Democrats' 'religion gap' not full story: "Some people are overinterpreting the numbers"

News in the February 24, 2004 issue

In this election year, surveys reveal what many call the “religion gap” facing the Democratic Party. The most frequent churchgoers have been voting Republican in recent presidential contests. However, that doesn’t make incumbent President George W. Bush a shoo-in, since the larger statistical picture of religious voters is as complex as America’s spiritual landscape.

For one thing, the religion gap disappears, even reverses, when pollsters look at the voting habits of people who go to church a tad less frequently than every week, according to a much-cited expert on religion and politics. In addition, there is barely a gap when researchers apply other measures of religiosity, such as belief, prayer and Bible reading.

“The religion gap is very real, and it’s been developing for a long time,” said John C. Green, a political scientist at the University of Akron who has spotlighted this gap in several studies. Talk of a religious divide in electoral politics is based on studies of voting and church attendance, he said.

But other surveys, using other measures of religiosity, are less conclusive. “If you look at basic beliefs, yes, Republicans do tend to be a little more traditional in their religious beliefs than the Democrats, but the gap is not very big at all,” said Green.

There are many more religious believers than weekly worshipers, and studies of this wider population have not found a very visible religion gap. “So it’s a worship attendance difference,” Green specified. “When you talk about belief measures, or private religious behavior like prayer or Bible reading at home, there is a bit of a gap, but it’s pretty small.”

The electoral picture is not even altogether clear when it comes to regular or frequent churchgoers. The 2000 election tells part of the story. According to exit surveys, Bush won 56 percent of the vote of those who said they attend religious services once a week, while Democratic nominee Al Gore took 41 percent of this tally. However, those who reported attending religious services “a few times a month” swung in the opposite direction. Their vote went to Gore, by a 51-45 ratio over Bush.

The generic poll numbers might also obscure differences between faith groups. Among Protestants and especially evangelicals, there is a large and growing gulf between regular churchgoers and the Democrats. But the pattern does not hold well with Catholics. “There is a [religion] gap among Catholics as well, but it is not nearly as wide as it is among Protestants,” said Mary E. Bendyna of Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

For example, Protestants who reported attending church once a week handed Bush 64 percent of their vote in 2000, compared to Gore’s 34 percent, according to the exit surveys. Even the “few-times-a-month” Protestants went decisively for Bush, by a 55-40 ratio.

Among committed Catholics, the leanings in 2000 were far less clear. Weekly Catholic massgoers supported Bush by a seven-point margin, in contrast to the 30-point margin among their Protestant counterparts. When it came to Catholics who reported going to mass a few times a month, the trend was exactly reversed. Those Catholics chose Gore by a seven-point margin.

Recent polling by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press indicates that the religion gap persists. Bush still enjoys a distinct advantage among active churchgoers, especially those who report going to church more than once a week. But this gap is no wider than it was between Bush and Gore, and has actually narrowed somewhat among once-a-week churchgoers.

Taking a longer historical view, analysts say there have been decisive shifts at the intersection of faith and politics.

“It used to be that if you were a mainline Protestant and you went to church a lot, you were almost certainly Republican, or were pretty reliably a Republican voter even if you didn’t call yourself a Republican,” said Scott Keeter, the Pew Research Center’s associate director. “On the other hand, if you were in the tradition that we

now call evangelical, you might very well have been a southern dweller, in which case you would have been a Democrat. “And of course, if you were a Catholic, you probably were a Democrat,” said Keeter, alluding to the northern, blue-collar roots of most Catholics.

Today mainline Protestants feel free to stray into the Democratic camp, evangelicals are largely congregating in the Republican tent, and Catholics are “classic swing voters,” he said. Much has changed over the decades, and pollsters note that much could change this year. The gap between the devout and the Democrats could grow, especially if the issue of gay marriage becomes pivotal.

Meanwhile, researchers are advising pundits not to read too much into how weekly worshipers intend to vote. As Green put it, “Some people are overinterpreting the numbers.” –*William Bole*, *Religion News Service*