Will Democrats get whacked on religion? Bush has wide lead among religious voters: Bush has wide lead among religious voters

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General Wesley Clark says he is a Methodist turned Baptist turned Catholic who attends a Presbyterian church. Congressman Richard Gephardt says his religion is "to care about the poor first." Howard Dean, who has criticized the mixing of religion and politics, now promises to talk about Jesus when he campaigns in the South.

The Democratic field remained crowded even as the first skirmishes for convention delegates loomed in Iowa and New Hampshire. Some presidential hopefuls, notably Dean, are trying to show that they "get" religion. Doubt remains about whether any Democrat can compete with President Bush on that front.

Polls indicate Bush holds a commanding lead among the most religious voters, an advantage he did not enjoy over Democratic nominee Al Gore in 2000. And Dean's confused answer January 2 when asked about his favorite New Testament book (he named Job, from the Old Testament) may not have helped him. The 21-point lead Dean held over Clark among registered Democrats weeks earlier narrowed to just 4 percent, *USA Today* reported January 7, citing its poll with CNN and Gallup.

A Gallup Poll held November 10-12 showed how much the White House incumbent appeals to large faith groups. Bush held a 67 percent to 30 percent lead among religious voters over Dean, the Democratic front-runner, in a hypothetical head-to-head race against the former Vermont governor. "It seems that in the three years since the [2000] election, Bush has become the go-to candidate for those who feel that religion is important to their vote for president," wrote Gallup religion and values editor Albert Winseman.

White Roman Catholics and evangelical Christians have become increasingly Republican over the past 15 years. Jews and black Protestants have remained loyally Democratic, but their numbers are not large enough to counter the overall religious migration to the GOP.

The shift could be significant, particularly in southern and midwestern states, where religion can spell the difference in a close election. According to Gallup polls, religion is “very” or “extremely” important to the voting decisions of about one in three nationally. And among these Americans, Bush has the advantage.

It was different in 2000. A Gallup Poll in August of that year showed religious voters evenly split between Bush and Gore at 46 percent each. Like former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, Gore was a Southern Baptist, comfortable with religious symbolism and the vernacular of faith. Gore also invoked religious principles in addressing the environment, civil rights and other issues.

But with the exception of Sen. Joe Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew with a record of living his faith, no leading Democrat in the 2004 race has a compelling religious narrative to compete with Bush’s story of giving up drinking through the power of Christian belief. Bush, a United Methodist, employs religious words and principles on a wide variety of issues, including preventing terrorism, spreading democracy, adopting faith-based initiatives and banning gay marriage.

Dean tried in recent weeks to close the religion gap. He told reporters in mid-December that he “doesn’t wear religion on his sleeve because I’m a New Englander,” alluding to the traditional taciturn manner of New Englanders.

In a departure from past practice, Dean opened a December 27 event with a prayer said by a pastor. That same day, Dean told voters, “I think religion is important and spiritual values are very important, which is what this election is really about.”

The faith-friendly tone follows a December cover story, “Howard Dean’s Religion Problem,” in the *New Republic* magazine. The article called Dean “one of the most secular candidates to run for president in modern history.” It quoted Dean, whose wife and children are Jewish, saying he doesn’t go to church “very often” and that “my religion doesn’t inform my public policy.”

In fact, Dean’s religious narrative has been held up to some scrutiny. In the early 1980s, Dean became a Congregationalist because he objected to a local Episcopal

diocese's reluctance to surrender property for a scenic bike path. "Was it just over a bike path that you left the Episcopal church?" CNN's Judy Woodruff asked Dean. "Yes, as a matter of fact it was," Dean replied.

Dean's citing Job as his favorite New Testament book occurred on a campaign flight while talking to reporters. He corrected himself an hour later on the plane, even elaborating on his remarks about the Old Testament book. Pressed by reporters on his favorite part of the New Testament, Dean said, according to the *New York Times*, "Anything in the Gospels."

Other Democratic candidates have more spiritual stories. For example, Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina turned to the Bible after his 16-year-old son, Wade, died in a car accident. But Edwards has been uncomfortable talking about this, saying it's a private family matter.

Al Sharpton, ordained a Pentecostal minister at age 9, naturally draws on religious themes when campaigning. In a Democratic debate in December, he told voters he prays daily, adding, "I can assure you in my talks with God, he is not a registered member of the right wing of the Republican Party."

Clark, whose father died when he was four, has a mixed religious pedigree. His mother raised him Methodist, then Baptist. At 24, Clark learned his father was Jewish. When he confronted his mother about the secret, she tearfully explained that she didn't want him to face discrimination.

Clark eventually adopted his wife's Catholicism. But the general stopped attending mass after hearing one too many sermons criticizing the military. He still considers himself Catholic, though he attends Second Presbyterian Church in Little Rock. "If you're going to live your faith, you've got to take care of people," Clark told a Louisiana audience.

Lieberman, who refuses to campaign on the Jewish Sabbath, has made religion an issue in veiled references to other Democratic candidates. "They forget that the constitutional separation of church and state, which I strongly support, promises freedom of religion, not freedom from religion," Lieberman said at a recent campaign stop.

Church-state issues were the focus of a Gephardt interview on the Fox News Channel's *O'Reilly Factor*. Gephardt said "the government has to divorce itself" from

religious beliefs and that a Ten Commandments display must be removed from government property in Alabama, even though polls showed a majority of Americans want it to remain there.

Gephardt, a Baptist, then distinguished between public policy and his personal belief, which teaches him to care for the poor and “love your enemy as much as you love yourself.”

Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, sees that approach as a start. But Wallis, a Democrat, said Gephardt and the others also must apply religious principles to nitty-gritty Democratic issues like health care, child care and the need for affordable housing.

“When they’re asked about religion by a reporter, the Democrats say, ‘I go to church, I pray, but that won’t affect my political beliefs because I believe in separation of church and state,’” Wallis said. “That’s a mistake. Separation of church and state doesn’t mean banishing morals or religious values from the public square.” –*Mark O’Keefe*, *Religion News Service*