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**The Old and New Politics of Faith:  
Religion and the 2010 Election**

**E.J. Dionne, Jr. and William A. Galston**

Economic convulsions have a way of changing the priorities of voters. Although concerns for their own and their families' well-being are never far from citizens' minds, these matters are less pressing in prosperous times. At such moments, voters feel freer to use elections as ways of registering their views on matters related to religion, culture, values and foreign policy.

But when times turn harsh, the politics of jobs, wealth, and income can overwhelm everything else. Thus did the focus of the country's politics change radically between 1928, a classic culture war contest dominated by arguments over prohibition and presidential candidate Al Smith's religious faith, and 1932, when the Great Depression ushered in a new political alignment and created what became Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal coalition.

The Great Recession has had a similar effect in concentrating the electorate's mind on economics. But the evidence of the 2010 election is that it has not—up to now, at least—fundamentally altered the cultural and religious contours of American political life. Religion and issues related to recent cultural conflicts, notably abortion and same-sex marriage, played a very limited role in the Republicans' electoral victory. Overwhelmingly, voters cast their ballots on the basis of economic issues, while the religious alignments that took root well before the economic downturn remained intact. Democrats lost votes among religiously conservative constituencies, but also among religious liberals and secular voters. They did not, however, lose ground among African-Americans of various religious creeds and held their own among Latino voters. To see issues related to religious or cultural issues as central to the 2010 outcome is, we believe, a mistake.

But there is a new constellation of issues related to religion that looms as a troubling and potentially divisive element in American political life. The attack of September 11, 2001 has left the country divided in its view of Islam and Muslims, and these divisions reinforce the cleavages between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. Americans are also sharply divided in their perceptions of President Obama's own religious faith.

A survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in cooperation with the Brookings Institution found that Americans split almost evenly when asked whether "the values of Islam, the Muslim religion, are at odds with American values and way of life." The survey found that 45 percent of Americans agreed with the statement (including 20 percent who said they agreed "completely") while 49 percent disagreed (including 22 percent who disagreed "completely").

There was a wide variance of views across demographic and political lines. Among Americans aged 65 and over, 51 percent agreed that Muslim and American values are at odds. But only 36 percent of those under 30 said this. Among whites, 46 percent agreed, as did 44 percent of Hispanics. But only 31 percent of African-Americans saw Muslim and American values as being incompatible.



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Attitudes on this issue are correlated with partisan allegiances as well: 67 percent of Republicans—but only 43 percent of independents and 30 percent of Democrats—saw Muslim and American values as being at odds. And there is a comparable ideological difference: 62 percent of conservatives saw Islamic and American values as in conflict, compared with 40 percent of moderates and only 26 percent of liberals.

Much attention has been paid to the significant minority of Americans who say that President Obama is a Muslim. Rather than pose a question rooted in a falsehood, the PRRI survey sought instead to assess how Americans saw the president's religious faith in relation to their own convictions. The survey found that 51 percent of Americans saw the president's religious views as different from their own, including 16 percent who saw them as "somewhat" different and 35 percent who saw them as "very different." Only 40 percent see the president's religious beliefs as similar to their own, including only 12 percent who saw them as "very" similar. This question sharply divides Americans along racial lines: 74 percent of African-Americans see the president's religious views as similar to their own, compared with just 35 percent of white Americans.

We do not want to exaggerate the importance of these new religious divisions. Views on the nature of President Obama's religious faith parallel political attitudes toward the president. Voters who are hostile to him on political grounds are likely to distance themselves from his views on other matters, including religion. In the PRRI survey, 94 percent of those who said Obama's religious views were "very similar" to their own had a favorable view of the president. Among respondents who said his religious views were "very different" from their own, 78 percent had an unfavorable view of him.

In addition, no one can ignore the fact that Obama is the nation's first African-American president and that at least some part of the opposition he confronts is rooted in racial sentiments. These responses no doubt condition the attitudes of some toward the president's religious faith.

