

Campaigns' faith outreach centers on economy

by [Daniel Burke](#) and [David Gibson](#)

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With voters focused intently on pocketbook issues, both Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama are framing their faith outreach efforts around the economy as the presidential campaign enters its final weeks.

That marks a shift from previous election cycles, campaign advisers say. “That’s a major difference between this election and the last. The economy is the single issue that transcends every demographic, every coalition, every interest group,” said Mark DeMoss, an evangelical who has led Romney’s efforts to rally conservative Christians—a key Republican voting bloc—around the GOP nominee, who is a Mormon.

“Evangelicals are no less interested in the unemployment rate and the cost of living than nonevangelicals,” DeMoss added.

Those concerns are reflected in voter outreach efforts by religious conservatives, who are often associated almost exclusively with hot-button social issues related to sexual morality. For example, the Faith and Freedom Coalition, which is led by longtime evangelical activist Ralph Reed, has a voter guide that lists tax cuts and a balanced-budget amendment ahead of same-sex marriage and abortion.

Reed’s group, a successor to his Christian Coalition, says it plans to distribute 40 million voter guides, knock on a million doors and make 15 million get-out-the-vote phone calls. The Faith and Freedom Coalition is also building a database of more than 17 million conservative religious voters.

On the Democratic side, the top issues listed on Obama’s faith platform are “economic recovery,” followed by “tax fairness” and “Wall Street reform.”

Citing the apostle Paul, the platform says that “President Obama’s belief that we are all connected—that, as 1 Corinthians says, ‘If one part suffers, every part suffers with it’—has anchored him as he has worked tirelessly to lead with values.” The platform then lists “basic economic security for everyone who is willing and able to work,” as well as retirement security and affordable health care.

In mid-September, the campaign launched People of Faith for Obama, which includes a three-minute video of the president framing key decisions in his first term, such as the bailout of auto companies and the reform of the health-care system, as driven by moral concerns.

“I’m standing on the side of human dignity,” Obama says in the video, “and a belief in the inherent worth of all human beings.”

Couching the economic message in faith terms makes sense, experts say. Surveys have consistently shown that the economy, jobs, the budget deficit and other issues easily outstrip abortion and other social issues as voter priorities.

“Some of the usual issues may not be percolating in this election,” Michael Wear, the Obama campaign’s national faith vote coordinator, told journalists meeting October 5 in Bethesda, Maryland, for the annual Religion Newswriters Association conference.

“We are seeing a broadening of issues that are related to faith,” said Wear, who was joined on the panel by DeMoss as well as Broderick Johnson, head of Obama’s Catholic outreach campaign. —RNS

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