

Religious clout often elusive in 2008: God not on the ballot

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Barack Obama may have chosen Joe Biden, and John McCain may have turned to Sarah Palin, but in the end the most sought-after running mate in the 2008 campaign never appeared on a single ballot.

God, it seems, couldn't be successfully wooed by either party.

The unprecedented and extraordinary prominence of religion in the 2008 election was easily the year's top religion story. Both major parties battled hard for religious voters, and both were forced to distance themselves from outspoken clergy whose provocative rhetoric threatened to become a political liability.

In the end, the top prize went to Obama, the son of a Muslim-born father and an atheist mother, who spent much of the campaign fighting off persistent—and untrue—rumors that he was a closet Muslim.

His party, after years of consistently losing churchgoers to Republicans, decisively won Catholics, Jews and black Protestants and made small but significant inroads among evangelicals.

McCain, meanwhile, managed to shore up his dispirited base of religious conservatives, winning three out of four evangelical votes, but his troubled campaign could not overcome an onslaught of negative economic news that in the end trumped all other issues.

"It's very tempting but a bit dangerous to overinterpret what happened," said Luis Lugo, executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. "Clearly Obama improved across all religious groups, but the economy just overwhelmed every other issue."

Still, the 2008 campaign was remarkable for the ways that religion—or religious figures—played such a prominent role. Obama was forced to sever ties with his fiery

pastor of 20 years, Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, after Wright made remarks before the National Press Club that were deemed racist, anti-American and at times downright bizarre. McCain, in turn, was forced to refuse the endorsements of megachurch pastors John Hagee of Texas and Rod Parsley of Ohio. Religious right leader James Dobson gave McCain support only after Palin was picked as McCain's running mate.

Voters want their politicians to be at least somewhat religious but prefer to make up their own minds, without the interference of politically outspoken clergy. "People still do not want religious institutions or religious leaders to weigh in on politics," said Lugo. "There's strong opposition to it."

Yet one religious leader whose politics are fairly well known—and not always embraced by the American public—received a 21-gun salute (literally) when he arrived at the White House in April during a six-day U.S. tour.

When Pope Benedict XVI arrived for his first U.S. visit as pope, many Catholics still clung to fond memories of his predecessor. But by the time he wrapped up his whirlwind spin through New York and Washington, Benedict left with higher approval ratings than when he arrived.

The pontiff surprised his U.S. flock by giving unexpected attention to the clergy sex-abuse crisis. He told American bishops that the scandal had "sometimes been badly handled" and said they had a divine mandate to "bind up the wounds . . . with loving concern to those so seriously wronged." He also met privately with a small group of abuse victims.

Among other news-making issues in 2008, religious conservatives continued their winning streak on the volatile question of gay marriage in California (where the state Supreme Court voted to allow same-sex marriages in May), Arizona and Florida. The high-stakes and expensive California fight, which is still being battled in the courts, reflects conservatives' ability to rally the troops at the ballot box in opposition to gay marriage.

A related fight over homosexuality continued to roil the Episcopal Church, which saw dioceses in Fort Worth, Texas; Quincy, Illinois; and Pittsburgh secede to realign with a more conservative Anglican province in Argentina. Related big-ticket legal fights resulted in a \$2.5 million deficit for the national church.

In August, Episcopalians emerged from a once-a-decade summit of Anglican bishops in England relatively intact despite calls for discipline from conservative Anglican bishops, most of whom boycotted the three-week Lambeth Conference. That fragile unity will be tested in 2009 because conservatives have moved to establish a separate U.S. province (see story below).

The United Methodist Church voted to keep its traditional stance on homosexuality, maintaining rules that call homosexual activity “incompatible with Christian teaching.” The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), meanwhile, voted to remove a constitutional rule that requires clergy to maintain “fidelity in marriage . . . or chastity in singleness.” However, a majority of local presbyteries must approve the amendment, which may prove too high a hurdle.

Religion and secular law collided at a fundamentalist Mormon polygamist compound in Texas and at controversial sect leader Tony Alamo’s compound in Arkansas over charges of sexual abuse of minors.

Interfaith relations continued their difficult dance in 2008 as several high-level attempts at dialogue—by the UN, Jordan’s King Abdullah II and the Vatican—sought tentative common ground between the Muslim world and the largely Christian West.
–Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*