Nonetheless, this finding does point to a challenge the president faces that goes beyond the minority of Americans who see him as "a Muslim." An American president is not only the head of government but also the head of state. As such, he is called upon to represent the nation's shared values and broad purposes. More than most Democratic politicians, Obama has defended a role for religion in public life and sought to broker a truce in the nation's religious conflicts. Before he became a candidate for president, he argued that "the discomfort of some progressives with any hint of religion has often prevented us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms" and said that "secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square."<sup>1</sup> Judging from this survey, the president needs to reengage these questions in a public way.

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size and role of government. Yet the existence of these new religious cleavages helps explain recent flare-ups around Islam in American politics—and also the role of conservative and Republican politicians and media outlets in these episodes. One thinks, for example, of the passage of a referendum in Oklahoma barring the use of Shari’a law in the state and the controversy surrounding the construction of an Islamic cultural center a few blocks from Ground Zero. Skepticism toward Islam among older and more conservative voters suggests that there is a latent issue in American politics that has the potential of arising in unexpected ways. This places a heavy responsibility on political and religious leaders to battle religious prejudice against American Muslims.

It also suggests that American Muslims are in a situation similar to that of Catholics, who in earlier periods of our history were seen by a significant share of America’s population as representing principles at odds with equality and democracy. There may be lessons for American Muslims in the experience of the Catholic community and its ultimate success in breaking down barriers and entering the mainstream of American political life.

Finally (and related to these findings): while there is considerable overlap between the Tea Party movement and religious conservatism, there is evidence that the Tea Party may represent not so much a more libertarian alternative to the Christian Right as an embodiment of a more critical or even hostile attitude toward multiculturalism, immigration and the idea of compassionate conservatism put forward by former President George W. Bush. We offer this conclusion tentatively. The Tea Party is a diverse movement with a core commitment to a smaller federal government. Measures of its size have varied considerably. And many in the Tea Party also identify with Christian conservatism—an alliance embodied in the word “Teavangelical,” coined by the Christian Broadcasting Network’s David Brody.<sup>2</sup> But to the extent that the two movements are distinctive, they are likely to split less around issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage than in their attitudes toward minority groups, immigrants and social programs for the poor. We will offer evidence for this distinction from both the PRRI survey and from exit polling in the 2010 Colorado Governor’s race, which featured the candidacy of Tom Tancredo, one of the country’s most vocal and extreme opponents of illegal immigration.

During the 2008 election, many observers noted a divide between a new America—younger, more urban and ethnically diverse, more tolerant of differences—and an older America, predominantly white and living in communities—smaller cities, towns, and rural areas—where social and cultural norms were more homogeneous and less malleable. The evidence analyzed in this report suggests, if it does not quite demonstrate, that the rise of new America unsettled the denizens of old America more deeply than was apparent in the initial reactions to Barack Obama’s election. The aftershocks from that watershed event continue to reverberate through our society.

A note on the data used in this paper: We rely here on the publicly reported network exit polls, which included a limited number of questions related to

religion, and also on a survey conducted by PRRI with 1,494 Americans, including 1,194 who said they cast ballots on November 2. This survey, conducted from November 3 to November 7, was based on re-interviews with respondents to an earlier poll conducted in September whose results were released at a Brookings event on October 5. The original survey was based on 3,013 interviews. The authors of this paper played a role writing both questionnaires, though primary responsibility for organizing and carrying out the survey rested with Robert P. Jones and Dan Cox. We are deeply grateful to Robby and Dan for their many wise insights, their hard work and their warmly cooperative spirit. PRRI is producing a separate report that will summarize and analyze the core findings of the survey. We also thank the Ford Foundation for its financial support, and in particular Sheila Davaney, our program officer at Ford, for her encouragement, superb advice, enthusiasm for this work, and for the freedom to carry it out.

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### The 2010 Vote: Jobs, Not Values

This was an election about economics. It was secondarily an election about government and its proper size and reach. Religion and cultural values played a very limited role in its outcome, even if the old religious and cultural alignments were largely left intact after the votes were counted.

