

***Religion and Republicans: The Presidential Election of 2012***

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Religion has always played a major role in American politics. Although the tides of electoral politics may often turn on economic events, foreign policy crises or other “secular” issues, partisan coalitions in the past few decades have been structured by religious alliances that have been extraordinarily stable, with only marginal changes from election to election. Those marginal changes have, of course, produced dramatically different outcomes in presidential and congressional races, with Republican victories in 2004 and 2010, and Democratic triumphs in 2006 and 2008. And although one journalist proclaimed that “God was remarkably absent” from the 2012 presidential race, in fact religious questions played an important part in the lead-up to the November election in both parties.

This paper considers the role of religious groups, issues and candidate strategies in the 2012 presidential race. First, we consider two broad perspectives that shape expert interpretation on that role, the *ethnoreligious* and *restructuring* theories. Then we examine briefly religious strategies in the 2008 election and the resulting pattern of religious group votes in that contest. As this pattern sets the context for both the Obama administration’s approach to religious groups and campaigns during his years in office and for competitive strategies by the GOP hopefuls, it is important to understand the nature of religious party coalitions. We then focus on the Republican nominating contest, discussing the cast of candidates, their religious strategies and the impact of those strategies. Finally, we turn briefly to the Democratic candidate’s religious strategy, arguing that Obama reluctantly made major changes in his approach to religious groups from that he followed in 2008, changes dictated both by his experiences in the politics of his first term and by the structure of campaign incentives.

### *Alternative Theories of Religious Coalitions: The 2008 Election*

Much journalistic commentary on the role of religion in 2012 revealed considerable confusion over the operative religious forces. Two approaches have competed in professional analysis of religious voting: *Ethnoreligious theory* emphasizes religious affiliation's influence 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 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 2008 results, as illustrated by Table 1. We report both the votes of the religious traditions, emphasized by ethnoreligious theory (Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Anglo Catholics and so on), and those of theological factions. Unlike Hunter's bipolar model, we divide the big religious traditions into three factions, with "traditionalists" on the most theologically orthodox and observant pole, and "modernists," with more heterodox religious attachments, anchoring the other end.

[Table 1 about here]

Religious traditions differed dramatically in 2008. Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals were overwhelmingly Republican. Unlike 2004 when they voted for Republican George Bush, Latino Protestants joined most other religious "minorities," including Jews, Black Protestants, Latino Catholics, other non-Christian faiths and the unaffiliated in voting staunchly Democratic. Note that Mainline Protestants and Catholics were "swing" groups, almost evenly divided—a pattern that has obtained for the last several presidential races. Thus, ethnoreligious differences were clearly apparent in 2008. 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 co-parishioners, who were overwhelmingly Democratic. Indeed, each theological faction resembled its counterparts in other traditions more than competing factions within its own. Thus, the restructuring theory also finds considerable validation in the 2008 results, with McCain relying on traditionalists and Obama drawing on modernists.

Each party, then, had a distinct religious “base.” McCain, despite his personal lack of rapport with religious conservatives, 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, which held conservative positions on social, foreign policy, and even economic issues (see Guth 2011). Of course, Republicans still needed votes from other religious groups and unaffiliated voters, but no GOP presidential aspirant in 2012 could ignore this traditionalist base. The strategic problem from a religious perspective was to hold and activate those voters, while attracting enough others to reverse the Democratic majorities in 2006 and 2008.

The Democrats had a more complicated situation, given their greater internal religious diversity and need to add voters to achieve a majority. In the 2006 congressional contests the Democrats made new overtures to religious voters, even to traditionalists, and in 2008 Barack Obama was dogged in his “ecumenical” religious strategy, appealing to groups outside the usual Democratic coalition. He did succeed in making marginal but crucial inroads among usually Republican religious blocs, such as Catholic traditionalists and Latino Protestants (for details, see Guth 2009). Nevertheless, as the last column in Table 1 shows, Obama’s largest single bloc was Black Protestants, due to their virtually unanimous support and high turnout. They provided Obama with one-fifth of his total vote, matched by Anglo-Catholics, and followed by Mainline Protestants. Unaffiliated or secular voters supplied a slightly smaller total, around 16 percent. The rest of the president’s total came from a wide scattering of religious groups, including Latino Catholics and Protestants, Jews (an important financial and activist constituency), and a few Evangelicals.

