conservatives his marital history and infidelities were indeed troublesome. Although he took the right stances on culture war issues, the former speaker exhibited idiosyncratic tendencies on some questions and was not universally regarded as trustworthy. Even if Gingrich had written *Rediscovering God in America* (2006) and used religious language in speeches, most Evangelicals and other traditionalists did not see him as a credible political spokesman for their concerns.

Still, social conservatives hoped to achieve agreement on a candidate before the often-critical South Carolina primary (Wallsten and Tumulty 2012). Meeting in Texas, one hundred and fifty mostly Evangelical leaders voted overwhelmingly (on the third ballot) to coalesce behind Santorum. Nevertheless, Gingrich vowed to stay in the race, as his supporters argued that the first ballot had been much closer and the “overwhelming” vote came only after Christian Right bigwigs James Dobson, Tony Perkins and Gary Bauer argued strongly for a clear, single endorsement (Martin 2012). Whatever the degree of unity achieved, Santorum’s anointing came too late for South Carolina, which was carried by Gingrich. It soon became evident, however, that the Georgian’s appeal was limited outside the South and Santorum gradually emerged as the alternative to Romney. None of the “anti-Romney” candidates were willing to drop out of the race, however, and the presence of Gingrich, Santorum and Paul on the ballot continued to split the conservative vote and allowed Romney to emerge as the GOP nominee, although not before intramural bloodletting had drained party coffers and presented the Democrats with potent issues for the general election.

How did religious constituencies respond to the GOP primary campaign? Looking at the state exit polls for which religious measures are available (and taken before Santorum dropped out), it is clear that religious factors shaped the outcome. Santorum won the most frequent church-attenders (57 to 26 percent), while Romney prevailed among the least observant (48 to 27 percent). Similarly, Santorum carried 49 percent of those who preferred a candidate who shared their faith, compared to 21 percent for Romney. Outside his home state and neighboring South Carolina, Gingrich did not do well among church attenders or those to whom the candidate’s religious views were important (Bradberry 2012).

The candidates also had quite different appeals to the GOP's major religious constituencies. State by state, Romney's vote share had a strong negative correlation with the size of Evangelical presence in GOP primaries ($r = -.75$), but was strongly and positively correlated with the Catholic electorate ($r = .68$).² Santorum and Gingrich shared almost identical aggregate profiles, with a modest advantage in states with many Evangelicals ($r = .40$ and $.37$, respectively), but no statistically significant advantage or disadvantage in heavily Catholic ones. The mean proportions of the Evangelical and Catholic vote, however, provide a somewhat different angle. Santorum barely edged Romney among Evangelical voters (35 to 32 percent), with Gingrich (22 percent) and Paul (9 percent) trailing. Among Catholics, Romney had a decisive advantage over Santorum in the thirteen states where they were identified in the exit polls (46 to 25 percent).

Did these tendencies vary over the course of the campaign? To check this possibility, we simply correlated the candidates' Evangelical and Catholic vote proportions with the chronological order of primaries. This exercise shows that Romney made some very slight gains among Evangelicals as the campaign wore on and moved out of the South ($r = .25$), but Santorum's rise was more dramatic, as he markedly increased his vote among both Evangelicals and Catholics in the later primaries ($r = .63$ and $.72$, respectively), largely at the expense of Gingrich and, to a much lesser extent, Ron Paul. Had social conservatives been able to focus their energies on one candidate prior to Iowa, then, Romney might have had an even tougher time securing the GOP nomination. Although he did improve slightly on his 2008 performance among church-goers and Evangelicals, Romney clearly won the nomination without the full endorsement of all the party's core religious constituencies.

