# The faith factor: Religion in the voting booth

by Mark Silk in the December 2, 2008 issue

The role of religion in the presidential campaign was summed up by Associated Press religion writer Eric Gorski in an article headlined “Religion Used to Divide, Mock in ’08.” Lamenting the low level of discussion of religion, Gorski ran through a YouTubed array of controversies, from the inflammatory preachings of Jeremiah Wright and John Hagee to Mike Huckabee’s thoughts on whether Mormons believe that Jesus and the devil are brothers to a witch-hunting Kenyan pastor’s prayer over Sarah Palin.

Such exhibition and exploitation of religion, wrote Martin Marty, is “bad for the name of religion itself, for religious institutions, for a fair reading of sacred texts, for sundered religious communities, for swaggering religious communities which are too sure of themselves, for the pursuit of virtue.”

That may be. But behind the religious carnival of the 2008 presidential campaign was a story of critical importance to the next chapter of American politics.

First, though, let’s look at the numbers. What has always concerned politicians most when it comes to religion is how particular faith groups vote. As the Gershwin lyric goes, “Wintergreen for president! Wintergreen for president! He’s the man the people choose; loves the Irish and the Jews.”

This year the Jews were supposed to give more of their votes to John McCain than they had to any Republican since Ronald Reagan—a result of worries about Barack Obama’s Muslim antecedents and allegedly anti-Israel sentiments. It didn’t work out that way. A larger proportion of Jews (78 percent) voted for Obama than had for John Kerry four years ago. In the view of many, nothing goes further to explain this than McCain’s selection of the evangelical Sarah Palin as his running mate.

Evangelicals ended up voting pretty much true to form. There was a good deal of wishful thinking and writing about the possibility that a large proportion of

evangelicals were expanding their concerns beyond abortion and gay marriage to include such issues as climate change and AIDS and peace in Darfur—and that these people would consider voting Democratic. In the end evangelicals overall voted for McCain over Obama by a margin of 72 percent to 26 percent—11 points less than the margin they gave George W. Bush over John Kerry in 2004, but at roughly the same 3-1 rate that they have tended to prefer Republican candidates for president and Congress over the past decade.

Once upon a time, Catholics were a solid Democratic constituency. Nowadays it makes the most sense to see them simply as that religious agglomeration that most closely approximates the public at large. Catholics went for Obama 54-45, very close to Obama's 53-46 margin overall. Four years ago, they went for Bush, again at almost the same rate as the entire electorate.

Mainline Protestants, once the bedrock of the GOP, are now fairly closely divided, though they still tend to favor Republicans. The only way to identify them from the exit polls is as Protestants who do not claim to be born again or evangelical. They voted for Bush over Kerry 56-44, McCain over Obama 54-44.

It's worth bearing in mind that not all religious groups vote the same way in all parts of the country. While Obama's efforts to appeal to southern evangelicals went nowhere, he was able to move a significant number of midwestern evangelicals in his direction. Nowhere was this more the case than in Indiana, where the Republican edge among evangelicals was narrowed by 30 points, providing fully half the votes Obama needed to capture what had been one of the reddest states in the nation.

Over the past couple of decades, the importance of religion in politics has extended from the distinctive voting behavior of the various faith groups to what has come to be called the "God gap"—the tendency of frequent worship attenders, regardless of faith, to vote Republican and of less frequent attenders to vote Democratic.

In the 2000, 2002 and 2004 elections, the gap among the frequent attenders voting Republican or Democrat was about 20 points. But it shrank to 13 points in the 2006 congressional voting. The House of Representatives changed hands that year thanks to the votes of less-frequent attenders, a somewhat larger body of voters who preferred Democratic candidates by a huge 25-point margin. This year, the presidential election showed a God gap virtually identical to that in 2006 within each of the two groups of voters.

Whereas the tempests over preachers Wright and Hagee may have been merely unwanted distractions from the serious business of electing a president in perilous times, the issue of Mitt Romney's Mormonism was of real consequence. With surveys showing that the evangelical base of his party harbored considerable hostility toward members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Romney decided that in order to win the GOP nomination he would need to position himself as the most orthodox of social conservatives.

In the primary, he won the tacit support and open endorsement of a number of important evangelical leaders, who took to saying that the country was electing a president, not a pastor. But as Robert Jeffress, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, admitted, "It's a little hypocritical for the last eight years to be talking about how important it is for us to elect a Christian president and then turn around and endorse a non-Christian. . . . Christian conservatives are going to have to decide whether having a Christian president is really important or not."

Many of the evangelical rank and file decided that it was important, and they turned to one of their own, the sometime Baptist pastor Mike Huckabee. Their decision was based, at least in part, on hostility to Mormons, a religious community that, they believe, has no right to claim the name Christian. Writing to the conservative journalist Jonah Goldberg last year, one evangelical expressed his concern this way:

> Speaking for myself, there is no policy that I think a Mormon would pursue that I find objectionable. I will not vote for a Mormon because they claim to be Christian, when they are not Christians. Electing, or even nominating, a Mormon continues to send the message to Americans that Mormons are fine and dandy, Christians like everyone else. Thousands of Christians are converted to Mormonism each year, and it is done under false pretenses. . . . I would vote for a Jew. I would vote for a Hindu, an atheist, etc.

While it is difficult to specify the extent to which evangelical voters were motivated by anti-Mormon prejudice, there is good reason to believe that had they been willing to embrace Romney as their leaders preferred, he would have won a number of southern primaries and stood a good chance of capturing the nomination.

If the failure of the Romney candidacy demonstrated that reports of the demise of the religious right had been severely exaggerated, McCain's choice of Palin made it clear that the GOP has come to regard evangelicals as essential to electoral success. In the wake of Tuesday's overwhelming Democratic victory, the Republican Party

has nothing more important to resolve than the consequences of its having become, for a generation, the political home of a conservative religious ideology. Much if not all of the divisive, mocking use of religion in our politics flows from that fact. Unless the party of Bush, McCain and Palin calms the ideological waters, we will be living with the division and mockery for years to come.