### *Changes in the American Religious Landscape*

Religious strategies in 2012 would be shaped not only by past electoral patterns, but also by changes in the American religious landscape. First, there was some continued ebbing in public receptiveness to religious appeals by politicians. In the 2004 election 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 2012 public opinion seemed slightly less positive about religious politics, although most Americans still wanted the president to have a strong religious faith (Guth et al. 2006; Pew Research Center 2012). Some attributed this to long-term disenchantment with the Christian Right's overt politicizing of religion, while others credited secularization, as the numbers of the religiously unaffiliated Americans increased steadily and some markers of religious practice declined. In addition, public opinion had liberalized on some social issues such as same-sex marriage, civil unions and stem cell research. And, perhaps most important, the national agenda was dominated by the financial crisis of 2008-9, the economic slump, and controversies over policies such as the 2009 stimulus bill and health care reform.

At the same time, two changes within the American 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. Reed, however, after an unsuccessful effort in electoral politics, had returned to building a new Christian Right

organization, the Faith and Freedom Coalition. Dr. James Dobson's had retired from his leadership of Focus on the Family, which in any event was experiencing financial woes, as its new executive sought to bolster the organization by focusing on its traditional non-political mission. 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, who had actually interacted with—or even supported Barack Obama's 2008 campaign (Guth 2009). Even staunch conservative groups such as the 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 (Seiple 2012).

“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 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). And although Wallis eschewed partisanship, the movement's agenda and policy clearly tilted Democratic, presenting an opening for party leaders in 2008.

Developments within the large Catholic tradition were more ambiguous. The Catholic Church had a growing cadre of activist traditionalist archbishops and bishops eager to confront what they perceived as the moral evils of our time. Although in previous elections this involved a propensity to confront pro-choice politicians, mostly Democrats, over abortion, in 2012 this concern was compounded by the issues of gay marriage and religious exemptions from the administration's interpretation that the Affordable Care Act of 2010 required health insurance plans to include free contraception. After protests from Catholic organizations, the HHS exempted churches—but not all religiously affiliated organizations—from the requirement. This led the Catholic Bishops Conference to institute a “religious freedom” campaign, which drew support from some Evangelical Protestant groups as well.

Although the bishops were usually insistent that their protests were not designed to affect the 2012 election, liberal Catholic groups were not so sure. Many of these groups were much more concerned by prospective federal budget for programs assisting the poor and thought the Church should be much more active in combatting these efforts. Such sentiments were especially strong among women religious, who also thought the bishops' opposition to the contraception mandate played into the hands of conservatives. A small group of nuns put this conflict on the front pages with a cross-country tour raising awareness of the potential impact of budget cuts. As the “Nuns on the Bus” attracted extensive media coverage and praised by other liberal groups, the conflict between leaders of the women's religious orders and the bishops' conference on a

wide range of issues divided Catholics, reflecting the growing theological and ideological divisions in the Church.

All these developments influenced arguments over partisan “religious” strategies. Although the Democrats and candidate Obama had embraced an aggressive appeal to religious traditionalists in the 2006 and 2008 elections—with some success, other Democratic strategists argued for reliance on a “new Democratic majority” based on ethnoreligious minorities, such as black Protestants and Latino Catholics, combined with the growing number of secular Americans, concentrated in the highly educated and professional sectors of the American voting population (cf. Judis and Teixeira 2002). As these groups were growing as a proportion of the public, this strategy supposedly assured Democratic electoral success for the foreseeable future. On the GOP side, the debate was often between those strategists who saw Republican success based on effective mobilization of religious traditionalists and economic conservatives (groups with considerable overlap), and those like Karl Rove who hoped to broaden the party’s appeal to at least some ethnoreligious minorities, such as Hispanic Protestants and Catholics, arguing that ignoring these groups would eventually render the GOP a permanent electoral minority. In reality, both parties vacillated in their strategic deliberations over the course of the campaign.

