

Partisan religion: Analyzing the 2000 election

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From the time that George W. Bush declared Jesus his favorite political philosopher to the day Joseph Lieberman joined the Democratic ticket quoting the Book of Chronicles, religion was in the limelight during the 2000 presidential campaign. And when it was all over, Bush entered office amidst a flurry of worship services, clerical blessings and religious consultations.

Bush's triumph in the primaries was a tribute both to his unprecedented fund raising among Republican business elites and the surprising loyalty of religious conservatives. The dramatic failure of John McCain's attack on Christian Right leaders—calculated to split off traditionalist Catholics and more moderate religious voters—and the collapse of Pat Buchanan's third-party appeal to evangelicals underscored Christian conservatives' commitment to the GOP establishment.

On the Democratic side, religious factors also permeated the nominating process. From the start, Al Gore stressed his own religious credentials, recalling his sometimes-neglected Southern Baptist roots, his flirtation with seminary education, and his internal guidepost, "What would Jesus do?" Coupled with his frequent visits to African-American churches, Gore's combination of traditional and progressive language was designed to solidify key elements in the Democratic religious coalition.

Although both Bush and Gore sought to expand their religious coalitions, especially after the primaries, the Republican and Democratic National Conventions confirmed the sharp differences in the parties' religious profiles. Although Christian conservatives were less visible at the GOP meeting than in 1992 or 1996, they were clearly entrenched in the party machinery. In fact, John S. Jackson III's quadrennial survey found that 29 percent of all GOP delegates came from white evangelical denominations—almost identical to the 1996 figure. Mainline Protestants clung to a diminishing plurality with 33 percent, a pale reflection of their historic dominance.

Catholics made up another 20 percent of those present, all other religious groups combined for just 12 percent, and secular delegates accounted for only 5 percent.

The Democrats came from very different religious locations. Only 7 percent belonged to evangelical churches, 19 percent were mainline Protestants, and 23 percent were white Catholics. About half represented religious minorities: Jews (8 percent), black Protestants (15 percent) Hispanic Catholics (8 percent), and other religions (7 percent). Secular activists counted for 14 percent. In almost every religious tradition, Democrats were distinctly less observant than their GOP counterparts. While 55 percent of the Republicans reported attending religious services once a week or more, over half the Democrats claimed to attend only “several times a year,” “seldom” or “never.”

Not surprisingly, Republicans and Democrats held dramatically different views of the religious right and left. Among Republicans the total of self-described Christian Right “supporters” and “sympathizers” dropped slightly, from 65 percent in 1996 to 56 percent. Few Democrats sympathized with conservative religious groups; indeed, 39 percent were “skeptical” of such groups and almost half were “opposed.” On the other hand, a majority of Democrats (56 percent) said they supported or sympathized with liberal religious groups, toward which most Republicans were skeptical (40 percent) or opposed (35 percent).

The fall campaign witnessed extensive religious mobilization, albeit in a different configuration than in past years. The Christian Coalition was clearly under stress, as the national organization and state chapters struggled to mobilize; its claim to have distributed 75 million voter guides should be taken with more than the usual grain of salt. Other Christian Right and pro-life groups probably took up the slack, however. The Campaign for Working Families, Concerned Women for America, Jerry Falwell’s “People of Faith 2000,” the Traditional Values Coalition, Priests for Life and similar organizations produced voter guides, sent mounds of direct mail, and ran phone banks. However, much of the religious effort was under Republican Party auspices, as many Christian Right leaders followed former Christian Coalition executive Ralph Reed into the Bush campaign. While continuing to target Protestant evangelicals and mainline traditionalists, the Bush organization also focused on “regular mass attending Catholics,” identified by Republican strategists as key to a Bush victory.

This offensive on the right did not go unchallenged by the religious left. Gore and other Democratic candidates campaigned without ceasing in black churches.

(Senate candidate Hillary Clinton probably set a record for services attended on a single Sunday in New York.) For his part, President Clinton arranged a national conference call just before the election with several hundred African-American clergy. These efforts provided a much-needed stimulus for the turnout of black voters in important races, including the presidential contest. At the same time Democratic officials and black clergy were activating African-American Protestants, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the Interfaith Alliance and other groups focused on demobilizing the Christian Right.