Securing the GOP Religious Base

Although Romney hoped that public reaction to the nation's economic and budgetary woes would sustain his campaign, social conservatives' lack of enthusiasm was still a concern. Having secured the nomination, Romney acted to propitiate this wing of the party. He gave the commencement address at Liberty University, founded by Jerry Falwell, stressing the common commitment to faith and conservative values of all the GOP's religious constituencies. His campaign organized "Catholics for Romney," headed by six former American envoys to the Holy See and buttressed by a candidate visit to Poland, the ancestral home of many Catholics in Midwestern battleground states. He also established a Jewish liaison body and travelled to Israel, appealing both to Jewish voters disgruntled by Obama's Mideast policy and to pro-Israel sentiment among Evangelicals. And in a dramatic departure, Romney also put more emphasis upon his life as a person of faith, even inviting reporters to join him at Sunday worship services—but not Sunday school (Barbaro and Parker 2012). He also attacked the Obama administration's "war on religion," arguing that church-state separation had been "taken by some well beyond its original meaning" (Swaine 2012).

Although these actions were welcomed by Christian conservatives, movement leaders held out for more, specifying that Romney's choice of running mate would influence their willingness to work for the ticket. The reputed "short list" for the post certainly ran the gamut of American religion. Tim Pawlenty would be an Evangelical choice who might also appeal to Catholics. Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, a United Methodist, would reassure the "old" Mainline GOP elite. Others would attract religious groups inclined toward the Democrats, but perhaps in play in 2012, such as minority Catholic governors Bobby Jindal of Louisiana or Susana Martinez of New Mexico. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida was not only Latino and a Tea Party favorite,

but was a serious religious person who had spent time in Catholic, Evangelical and Mormon churches. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was a devout Evangelical Presbyterian from the Black Protestant tradition, if not quite pro-life enough for a GOP convention.

Romney's choice of Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin was initially seen as a gesture toward Tea Party enthusiasts and to other economic conservatives, but it was more than that. Although Ryan's fame rested on leadership of the House GOP on budget issues, he was also a staunch social conservative: pro-life, anti-gay marriage, and opposed to embryonic stem-cell research (Condon 2012). A devout Catholic, he participated regularly in a Wednesday morning congressional prayer group frequented by Evangelicals. As a result, he had a strong appeal to social conservatives: Christian Right leaders were universally enthusiastic about Ryan. Indeed, the warm welcome accorded an Irish Catholic by Evangelical leaders (coming after their primary endorsement of Santorum) seemed to validate claims of culture war theorists that religious alignments in politics are now determined by theological traditionalism or modernism, not ethnoreligious affiliation.

Ryan's sudden prominence not only brought his controversial proposals for reforming social welfare entitlements to the forefront of debate, but also highlighted his social conservatism. Democratic strategists immediately attacked his "anti-woman" position on "choice" issues, as well as his opposition to same-sex marriage (although he had supported anti-employment discrimination legislation for gays). This attack was soon augmented by the media furor over comments made by Ryan's House colleague Todd Akin, running for the Senate in Missouri. (Akin asserted that in cases of "legitimate rape" there was little likelihood that the victim would become pregnant.) As Ryan's congressional votes on abortion closely matched Akin's, he was an easy target for Democratic critics. On the other side, Concerned Women for

America, a Christian Right powerhouse, the National Right to Life Committee and other conservative organizations quickly sprang to his defense (Haberman, Shultheis and Romano 2012).

Ryan's budget proposals also evoked religious criticism. He had already been targeted by Religious Left organizations and, perhaps more importantly, by some members of the Catholic Bishops Conference, who argued that his budget cuts would disproportionately harm the poor. Liberal Catholics asserted that Ryan's view of Catholic social teachings was warped by enthusiasm for the doctrines of libertarian thinker (and atheist) Ayn Rand (Sibley 2012). Ryan had refuted this charge in addresses to Catholic audiences, claiming that "the work I do as a Catholic holding office conforms to the social doctrine as best as I can make of it." In this claim he was quickly supported by his own bishop and some others (Pew Forum 2012c). He was unable, however, to fend off the "Nuns on the Bus," who made his budget proposals a prime target of their national tour. Indeed, his views soon became a cynosure of the debates between traditionalist and liberal Catholics, fought out in both the religious and the secular press (Davies and Antolin 2012).

