

Whither Democratic faith outreach?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In the 2004 election, the Democrats dropped the ball on outreach to faith-based voters. In 2006 and 2008 they did better, one of many things that can plausibly (though hardly persuasively) be credited with their wins. If you're anything like me, you both appreciated this turns of events and got very sick of hearing about it in the news. The Democrats Have Found Their Faith! Terrific—now let's move on, lesson learned.

Unless, of course, the lesson wasn't learned. Michelle Boorstein had an [interesting story](#)

earlier this week: apparently the Democratic National Committee's faith office now consists of exactly one staffer, who's part time. The Web site's out of date. Meanwhile, the consulting group that played such a big role for Democrats in 2008, the Eleison Group, doesn't have any 2010 national campaign contracts. Have the Democrats Lost Their Faith in Faith?

Maybe. Daniel Schultz [isn't too concerned](#), noting that the results of all the Dem faith outreach were "ambiguous at best." Sarah Posner [adds](#) that the party might well be ambivalent about success as Eleison has produced it, what with the group's affiliation with conservative Democrats prone to things like extracting a pound of flesh over abortion language in a health-insurance reform bill and then voting against the bill itself anyway.

Mark Silk [goes in another direction](#), inferring that Joshua DuBois, director of the White House's faith office, is shifting control over faith-based outreach from the DNC to his own office. This raises two issues for Silk. One is the danger (articulated so well [by David Kuo](#)) of connecting an office such as DuBois's to electoral politics. The

other is the prospect that the Obama administration will continue to focus on maintaining cozy relationships with religious big shots rather than on targeting faith-based voters themselves via sophisticated organizing campaigns—the sort of campaign that *candidate* Obama ran better than anyone in history.

All fair points, but I have to wonder whether there's something simpler going on here. I was at Obama's [2006 speech](#) on the role of faith in public life, and I was struck by the freshness of his vision of a public square that welcomes faith-based perspectives without catering to them or lowering standards for them. Compared to John Kerry's approach to discussing his faith in 2004, which consisted essentially of repeating the phrase "separation of church and state" *ad nauseam* till someone else changed the subject, this was downright inspiring.

Before

long, this became the way many prominent Democrats talked about faith, most notably Obama's opponents for the presidential nomination. Obama spoke of faith with ease and passion all the way through the general election and continues to do so in office, as do a variety of other leading Democrats. And thanks largely to Obama, no one seems to find this especially strange anymore.

Is it possible that the

Democrats-have-faith-too meme has so infused the public consciousness that specifically faith-based outreach just isn't as urgent as it was a few years back?