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

The complex religious divisions appearing in 2008 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). One effect of this was to shift the religious identification of presidential candidates into a new pattern in 2012. Indeed, as *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat noted, the long-

term dominance of mainline Protestants over the presidential nominating pool came to an end and the nation finally had “a presidential field that mirrors the diversity of American Christianity as a whole” (Douthat 2012). Not surprisingly, as we shall see, the initial field of candidates in the GOP (see Table 2) did indeed reflect the party’s new religious constituency for the first time, but in ways that revealed potential fractures within that coalition.

[Table 2 about here]

The obvious problem from the start of the GOP nominating contest was that the membership of the putative front-runner, former Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was an obstacle to securing support among the largest single bloc of Republicans, Evangelical Protestants. Indeed, Romney was not only an observant Mormon, but had held various leadership positions in the Church in Massachusetts. Although as Table 1 shows, Mormons closely rival Evangelicals as a staunch participants in the GOP electoral coalition (and share many similar political views), Evangelicals often regard the Mormon faith as “a cult” and “not Christian.”<sup>1</sup> These concerns had been heightened by Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee in the 2008 Republican nominating contest and polls still showed that a substantial minority of Evangelicals would not vote for a Mormon for president in 2012—at least in the GOP primaries (Pew Research Center 2011). As Evangelicals represented a majority of GOP caucus and primary voters in many states and a substantial minority in others, this presented a major strategic problem to Romney.

Unlike 2008 when Romney gave a well-publicized speech addressing his views on religion and politics, emulating John F. Kennedy’s famous address to the Houston Ministerial Alliance in 1960, in 2012 he handled the issue of his religion largely by ignoring it was far as

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<sup>1</sup> A Pew Research Center study showed not only that Mormons and Evangelicals were the most Republican religious groups in the electorate (80 and 70 percent Republican or “leaning” Republican in 2011), but that those preferences had increased since the presidential election of 2008 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012a).

possible; indeed, his campaign staff vigorously discouraged reporters' interest in the candidate's faith and religious observance (Barbaro and Park 2012; Horowitz 2012). Romney did insist on his commitment to conservative stances on social issues, but as in 2008 these commitments were questioned by many social conservatives because they differed from those he took while governor of liberal Massachusetts. Although Romney did have a staffer whose role was to maintain relations with Evangelical and Catholic conservatives, his campaign made little effort to build such support during the primaries, preferring to rely on Mormon and business networks for fundraising and campaign activism and other religious groups such as mainline Protestants and Anglo-Catholics for votes. And of all the major GOP candidates, Romney was least prone to use religious language and appeals during the presidential candidate debates (Bradberry 2012).

Not surprisingly, Romney's challengers in the initial Republican field included several Evangelicals, drawing on the religious core of the GOP (see Table 2). Congresswoman Michele Bachmann of Minnesota was a lifetime member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), a traditionalist body, attended law school at Oral Roberts University, a school with a Pentecostal background, and helped run her husband's "biblical world-view" counseling service. During the lead-up to her campaign she faced criticism on WELS' anti-Catholic posture, ultimately resigning her membership and joining the Eagle Brook Church, an Evangelical megachurch with a Baptist heritage. Her meteoric campaign drew substantial support from Evangelical pastors, parishioners and social conservative groups in Minnesota and Iowa, but her frequent erratic pronouncements soon caused her campaign momentum to falter and she withdrew from the race before the Iowa caucuses.

Former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty seemed to start his own quest for the nomination with the advantage of a more mainstream electoral appeal, combined with strong

Evangelical credentials. Raised a Catholic, Pawlenty converted to Evangelical Protestantism in 1987 and was an active member in Eden Prairie's Wooddale Church, a large non-denominational congregation led by Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, with whom Pawlenty maintained a long friendship. Although Pawlenty was a reliable social conservative on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and embryonic stem cell research, he joined his pastor in deviating for a time from Republican orthodoxy on global warming (and taxes), explaining these positions in religious terms. Although he later recanted upon entering the GOP nominating process, his campaign failed to catch fire, and when he lost the Ames Iowa Straw Poll to Bachmann, Pawlenty withdrew from the race, eventually throwing his support to Romney and serving as a surrogate for that campaign, figuring notably in speculation over Romney's choice for the vice-presidential nomination.