Reverting to the Base: Barack Obama's Religious Strategy

The factors influencing Barack Obama's strategy were rather different from those confronting Romney, but also resulted in a "movement toward the religious base." In 2008 Obama had followed an "ecumenical" approach that reflected both his personal experience and Democratic political imperatives. Obama himself embodied a crucial Democratic ethnoreligious constituency, Black Protestants, but his background was even broader. Raised in an agnostic home, Obama grew up in contact with several traditions: his (absent) father and Indonesian stepfather were Muslim (leading to persistent rumors 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 (and was paid by a Catholic organization). 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). Although Obama had withdrawn from that congregation in 2008 after controversial statements by pastor Jeremiah Wright threatened his campaign, the episode did little to reduce his appeal to Black Protestants. To round out his ethnoreligious profile, Obama even had an in-law who was an African -American rabbi in Chicago!

As a presidential candidate, Obama's religious strategy had been shaped by political imperatives as well. Concerned by the "God gap" favoring the Republicans, Obama was outspoken in welcoming "people of faith" into the Democratic Party while criticizing those who would restrict such access. During his 2008 campaign, Obama made strong overtures to normally Republican religious groups and leaders, including Evangelicals and conservative Mainline Protestants and Catholics, hoping to add members of these groups to the usual Democratic coalition of ethnoreligious minorities, modernists and seculars. These appeals were often as much rhetorical as substantive, but he also pledged to find middle ground on culture war issues such as abortion, continued to oppose same-sex marriage, and supported a "faith-based" initiative not very different from that of the Bush administration. Indeed, few recent Democratic candidates have had a more impressive religious mobilization operation (Guth 2009). Even Obama's inauguration had been a festival of religious ecumenism.

Once in office, however, Obama was unable to sustain this strategy, as the imperatives of mobilizing partisan majorities for his signature policy initiatives ultimately evoked the very ethnoreligious and culture war cleavages that he had sought to overcome in his campaign. His

administrative and judicial appointees almost exclusively reflected the Democrats' traditional ethnoreligious and secular constituencies, his health care proposals renewed traditionalists' fears about public funding for abortion, his push to eliminate the "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military angered traditionalists, and his overtures to the Muslim world and Middle East policies bothered some Jews and many Evangelicals. Finally, his efforts to extend and clarify Bush's "faith-based initiatives" failed to satisfy conservatives—or religious liberals, for that matter. Even Obama's rhetoric and personal behavior took on a more "secular" mien, as his use of religious language waned and he rarely attended church once in office. In the 2010 congressional elections, Democrats gave back most of the gains Obama had made among "Republican" religious groups in 2008 (Guth 2011).

As the 2012 campaign approached, Obama abandoned any thought of reviving his broad-based appeal of 2008. Rather, his executive actions and campaign rhetoric stressed policies designed to maximize his margins and turnout among traditional Democratic ethnoreligious and culture war constituencies. Executive actions on immigration policy, contraception in health plans under the Affordable Care Act, Justice Department briefs on the Defense of Marriage Act (and his own "evolved" position in favor of same-sex marriage) are just a few instances of a host of actions directed at ethnoreligious minorities, feminists, gay rights advocates, secular citizens and other base Democratic constituencies. Democratic mobilization strategies sought to maximize the vote and turnout among these groups, rather than renewing the wider appeals of Obama's 2008 religious outreach.

As the general election loomed, then, the evolution of religious strategies for both Romney and Obama converged on the politics of core constituencies. This, despite the evident initial preferences of both nominees for a different sort of coalition-building: in Obama's case,

for a sort of “grand coalition” of religious forces, and in Romney’s, for a focus on economic issues and management that would take attention away from issues more strongly shaped by religious alignments. The president’s preferred strategy was negated by the political battles of his administration, while Romney’s approach was defeated by the imperatives of Republican nominating politics. All this suggested that religious coalitions in 2012 would remain largely unchanged from those that have characterized American politics for the last three decades (Kellstedt and Guth 2012).