These efforts on both sides may have had some effect. The Survey of Religion and Politics, conducted by the University of Akron for the Ethics and Public Policy Center, found that voters reported only slightly fewer religious contacts of all sorts in 2000 than in 1996. Voter guides were less in evidence, but primarily because of reduced availability in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, not in evangelical churches, which sometimes even produced their own materials to compensate for the absence of Christian Coalition guides. This finding is buttressed by preliminary results from our quadrennial survey of Southern Baptist clergy: political activism among these conservative pastors was actually greater in 2000 than in 1996, when GOP candidate Bob Dole failed to arouse enthusiasm. Similarly, the Akron survey hints that liberal clergy, especially African-American Protestants but also mainline Protestants, were at least as vocal as they were in previous years, and perhaps more so.

How did the public react to all this religious involvement? When the Akron survey asked citizens whether there had been too much or too little emphasis on religion in the campaign, over 56 percent reported “about the right amount.” And more thought that there had been “too little” (28 percent) than “too much” (16 percent). As we might expect, however, sentiments varied by religious tradition: evangelicals tended to lament the absence of enough religion in the campaign (42 percent), joined by African-American Protestants (36 percent). In contrast, Jewish and secular voters often perceived excessive religious involvement (53 and 37 percent, respectively). And these same patterns appeared when voters were asked whether religious organizations had spent too much or too little effort “discussing the issues” and “mobilizing voters.” On the whole, then, voters accepted the confessional tone of the new religious order, but some groups wanted more, others less.

On election day, evangelical Protestants were by far the most solidly Republican subgroup, producing a 75 percent majority for Bush. Indeed, regular church-

attending evangelicals gave him a whopping 84 percent, compared to a more modest 55 percent among less-regular adherents. Mainline Protestants still occupied quite a few Republican pews, but were less faithful than their evangelical brethren, giving Bush only 59 percent, with weekly attendees outdoing less observant co-parishioners, 66 to 57 percent. Catholics of European background were closely divided, giving a 51-49 majority to Al Gore, but regular mass attendees were much more supportive of Bush (57 percent) than were other Catholics (41 percent). Thus, in all the major white Christian traditions, regular churchgoers—predominantly traditionalists—have become distinctively more Republican than those less involved in religious institutions.

The Democratic religious coalition was quite different. In addition to capturing less observant Catholics, Gore overwhelmed Bush among the Democrats' traditional minority religious groups: black Protestants (96 percent), Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims (80 percent), Hispanic Catholics (76 percent), Jews (77 percent), other Christians, such as the Orthodox (72 percent), Hispanic Protestants (67 percent) and, finally, secular voters (65 percent).

These coalitional differences are even more impressive when considering the proportion of a candidate's vote drawn from each religious group. Fully one-third of Bush's vote came from weekly church attendees among evangelical Protestants. Add another 10 percent from among observant mainliners, 12 percent from mass-attending Catholics and 3 percent from devout Mormons, and we find that almost 60 percent of the Republican constituency consisted of traditionalist Christians and their allies. On the other side, the bulk of the Democratic coalition was composed of black Protestants and secular voters (19 percent each), Jews, Hispanic Catholics and other religious minorities (15 percent), less observant evangelical and mainline Protestants (15 percent combined) and less committed white Catholics (11 percent). These patterns were replicated in House races, as well as in voters' party identification.

The strength of these patterns certainly suggests that the campaign played its customary role in solidifying each party's religious coalition. On the Republican side, Bush made big gains among evangelical Protestants over the summer, smaller improvements among mainliners and white Catholics, but lost ground among black Protestants, Jews and other religious minorities. Fifty-nine percent of evangelicals said they felt very close or close to Bush by Election Day, compared to only 37 percent of mainline Protestants and white Catholics. Among all three groups,

naturally, the religiously observant were most positive about the Republican nominee.

Conversely, Gore improved his position among black Protestants, less observant Catholics and most religious minorities—the core of his electoral coalition. Sixty-seven percent of black Protestants felt very close or close to Gore, as did 37 percent of secular voters. Gore's choice of Joe Lieberman as his running mate may have delayed defections of observant evangelicals, mainliners and white Catholics. In all these Republican-leaning groups Lieberman was actually more popular than the vice president—but in the end his nomination probably won few converts. Indeed, Democratic losses among white Protestants may have cost Gore his home state of Tennessee and, perhaps, the election.

Unlike many other features of the presidential campaign, these religious underpinnings are not likely to disappear soon. Rather, they reflect a new religious order in American politics, where the historic loyalties of the nation's diverse religious traditions are either reinforced or attenuated by divisions between traditionalists and progressives. As in the past, Republicans and Democrats have strong religious constituencies, and both seek to attract religious groups less firmly aligned without antagonizing those core constituencies. In 2000, this new religious order produced partisan parity. This means that any future electoral shifts among religious groups, or the emergence of new religious forces, will be a matter of vital political significance.