Two other Republican hopefuls shared with Bachmann the experience of rising to the rank of front-runner in the polls prior to the start of the nominating process 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 slogans on taxation ("9-9-9"). Cain also claimed a strong religious connection, but one that was more typically associated with Democratic politicians than Republicans. He was a long-time member of the Antioch Baptist Church in Atlanta, part of the National Baptist Convention USA, a historically African American denomination. He eventually became a licensed minister and served as an associate minister at the same church, although at odds with the church's political leanings. Cain's campaign imploded when he was confronted with sexual harassment and infidelity charges.

Governor Rick Perry of Texas was the next hope of social conservatives, seemingly offering a candidacy appealing to economic conservatives and Tea Party advocates as well. With

an untarnished electoral record in Texas, Perry also offered political credentials stronger than those of many other Republican contenders. After spending most of his life as a United Methodist, by 2010 Perry had moved to the Lake Hills Church, a contemporary non-denominational Evangelical congregation. He was strongly urged to enter the race by prominent Christian Right leaders, such as Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, Gary Bauer of American Values, and others. The effective “kick-off” of his campaign took place on August 6, 2011 at a prayer rally in Houston’s Reliant Stadium which drew over 30,000 participants and was co-sponsored by the American Family Association, the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family. Perry was unabashed in his use of religious language and appeals during both his governorship and his presidential campaign, but despite much success in fundraising, his poor performances in nationally televised candidate debates soon punctured his balloon and he withdrew from the race after poor showings in the Iowa and New Hampshire. Perry’s failure to gather steam left religious conservatives without an obvious candidate in the nominating contest, at least one sharing their broad Evangelical theological and social perspectives.

The divisions within the Evangelical community were evident both in Iowa and New Hampshire: Rick Santorum carried a plurality of the Evangelical vote in Iowa but Mitt Romney accomplished the same feat in New Hampshire, although among a smaller Evangelical constituency. But the Evangelical vote was scattered among several candidates in both states. If Romney were to be stopped, social conservatives needed to unite behind a single champion. 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 religious views out of his campaign and his vocal libertarian streak often put him at

odds with religious conservatives. Paul did have an active coterie of Evangelical supporters, but the leaders of the traditionalist wing of the GOP did not regard him as a serious option.<sup>2</sup>

That left two Catholic candidates: former Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. As Catholics, both were religious “traditionalists,” but Santorum was a life-long Catholic by family heritage and personal commitment, and Gingrich was a recent “convert” to the faith after a history of nominal Lutheranism as a youth and varying commitment as a Southern Baptist during his adult years and congressional career. Each had political liabilities as a candidate for president in the mind of social conservative leaders. Although Santorum attributed his own adult recommitment to his Catholic faith to the effects of a largely Evangelical prayer group he met with on Capitol Hill, not all Evangelicals would necessarily resonate with the choice of a Catholic of a very traditionalist stripe, whose pronouncements on social issues such as abortion, gay marriage and other issues often seemed extreme even to them. Santorum’s somewhat wooden campaign style was often compared unfavorably to that of Mike Huckabee, the Evangelical favorite from 2008 and FOX TV talk show host. Nevertheless, Santorum did have his Evangelical advocates and, perhaps, could add his support among Catholic traditionalists to his ranks.

Gingrich’s problems were different. For social conservatives, his marital history and infidelities were major obstacles, despite their frequent assurances of forgiveness. Although he took the appropriate positions on culture war issues, the former speaker was known to possess idiosyncratic tendencies on most issues and was therefore not universally regarded as

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<sup>2</sup> Three other initial GOP candidates were clearly *not* options for religious conservatives (or any other kind). Former Utah governor Jon Huntsman was, like his distant relative Mitt Romney, a Mormon, but a non-observant one with unsettled religious views. And former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson was a nominal Lutheran, but had not practiced his faith since childhood and also had indeterminate theological views. And both were distrusted by Tea Party and economic conservatives as well. Former Louisiana Governor Buddy Roemer found no traction with any faction within the GOP.

trustworthy. And even if Gingrich had written *Rediscovering God in America* (2006) and was increasingly prone to use religious language in campaign speeches, most Evangelicals and other traditionalists did not see him as a logical political expression of their movement.