Conventions and the Campaign

The next task for both parties was to make sure any marginal changes in these coalitions favored their candidate. The Republican and Democratic Conventions served both intentionally and inadvertently to solidify the parties’ religious bases. In the Republican case, there was a major effort to assimilate Mitt Romney’s religious experience to that of the GOP base by films and testimonials to his pastoral activities as head of the LDS stake in Boston and on his substantial financial contributions to church and charities. The Republican platform maintained its long-term commitment to conservative social policies on abortion, gay marriage and other culture war issues. If the party’s highlighting of minority members, such as Senator Rubio, Governor Martinez and Secretary Rice had an impact, it was often to emphasize the larger problem Republicans had attracting Latino and African-American voters. Many convention speeches and the platform itself had substantial stretches of religious language. Finally, the choice of New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, a prominent traditionalist, to deliver the closing prayer was seen as a gesture to conservative Catholics worried about abortion, same-sex marriage and the “religious liberty” issue (Goodstein 2012).

The Democratic Convention sought to portray the party's commitment both to faith and ethnoreligious diversity. For some observers, the 2012 meeting seemed one of the most "accessible" to religious concerns in recent decades. The embrace of faith by convention planners and party leaders was on display with opening and closing prayers offered by leaders of many faiths, including Cardinal Dolan (who was hastily invited by the Democrats to offset any impact from his GOP appearance), delegate prayer meetings each morning, and gatherings of the Faith Caucus throughout the week. Speeches had featured Sister Simone Campbell, one of the "Nuns on the Bus," who declared "I am my sister's keeper" and repeated the assertion of some members of the Bishops Conference that Ryan's budget failed a basic moral test by harming poor families.

But the Convention also inadvertently highlighted both the growing role of secular activists in the party and some interreligious conflict. The platform and convention speeches stressed repeatedly the Democrats' commitment to choice on abortion and legalization of same-sex marriage, issues with the greatest appeal to seculars and modernists, abandoning the more moderate language of the 2008 document. The platform committee had also removed a ritual reference to God in previous documents and omitted language recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, presumably in response to the sensitivities of Arab American and Muslim delegates, present in record numbers. Obama strategists quickly realized the negative potential of both deletions, as Republicans boasted that *their* platform included a dozen mentions of the Deity *and* recognized Jerusalem.

To remedy this "oversight," former Ohio Governor Ted Strickland offered an amendment on behalf of the Obama campaign to reinstate language that endorsed "government that stands up for the hopes, values and interests of working people and gives everyone willing to work hard

the chance to make the most of their God-given potential." The amendment also recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. As an "ordained United Methodist minister," Strickland was there "to attest and affirm that our belief in God is central to the American story and informs the values we have expressed in our party's platform." But the amendment effort quickly ran into trouble: on three successive voice votes the motion drew as many "nays" as "yeas." The presiding officer, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, finally overcame his indecision and ruled that the amendment had passed with the required two-thirds majority, eliciting a loud chorus of boos (Markoe 2012). Although the jeers no doubt reflected varied objections—to the parliamentary procedure followed, to the commitment to Jerusalem as capital of Israel, and to the use of "God-language" in a party platform—the media had a brief frenzy with headlines such as "Democrats Boo God in Charlotte." Even a friendly academic observed that "the Democrats were not sure they wanted God in the campaign at all" (Worthen 2012).

Once the conventions had adjourned, attention returned to voter mobilization. Despite spotty media coverage of religious mobilization, there seems to have been a good bit going on. First, there was the usual raft of candidate endorsements by religious leaders. A long list of Evangelical officials endorsed Romney, headlined by Billy Graham's clear imprimatur after a meeting with the GOP candidate, while a host of Black Protestant leaders gave a similar thumbs-up to Obama, most notably Bishop Vashti McKenzie's "personal" endorsement following the First Lady's speech to the annual meeting of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Both candidates highlighted endorsements or quasi-endorsements by prominent Catholics (Grant 2012; Kucinich 2012; McElwee 2012).