Table One reports the core findings of the network exit poll on religious questions. It shows that between 2008 and 2010, Democrats lost ground across all religious groups. They also lost ground from the 2006 midterm election. Republican gains were slightly larger among Catholics than Protestants, suggesting, as have many surveys in the past, that Catholics are one of the country's premier swing groups. But these differences were not large; Democrats also lost substantial ground among voters who listed themselves as having no religion.

**Table One**

Vote by Religion	2006		2008		2010		GOP Gain 06-10	GOP Gain 08-10
	R	D	R	D	R	D		
Protestant	54	44	53	45	59	38	+5	+6
Catholic	44	55	42	55	54	44	+10	+12
Jewish	12	87	19	81	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Other	25	71	21	76	24	74	-1	+3
None	22	74	25	72	30	68	+8	+5

**Table One – Continued**

		2006		2008		2010		GOP Gain 06-10	GOP Gain 08-10
		R	D	R	D	R	D		
<b>Vote by Religion Among Whites</b>									
	White Protestant	61	37	63	35	69	28	+8	+6
	White Catholic	49	50	52	46	59	39	+10	+7
	White Jewish	11	87	17	83	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	White- Other	29	66	29	66	28	71	-1	-1
	White – No Religion	25	72	29	67	37	62	+12	+8
	Non-White Voters	24	75	15	81	24	75	0	+9
<b>White Evangelical/ Born Again?</b>									
	Yes	70	28	70	28	77	19	+7	+7
	No	38	60	35	62	42	55	+4	+7
<b>Vote by Church Attendance*</b>									
	Weekly	55	43	53	45				
	Occasionally	39	59	41	56				
	Never	30	67	29	67				
	Yes					58	40		
	No					44	53		
<b>Vote by Race</b>									
	White	51	47	53	45	60	37	+9	+7
	African-American	10	89	5	93	9	89	-1	+4
	Latino	30	69	29	68	38	60	+8	+9
	Asian	37	62	31	63	40	58	+3	+9
	Other	42	55	25	70	44	53	+2	+19
<b>Vote by Region</b>									
	Northeast	35	63	38	61	44	54	+9	+6
	Midwest	47	52	45	53	53	44	+6	+8
	South	53	45	50	48	61	37	+8	+11
	West	43	54	39	58	48	49	+5	+9

\* The 2006 and 2008 exit poll provided the options of weekly, occasionally, and never for vote by church attendance, while the 2010 exit poll asked "Do you attend religious services weekly," and provided only the binary Yes/No option. <sup>3</sup>

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Democrats have always done especially well among more secular voters, and the 2010 election was no exception. Among those who answered “none” on the religious affiliation question, Democrats won by a 68 percent to 30 percent margin in 2010. But this represented a decline from the party’s 74 percent share of the “none” vote in 2006 and 72 percent in 2008. The across-the-board nature of the losses is also reflected in the fact that between 2008 and 2010, Republicans gained seven points both among white voters who described themselves as born again Christians and the remainder of the white electorate who did not.

Measured another way, however, the Democrats’ losses among white evangelicals were especially severe: The party lost more than a quarter of its total white evangelical vote between 2008 and 2010. Some of this loss is clearly accounted for by the decline in the proportion of the electorate that was under 30 years old, because younger white evangelicals are somewhat more sympathetic to the Democrats than their elders. In the PRRI survey, for example, 37 percent of non-voters but only 11 percent of voters were 18 to 29 years old; by contrast, 21 percent of voters but only 9 percent of non-voters were 65 years or older.

Progressive Christian activists have argued that some of these evangelical losses (as well as losses among Catholics) can also be explained by a decline in organized Democratic outreach to religious groups. While we agree that such outreach efforts were more significant in 2008 than in 2010—and these declines certainly suggest it would be in the Democrats’ interest to renew their religious mobilization programs—our sense is that the shift among religious voters was driven by factors (notably the economy) unrelated to organizational efforts. The fact that the Democratic vote also declined among the non-religious points to the impact of a larger wave.