Romney's apparent victory in the Iowa caucuses and his triumph in New Hampshire prompted social conservatives to seek unity—fast (Wallsten and Tumulty 2012). The Evangelical and Catholic traditionalist vote had been divided among several candidates in Iowa and New Hampshire and they hoped to coalesce behind a single choice before the often critical South Carolina GOP primary. Meeting in Texas, 150 leaders of the movement—mostly Evangelical Protestants—voted overwhelmingly on the third ballot to support Santorum. But supporters of Newt Gingrich argued that the first ballot had been much closer and the “overwhelming” vote came only after James Dobson, Tony Perkins and Gary Bauer argued the strategic advantage of a clear single endorsement (Martin 2012).

The anointing of Santorum came too late to propel him to victory in South Carolina, which was carried by Gingrich. But the former Speaker's appeal was limited outside the South and Santorum gradually emerged as the conservative alternative to Romney. The continued presence of several candidates in the race, however, gave a solid lift to Romney's prospects and he eventually emerged as the putative nominee, although not before the intramural Republican bloodletting had drained electoral coffers and presented the Democrats with potent issues for the general election campaign.

How did religious constituencies respond to the GOP primary campaign? This is somewhat difficult to answer with assurance, as only in some states did exit polls ascertain the religious affiliation of voters—and then only in crude terms. But some general patterns are apparent. Leigh Bradberry's (2012) conclusions about the early primaries apply to the entire

nominating campaign, with some modifications. Looking at the twenty GOP primaries for which some religious measures are available, it is clear that religion did much to structure the outcome: Santorum's appeal was strongest among regular church-goers, Evangelical Protestants, and those voters for whom it was important that the candidate's religious views resembled theirs.

Romney's vote peaked among those who were least observant, Catholic or mainline Protestant, and those for whom shared faith was not important. Outside of his own state of Georgia and neighboring South Carolina, Gingrich failed to develop a strong appeal to Evangelicals or to Catholics, although he depended on both groups for much of the vote. And although the questions on church attendance and religious assessment of the candidates were asked only in a few states, the results suggests that Gingrich's appeal was much weaker among religious traditionalists who make up a large part of the GOP primary electorate.

[Table 3 about here]

Nevertheless, the campaign did make a difference in several ways. As Table 3 confirms, over the course of the entire campaign Romney's vote totals had a strong negative correlation with the Evangelical proportion of the GOP primary vote in each state, but was strongly and positively correlated with the Catholic voting population. Santorum and Gingrich shared almost identical aggregate profiles, with a modest advantage in states with large Evangelical votes, but no advantage or disadvantage in heavily Catholic ones. The mean proportion of the Evangelical and Catholic vote, however, provides a somewhat different angle. Santorum barely edged Romney for a plurality of Evangelical voters, with Gingrich and Paul trailing by substantial margin. Notice, however, that Romney had a decisive advantage with Catholics in the thirteen states where Catholics can be identified in the exit polls.

To discover any trends over the course of the campaign, we simply correlated the candidates' Evangelical and Catholic vote proportions with the chronological order of the GOP primaries. If we look at the coefficients without putting too much emphasis on statistical significance in these very small samples, we see that Romney made some slight gains in his Evangelical vote as the campaign wore on (and moved out of the South). But the transformation of Santorum's appeal was more dramatic: the former Pennsylvania Senator markedly increased his vote among both Evangelicals and Catholics in the later primaries, largely at the expense of Gingrich and, to a much lesser extent, Ron Paul. Thus, had social conservatives been able to focus their energies on one candidate prior to the Iowa caucuses, Romney might have had an even tougher time securing the GOP nomination.<sup>3</sup> And although Romney did somewhat better among church-goers and Evangelicals than he had in 2008, he clearly won the nomination without the strong support of the party's core religious constituencies.