Second, each party sought assistance in religious mobilization. Evangelical groups such as the Faith and Freedom Coalition, the Family Research Council and others promised to deliver

millions of voter guides to conservative churches and make a comparable number of other contacts, but they were hardly alone in the field. The “Alliance Defending Freedom” expanded earlier efforts to persuade conservative pastors to challenge IRS restrictions on church electioneering by endorsing candidates from the pulpit (i.e., Mr. Romney)—and sending transcripts of the offending sermons to the agency (Skeel 2012). The Romney campaign, however, was most focused on attracting white Catholic voters, critical in battleground states, by emphasizing “religious liberty” questions arising from the HHS contraception mandate. In this the campaign was assisted by Priests for Life, the EWTN network, CatholicVote.org and several other conservative Catholic organizations, which produced Republican-friendly voter guides—at least online. And although the National Council of Catholic Bishops merely reissued their old 2007 election guide, several conservative prelates left little doubt about their preference for Romney (Gibson 2012).

Although Obama had staff dedicated to activating more liberal Mainline Protestants and Catholics, the main focus was on mobilizing Black Protestant churches. During the campaign there were numerous reports of voter registration drives in African-American churches, followed by “Souls to the Polls” actions in which entire congregations would leave Sunday services, pile in church buses, and vote early in crucial states such as Florida and Ohio (despite futile attempts by state Republicans to limit voting on Sunday). Like some Evangelical counterparts, more than a few African-American clergy seemed ready to ignore the apparently moribund IRS prohibitions on pulpit endorsements, making clear their enthusiasm for President Obama’s re-election (O’Keefe 2012; Nicholas 2012).

How many voters did such tactics reach? By some past markers, the religious mobilization was not terribly impressive (Pew Research Center, 2012b, 2012c). Despite

considerable outside encouragement, clerical endorsements from the pulpit remained rare: only 5 percent of regular church-goers heard one, although this rose to 13 percent among Anglo-Catholics (all such endorsements were of Romney). Similarly, only 8 percent of voters reported being contacted by religious organizations, mostly on behalf of the GOP ticket. Nor were voter guides particularly abundant, with only 13 percent of regular church-goers reporting their availability, half the number in 2004, although Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics reported slightly higher averages (16 and 17 percent, respectively). Of course, the paucity of contacts reported in national polls may well reflect the religious groups' decision to concentrate on only a few battleground states, certainly a rational use of limited resources.

Such measures of “direct” campaigning probably understate the amount of “indirect” activity transpiring in churches. A majority of church-goers reported being urged by clergy to vote, especially those in the parties' core constituencies: Black Protestants (79 percent) and Evangelicals (52 percent). Many clergy also discussed the candidates explicitly, especially in Black Protestant churches (40 percent) and Anglo-Catholic parishes (17 percent). Of those hearing such messages, only three out of ten said the messages favored one candidate, but that favoritism followed predictable lines, with Black Protestant clergy overwhelmingly favoring Obama, and Anglo-Catholic priests and Evangelical pastors supporting Romney. Of course, such pastoral preferences may not have had much impact: these clergy were “preaching to the choir,” backing the candidate already favored by most parishioners (see Jones, Cox and Navarro-Rivera 2012).

Even less direct political cues took the form of issue discussions. Not surprisingly, clergy were very likely to speak about hunger and poverty (74 percent), with Anglo-Catholics slightly more likely to hear about the topic. Abortion came in second, with 37 percent of church-goers

hearing of this issue, with Anglo-Catholics (58 percent) and Evangelicals (40 percent) topping the list. Homosexuality was slightly less discussed, with Evangelicals (40 percent) and Black Protestants (37 percent) hearing the most. Finally, “religious liberty” discussions were heard by only 21 percent of church-goers, but by an impressive 36 percent of Anglo-Catholics, perhaps explaining other poll findings that Catholic laity did tend to share their leadership’s concerns on these issues (Pew Research Center 2012a). Interestingly, Mainline Protestants, the old American religious elite, ranked lowest of all major groups on hearing issue discussions, receiving voting guides, reporting pulpit endorsements, and remembering any clerical discussion about the election.

