Mainline shows shift to Democrats: Most change among centrist mainliners

by John Dart in the July 15, 2008 issue

Although mainline Protestant denominations for decades have been closely linked to liberal causes—civil rights, women's movements, abortion rights and antiwar protests—most of their members have been mainstays of the Republican Party.

However, a recent survey found that 2008 marks "a historic tipping point" in party identification among mainline Protestants, with 46 percent now calling themselves Democrats and 37 percent saying they are Republicans.

That was the first time Democrats outnumbered Republicans in mainline churches since the New Deal era prior to World War II, according to research sponsored by the Paul B. Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics at Calvin College.

Institute director Corwin Smidt, in an interview, noted that opinion polls decades ago did not differentiate between mainline and evangelical Protestants. But even when such polling distinctions were made in 1992, 1996 and 2000, half of all mainline Protestants consistently identified with the Republican Party and about one-third were aligned with the Democrats.

Surveys found slippage four years ago in the percentage of mainline Protestant Republicans. Members identifying with the GOP were fewer than half in 2004, but they still outnumbered Democrats 44 percent to 38 percent.

The mainline membership registered as mostly Democratic in the 2008 poll taken of 3,000 adults from April 8 to May 10.

The biggest swing in allegiance was among centrist members of mainline churches. In 2004, only 33 percent of middle-of-the-road mainliners were Democrats, but that figure jumped to 52 percent this year. The so-called modernists (mostly Democrat) and traditionalists (most Republican) in mainline churches made little change in

party loyalties.

Mainline Protestants are just under 20 percent of adult Americans, and their centrists are just 7 percent of the U.S. population, but that could be enough to swing a close election, Smidt said.

Social justice issues and the Iraq war might have been the major influences for change by centrist mainline Protestants, Smidt said.

Sociologists say the partisan identification figures tend to be the most stable indicators of political allegiance. “You may change your voting choice without necessarily changing your party identification,” he said. “Over time, if you start voting in a particular fashion, and you think a candidate of the opposing party articulates your own viewpoints, then a change in partisan identification can occur.”

Mainline churches were known for having activist leaders who called for change in the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, and in later years brought more women into leadership and struggled with gay issues. “The leadership and clergy acted as the vanguard in the prophetic mode,” said Smidt, “and maybe over the years this might have had some impact.”

The unpopularity of President George W. Bush and the problems of the nation may have affected party switches by centrist mainline Protestants, added sociologist John Green, senior fellow at the Pew Forum, who was not a part of the survey.

“It may also be that some decided that the Democratic Party, with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton seeking the presidential nomination, had more to offer than the Republicans this year,” he said, noting that both are mainline Protestants.