Although Romney clearly hoped that Republican reaction to the nation's economic and budgetary woes would be enough to sustain his campaign, the lack of strong enthusiasm from social conservatives was still a concern. Once he had emerged as the putative nominee, Romney undertook several actions to propitiate this wing of the party. He gave the commencement address at Liberty University, Jerry Falwell's "Evangelical Notre Dame," stressing the common commitment to faith and conservative values of all the GOP's religious constituencies. The campaign also 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 American Catholics, especially in the battleground states of the Midwest. He also established a Jewish liaison body and travelled to Israel as well, in an effort to appeal both to Jewish voters

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<sup>3</sup> In the "what if" category, one might speculate whether Santorum's ultimate "victory" in the Iowa caucuses might have established him as the conservative "anti-Romney" candidate if it had been announced as a win at the time, rather than weeks later.

disgruntled by Obama's Mideast policy, and to strong pro-Israel sentiment among American Evangelicals. He did not target explicitly any other groups with special campaign bodies, but did ramp up his campaign's religious outreach capacity. Romney now began to 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 started to address church-state issues in a way attractive to Christian conservatives by attacking the Obama administration's "war on religion," and arguing that church-state separation had been "taken by some well beyond its original meaning" (Swaine 2012).

Although these actions were generally welcomed by Christian conservatives, movement leaders made it clear that Romney's choice of running mate would be a major factor in their willingness to work for the ticket. His reputed "short list" certainly met Douthat's (2012) characterization of the presidential pool: it ran the gamut of American religion. Tim Pawlenty was attractive as an Evangelical choice who might also appeal to Catholics. Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, a mainline 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 Susan Martinez of New Mexico. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida was not only Hispanic and a Tea Party favorite, but was a serious religious person who had spent time in Catholic, Evangelical and Mormon churches during his lifetime. 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 somewhat surprising choice of Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin was initially seen as a strong gesture toward the Tea Party enthusiasts in the GOP and to other

economic conservatives, but it was more than that. Although Ryan's public fame derived largely from 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. As a devout Catholic, he participated regularly in a Wednesday morning congressional prayer group populated primarily by Evangelicals. As a result, he had a strong appeal to social conservatives, including Evangelical Protestants, and Christian Right movement leaders were almost universally enthusiastic about Ryan's selection. Indeed, the welcome was so warm as to validate the claims of culture wars theorists that the relevant alignments in American religious politics were determined by theological traditionalism or liberalism, not historic religious traditions.

Ryan's sudden prominence in the campaign not only brought his controversial proposals for reforming social security, Medicare and Medicaid to the forefront of public debate, but highlighted his conservative positions on social issues as well. Ryan was staunchly pro-life and his tax returns revealed substantial contributions to pro-life organizations (Associated Press 2012a). 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 and public furor over comments made by Ryan's House colleague Todd Akin, running for the Senate in Missouri. Akin asserted that in "legitimate rape" that was little likelihood that the victim would become pregnant. As Ryan's congressional activities on the abortion issue closely matched Akin's, he was an easy target for Democratic critics. On the other side, Concerned Women for American, a Christian Right powerhouse, the National Right to Life Committee and other social conservative organizations quickly sprang to Ryan's defense (Associated Press, 2012b; Haberman et al. 2012).

Even Ryan's economic and budgetary policy proposals met religious criticism. During the previous Congress, Ryan had already been targeted by Religious Left organizations and, perhaps more importantly, by the Catholic bishops conference, which had argued that his federal budget proposals would disproportionately harm the poor. Liberal Catholics claimed that his view of Catholic social teachings was warped by excessive enthusiasm for the doctrines of the libertarian novelist Ayn Rand. Ryan had refuted this characterization in addresses to Catholic audiences in which he claimed that "the work I do as a Catholic holding office conforms to the social doctrine as best as I can make of it" (Pew Forum 2012b). His efforts were not enough, however, to fend off the attentions of the "Nuns on the Bus," who made his budget proposals and his opposition to the Affordable Care Act the target of their national tour. In the weeks after his nomination, Ryan's views became the 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 Religious Base: Barack Obama's Religious Strategy***

The trajectory of Barak Obama's religious strategy was quite different than that of the Romney ticket. In 2008 candidate Obama followed an "ecumenical" religious strategy that reflected both Obama's personal experience and 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 rumors throughout the campaign and during his presidency 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). To round out his ethnoreligious experience, Obama even had an in-law who was an African American rabbi in Chicago!