Religious Voting in 2012

From the most important standpoint, Obama’s strategy of solidifying his religious base produced an electoral victory. Nevertheless, most observers are hard pressed to see dramatic changes in partisan religious alignments. As one first cut at the exit polls suggested, “the basic religious contours of the 2012 electorate resemble recent elections” at least as far back as 2000 (Pew Forum 2012d). Indeed, looking at the crude religious measures available in the exit polls, what is remarkable is the absence of much change at all in the behavior of religious groups over the past four presidential races. Nor has there been any substantial modification of the “God gap,” the difference in electoral choices of frequent church-goers, more infrequent attenders, and the non-observant (Pew Forum 2012d).

With finer-grained measures, however, we can say a little more about some important, if subtle, shifts in religious voting and electoral coalitions. In Table 9.2 we report on religious voting, using data from the pre-election poll of the National Survey of Religion and Politics (NSRP) for Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics; this allows us to use the

NSRP's rich battery of religious questions to classify respondents by theological orientation. For the smaller ethnoreligious groups, we draw on the preliminary findings of the network exit polls, to minimize errors from the smaller subsamples in the NSRP (Pew Forum 2012b).

[Table 9.2 about here]

How did religious groups vote in 2012? Not surprisingly, Romney carried 78 percent of his fellow Mormons, a better performance than John McCain's in 2008, but he fell a little short of matching the Arizonan's totals among Evangelicals, losing some ground among the large traditionalist coterie, while gaining a bit among the smaller contingent of modernists. Thus, although Romney's Mormon faith and questionable commitment to conservative social values did not produce major defections among the GOP's largest religious constituency, neither did they foster maximum commitment, despite the best efforts of many Evangelical leaders and Christian Right organizations.

As his performance in the primaries suggested, Romney was much more attractive to the old GOP religious elite in the shrinking ranks of Mainline Protestants, doing better than McCain among traditionalists and, especially, among centrists, but losing ground to Obama among modernists. Thus, there was an enormous forty-point voting gap between Mainline traditionalists and modernists, considerably larger than that between the bookend Evangelical factions. This confirms the massive evidence from the religious press that Mainline Protestantism is at the center of religious restructuring, as these churches struggle with internal conflict over theology, social values and political choices. Once "the Republican Party at prayer," Mainline Protestantism is now a religious and political battlefield.

Romney also gained ground on Obama among Anglo-Catholics, but here theological divisions were much reduced, as modernists actually gave Romney a slight majority, albeit a

smaller one than their traditionalist co-parishioners did, with centrists standing pat on their solid GOP vote from 2008. Although restructuring influences are still evident among Anglo-Catholics, the results remind us that historic ethnoreligious loyalties and institutions can still create a modicum of group unity under the right conditions. Whether Romney's success among Catholics reflects the campaign's sustained outreach efforts, the Church's highly visible battle with the Obama administration over health care rules and other policies, or historically greater Catholic sensitivity to poor economic conditions is uncertain. As with Mainline Protestants, however, Romney gained less than he hoped from this successful appeal to white Catholics, given their declining contribution to the electorate (Pew Forum 2012d).

Romney also improved upon McCain's performance among usually Democratic ethnoreligious groups, gaining modestly among Latino Protestants (something of a surprise), unaffiliated voters (even agnostics and atheists moved slightly toward the GOP), Jews and "all other" faiths, although in each case he still won only a minority of the vote—sometimes a rather small one. President Obama, on the other hand, held on to virtually unanimous support among Black Protestants and actually improved on his overwhelming 2008 margin among Latino Catholics, a gain fortified by a substantial increase in their turnout rate. On the whole, then, although the President lost some ground within many religious groups, he minimized losses in the Democratic Party's core religious constituencies and actually increased his vote in some.