As a presidential candidate, Obama's religious strategy was shaped by political imperatives as well. Concerned by evidence of the "God gap" in favor of the Republicans in recent national elections, Obama had been outspoken in welcoming "people of faith" into the Democratic Party while criticizing those who would restrict such access. During the primary and general election campaigns of 2008, Obama and his campaign organization made strong overtures to normally Republican religious groups and leaders, including Evangelicals and conservative mainline Protestants and Catholics, hoping to add some members of these groups to the usual Democratic coalition of religious minorities and seculars. In some cases, such appeals were as much rhetorical as substantive, but he also pledged to find middle ground on culture war issues such as abortion, and supported a "faith-based" initiative not very different from that of the Bush administration. Indeed, few Democratic candidates in recent decades had a more impressive religious mobilization operation (Guth 2009). And Obama's inauguration itself 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 promised to overcome in his campaign. His administrative and judicial appointees almost exclusively reflected the Democratic Party's traditional ethnoreligious and secular constituencies, his health care proposals renewed traditionalists' fears about public support for abortion, his push to eliminate the military's "don't

ask, don't tell" policy on gays angered traditionalists, and his overtures to the Muslim world and policies on the Middle East bothered many conservative Christians. Finally, his efforts to extend and clarify Bush's "faith-based initiatives" failed to satisfy conservatives—or religious liberals, for that matter. By the time of the 2010 congressional elections, Obama had given back most of the marginal gains he had made among "Republican" religious groups in 2008 (Guth 2011).

As the 2012 campaign approached, Obama abandoned any effort to revive his broad-based religious 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 the president's own "evolved" position on same-sex marriage) are just a few instances of a host of actions directed at ethnoreligious minorities, feminists, gay rights advocates and other base Democratic constituencies. And, at this writing at least, Democratic mobilization strategies seem largely directed at maximizing the vote among these groups, rather than making the broader religious appeals characteristic of Obama's 2008 religious outreach efforts.

### ***Preliminary Soundings: The Early General Election Polls***

At this point, then, the evolution of religious strategies on both the Republican and Democratic sides seems pointed toward the politics of core constituencies. This, despite the evident initial preferences on behalf 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 the past four years, while Romney's preference was obviated by the imperatives of Republican nominating politics.

All this suggests that religious coalitions in 2012 will remain largely unchanged from those that have characterized American politics for the last three decades (Kellstedt and Guth 2012). Certainly that seems to be the message of the public opinion polls to this point. Although early polls on the general election choices confronting voters seldom contain detailed religious measures or have samples large enough to say much about smaller religious groups, we can nevertheless draw some early conclusions about the likely religious configurations in 2012. Table 4 reports the results of several surveys compiled by the Pew Research Center during mid-2012, after Mitt Romney became the putative GOP nominee. For comparison, we have included data from the last Pew survey before the 2008 general election.<sup>4</sup>

[Table 4 about here]

Although the Pew Center reports results only on the largest religious groups, given the sample sizes, the comparison of several monthly polls during 2012 with the final pre-election poll in 2008 is quite instructive. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn is the remarkable stability of the religious vote, despite the arguably distinct identities of John McCain and Mitt Romney. Both draw on almost identical religious coalitions, with Evangelical Protestants the core of the GOP vote, black Protestants and unaffiliated voters the center of the Democratic coalition, and white Catholics and Mainline Protestants the swing constituencies. Although we have no direct evidence on Latino Catholics, back-of-the-envelope calculations from the Pew data on the differences between "all Catholics" and "white Catholics" confirms that those voters remained

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<sup>4</sup> We have used this survey rather than data from the 2012 exit polls to eliminate differences in question wording and retain the effects of "undecided" voters.

overwhelmingly in President Obama's camp. Thus, the party system clearly retains a strong ethnoreligious coloration.

There is less direct evidence available at this point on the importance of the theological differences stressed by the religious restructuring or culture wars theory. Nevertheless, the "God gap" measure of religious observance is a useful, if crude, marker for religious traditionalists (who are much more observant than religious modernists). As Table 4 shows, the GOP candidate still draws more support from those who attend worship services regularly. Indeed, this pattern as well has not shifted much either over the past four years. Thus, it appears likely that the politics of religious voting in 2012 will be a story of "the more things change, the more they stay the same," or as Yogi Berra would put it, "*déjà vu* all over again."