A comparison of Tables 9.1 and 9.2 shows some changes in the significance of religious groups for the parties' electoral coalitions. Evangelical and Mainline Protestants were a slightly smaller proportion of Romney's coalition than of McCain's (39 and 36 percent for Evangelicals, 20 and 18 percent for Mainliners). This reflects a number of factors. Romney's stronger appeal to other groups diluted the total contribution of white Protestants, while the declining number of

Mainline voters also reduced their presence (Evangelicals constituted about the same proportion of the electorate in 2012 as in 2008). Anglo-Catholics, on the other hand, retained their “new” prominence in the GOP electorate, with almost a quarter of the vote. As many observers pointed out, these results meant that well over two-thirds of GOP voters were from the three large white Christian traditions, a proportion further augmented by Latter-day Saints, some Jews and many unaffiliated voters. And a solid majority of GOP voters also came from traditionalist camps within the three largest ethnoreligious groups, augmented by social conservatives among Latter-day Saints, Latino Protestants, and a few other religious communities.

The Democratic coalition shifted further in the direction of its base ethnoreligious constituencies, drawing proportionately fewer Mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics than in 2008 (18 and 14 percent for the former, 20 and 13 percent for the latter), and larger proportions from among Latino Catholics (4 and 10 percent), the unaffiliated (16 and 19 percent), other faiths (4 and 6 percent) and Black Protestants (20 and 21 percent). And to the extent that the Democrats still attracted some voters in America’s largest white religious traditions, their appeal was concentrated (perhaps increasingly) among religious modernists.

Conclusions

After every presidential election the inevitable discussion begins about the “long term” meaning of the results. Although political scientists are increasingly skeptical about applying a realignment model to electoral change, almost invariably some partisans on each side argue that the election has established a new, dominant electoral majority vindicating their strategy (if on the winning side) or requiring drastic changes in party policy and tactics (if they lost). Within hours of the 2012 election, some Democratic theorists were trumpeting the triumph of the “emerged Democratic majority,” based on ethnoreligious minorities, such as Black Protestants

and Latino Catholics, young people, and the growing number of “secular” Americans with liberal social values (McArdle 2012). And Republicans debated whether their party was “too Christian,” “too white,” and “too traditionalist,” and if so, what to do about it (Ayres, McHenry and Frans 2012).

Within a week or two, however, experienced political observers were cautioning against drawing long-term conclusions about party strength from any one contest (Kohut 2012). From the perspective of religious coalitions, indeed, what is remarkable about the 2012 election is how much it resembled the previous ones in this century. The Republican and Democratic parties consistently draw from a stable alignment of religious groups, with marginal changes in that support during any election cycle based on the traits of the candidates on offer, major political issues or events, and minor changes in the numbers and turnout of each group. But mostly, to quote political theorist Yogi Berra, “it’s déjà vu all over again” when it comes to religious voting.

Nevertheless, there are significant if gradual changes transpiring in religious politics. First, the religious population is indeed shifting in directions that benefit the Democrats—assuming that the GOP fails to make inroads into growing population groups such as Latinos, where the party has had some success in the past. Second, the Republican and Democratic electoral coalitions are growing more distinct, experiencing a “big sort” along ethnoreligious and theological lines. Evangelical, Mainline and Anglo-Catholic traditionalists have become the core of the GOP, while ethnoreligious minorities, modernists and secular citizens increasingly dominate the Democrats. In the past Mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics were major forces in both parties, but with their numerical decline (and theological “sorting”) these groups provide much less “overlap” and common ground between the parties.

In policy terms, this religious sorting has created—or at least reinforced—partisan divisions on a vast array of issues, from abortion and same-sex marriage, to economic regulatory policy, to foreign policy questions (Guth 2011). Indeed, some of the partisan acrimony evident in Washington reflects this religious sorting. And because the religious groups with more extreme ideological stances tend to produce more party activists, candidate selection reflects that dominance, sometimes to the party’s disadvantage in general elections. In 2012 Romney was hindered in his quest for the presidency by the constraints imposed by his need to appeal to conservative GOP primary electorates, while Republicans also nominated several Senate candidates favored by their religious core, but unacceptable to general election voters. Democrats have not suffered as much recently from an analogous malady, but will face such challenges in the future as their electoral base becomes ever more distinct religiously—and increasingly diverse as well.

Notes

1. The candidate profiles in the following paragraphs are drawn from a wide variety of sources, but the single most useful compendium of information was the website of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

2. The Pearson product moment correlation (r) is a statistic that measures the strength and direction of a relationship between two variables. This statistic runs from 0 (no relationship) to +/- 1.0 (a perfect relationship). In this case, one could predict the likelihood of Romney's success in a GOP primary by knowing the proportion of Evangelicals in the state (a strong negative influence) and the proportion of Catholics (a strong positive influence).

3. We emphasize that the findings of all these studies are preliminary. When available, the NSRP post-election survey will provide final estimates for religious group voting. The exit poll results will also be subject to revision based on secondary analysis of the data with more accurate weighting of respondents (Pew Forum 2012d). For another insightful survey on religious voting and electoral coalitions, with estimates quite similar to ours, see Jones, Cox and Navarro-Rivera (2012).

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Table 9.1 Religious Voting in the 2008 Presidential Election (in percent)

<i>Ethnoreligious Tradition and Theological Faction</i>	McCain Vote	Obama Vote	GOP Vote Coalition	Democratic Vote Coalition
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	72	28	5	2
Evangelical Protestant	76	24	39	11
<i>Traditionalist</i>	88	12	24	3
<i>Centrist</i>	68	32	12	5
<i>Modernist</i>	54	46	3	3
<i>Traditionalist -Modernist</i>	+34	-34	--	--
Mainline Protestant	50	50	20	18
<i>Traditionalist</i>	68	32	7	3
<i>Centrist</i>	49	51	8	7
<i>Modernist</i>	39	61	5	7
<i>Traditionalist -Modernist</i>	+29	-29	--	--
Anglo-Catholic	51	49	23	20
<i>Traditionalist</i>	58	42	8	6
<i>Centrist</i>	63	37	10	5
<i>Modernist</i>	34	66	5	9
<i>Traditionalist -Modernist</i>	+24	-24	--	--
Latino Protestant	33	67	1	2
Latino Catholic	27	73	2	4
Unaffiliated	27	73	7	16
<i>Unaffiliated Believer</i>	41	59	3	4
<i>Secular</i>	22	78	3	8
<i>Agnostic/Atheist</i>	19	81	1	4
Jewish	23	77	1	3
All Others	19	81	1	4
Black Protestant	5	95	1	20
Total Sample	46	54	100	100

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

Table 9.2 Religious Voting in the 2012 Presidential Election (in percent)

<i>Ethnoreligious Tradition and Theological Faction</i>	Romney Vote	Obama Vote	GOP Gain/Loss from 2008	GOP Vote Coalition	Democratic Vote Coalition
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)*	78	21	+6	3	1
Evangelical Protestant	74	26	-2	36	12
<i>Traditionalist</i>	86	14	-2	19	3
<i>Centrist</i>	71	29	-3	12	4
<i>Modernist</i>	52	48	+2	5	5
<i>Traditionalist -Modernist</i>	+34	-34	--	--	--
Mainline Protestant	55	45	+5	18	14
<i>Traditionalist</i>	73	27	+5	7	2
<i>Centrist</i>	62	38	+13	7	4
<i>Modernist</i>	33	67	-6	4	8
<i>Traditionalist -Modernist</i>	+40	-40	--	--	--
Anglo-Catholic	62	38	+11	23	13
<i>Traditionalist</i>	67	33	+9	7	3
<i>Centrist</i>	62	38	-1	11	6
<i>Modernist</i>	52	48	+18	5	4
<i>Traditionalist -Modernist</i>	+15	-15	--	--	--
Latino Protestant	40	60	+7	3	4
Latino Catholic*	21	75	-6	2	10
Unaffiliated	34	66	+7	11	19
<i>Unaffiliated Believer</i>	49	51	+8	3	3
<i>Secular</i>	32	68	+10	6	11
<i>Agnostic/Atheist</i>	24	76	+5	2	5
Jewish*	30	69	+7	1	2
All Others*	23	74	+5	2	6
Black Protestant	5	95	0	1	21
Total Sample	48	52	+2	100	100

Sources: National Survey of Religion and Politics, University of Akron, 2010.

*Estimate from national exit polls (Pew Forum 2012d).