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**Table 1. Religion and the 2008 Presidential Vote (in percent)**

<i>Religious Tradition and Group</i>	McCain Vote	Republican Party ID	Democratic Party ID	GOP Vote Coalition	Dem Vote Coalition
Evangelical Protestant	76	56	28	39	11
<i>Traditionalist</i>	88	72	16	24	3
<i>Centrist</i>	68	46	37	12	5
<i>Modernist</i>	54	38	36	3	3
<i>Traditionalist/Modernist Gap</i>	+34	+34	-20	--	--
Mainline Protestant	50	42	43	20	18
<i>Traditionalist</i>	68	51	37	7	3
<i>Centrist</i>	49	45	44	8	7
<i>Modernist</i>	39	33	50	5	7
<i>Traditionalist/Modernist Gap</i>	+29	+18	-13	--	--
Anglo-Catholic	51	37	48	23	20
<i>Traditionalist</i>	58	43	45	8	6
<i>Centrist</i>	63	44	44	10	5
<i>Modernist</i>	34	26	53	5	9
<i>Traditionalist/Modernist Gap</i>	+24	+17	-8	--	--
Latino Protestant	33	41	47	1	2
Latino Catholic	27	19	56	2	4
Unaffiliated	27	22	45	7	16
Jewish	23	15	66	1	3
All Others	19	18	58	1	4
Black Protestant	5	8	79	1	20
Total Sample	46	36	45	100	100

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

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Socialization</i>	<i>Current Affiliation</i>	<i>Theology</i>	<i>Political Religion</i>
Michele Bachmann	Wisconsin Synod Lutheran	Nondenominational Evangelical	Very traditionalist	Explicit and frequent
Tim Pawlenty	Catholic	Nondenominational Evangelical	Traditionalist	Fairly explicit and fairly frequent
Rick Perry	United Methodist	Nondenominational Evangelical	Traditionalist	Explicit and frequent
Ron Paul	Mainline Lutheran	Nondenominational Evangelical, Baptist	Traditionalist	Less explicit, infrequent
Rick Santorum	Catholic	Catholic	Very traditionalist	Explicit and frequent
Newt Gingrich	Mainline Lutheran	Catholic	Traditionalist	Fairly explicit and fairly frequent
John Huntsman, Jr.	LDS	LDS but non-practicing	Liberal	Infrequent
Mitt Romney	LDS	LDS	Somewhat traditionalist	Infrequent and indirect
Herman Cain	National Baptist	National Baptist	Traditionalist	Fairly explicit and fairly frequent
Gary Johnson	Mainline Lutheran	Non-practicing Mainline Lutheran	Very modernist	Decries political use of religion
Buddy Roemer	United Methodist	United Methodist	Somewhat traditionalist	No major use of religion

	Evangelical GOP Electorate <i>r=</i>	Catholic GOP Electorate <i>r=</i>	Average Share of Evangelical Vote	Average Share of Catholic Vote	Trend Evangelical Vote	Trend Catholic Vote
Romney	-.752***	.676**	33.4	45.2	.251	-.047
Santorum	.403*	.032	34.8	25.2	.631**	.721**
Gingrich	.368	.032	21.3	16.9	-.295	-.422
Paul	-.403*	.044	10.6	9.3	-.209	-.353
<i>N=</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>13</i>

Source: Author's analysis of data from exit polls.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

<b>Table 4. Republican Presidential Preferences by Religious Groups, 2012 Campaign</b>							
	<i>2008 Final Poll</i>	March	April	May	June	July (early)	July (late)
<b><i>Tradition</i></b>							
Evangelical	71	72	73	73	71	72	69
Mainline	48	52	50	53	52	55	51
White Catholic	47	44	57	53	50	49	47
Unaffiliated	24	22	26	26	26	27	27
Black Protestant	1	1	0	1	2	4	4
<b>All</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>41</b>
<b><i>Observance</i></b>							
Weekly	61	48	56	51	55	52	52
Less Regular	40	38	37	36	40	37	35

*Source:* compiled by the author from polls by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press