What is clear is that Democratic hopes to make advances among white evangelical voters were dealt a setback in 2010. The Democrats’ share of the House vote among white voters who described themselves as white evangelical or born again fell to 19 percent this year — substantially lower than the 25 percent House Democratic candidates won among these voters in the 2004, the very election defeat that spurred the party’s new religious engagement efforts four years later.

Unfortunately, the exit poll changed the way it posed the question about attendance at religious services, so it is impossible to compare 2010 directly with the two earlier contests on this dimension. Two facts stand out, however: Republicans continue to do far better among voters who attend religious services regularly, while Democrats do best among those who attend less frequently or not at all. And to the extent that the surveys can be compared, Democrats appear to have lost ground across the board.

It needs to be emphasized that the bulk of the Democrats’ losses were among white voters. The Democratic share of the African-American vote in 2010 was equal to its share in 2006, and down only slightly from the exceptional year of 2008. The Democrats lost ground among Latinos, but still won 60 percent of their votes, which proved pivotal in contests in California, Nevada and Colorado. We

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emphasize these findings because the religious factors that operate among white voters, particularly the differences related to attendance at religious services, do not affect African-Americans or Latinos in the same way—and both groups, taken as a whole, are more religious than the norm, measured by both practice and belief.

What is most striking about all these numbers is that they are not striking at all. The correlation between political preferences and the religious categories the political scientist John Green has called “behaving and believing”<sup>4</sup> that have been established over the last three decades were largely unchanged by the electoral upheavals of 2008 and 2010. Democrats did make some inroads among more conservative religious groups in 2008. Younger white evangelical voters remain a potential Democratic target group, as do younger Catholics. But whatever else changed in 2010, religious voting patterns remained largely intact.

We would add here that all analyses of religious voting patterns need to be tempered by substantial regional variations in political allegiances, notably the fact that the white South has emerged as a Republican Party bastion. White evangelical voters are disproportionately white southerners, and white southerners are disproportionately Republican. Conservative groups of all kinds, including the Tea Party, tend to be especially strong among white Southerners.

These regional patterns were at least as pronounced in 2010 as in earlier elections. The 2010 exit poll estimated that Republican House candidates secured 61 percent of the vote in the South, which would translate into a much larger share of the white southern vote. (White southerners were far less likely to vote for Obama in 2008 than whites in other regions.) By contrast, the G.O.P. secured only 53 percent in the Midwest, 48 percent in the West and 44 percent in the Northeast. The complex interaction among regional, cultural, religious and racial factors must always be taken into account in analyses that focus on any single factor in this mix.

The voters themselves made clear that religion and religiously significant social issues played only a modest direct role in their 2010 decisions in response to direct questions in the PRRI survey. For example, only 9 percent of voters said that their religious beliefs were the single biggest influence on their vote. Only 6 percent of voters said that religion played a larger role than usual in determining their vote. Eight percent said it played a smaller role, and the vast majority, 73 percent, said it played the same role as in the past.

It is also quite clear that the controversial “values” issues that played a significant role during elections in the Bush years played a very limited role in 2010. Table Two, drawn from the PRRI survey, shows that the economy was the single most important issue across religious groups. Overall, 47 percent of voters listed the economy as the most important issue in determining their vote, with health care (at 19 percent) and the size and role of government (at 16 percent) in distant second and third places. By contrast, same-sex marriage and abortion were each listed by only 3 percent of those surveyed as a voting issue.

**Table Two**

Of the following issues, which one would you say was MOST important to your vote for Congress this year?

	Total	White Evangelical	White Mainline Protestant	Black Protestant	White Catholic	Unaffiliated
<b>The Economy</b>	47	37	44	66	49	55
<b>Immigration</b>	4	4	5	4	2	2
<b>The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan</b>	5	5	6	2	4	5
<b>Health care</b>	19	21	21	21	24	12
<b>The size and role of government</b>	16	21	16	3	12	18
<b>Same-sex marriage</b>	3	3	3	2	1	4
<b>Abortion</b>	3	7	0	1	6	0
<b>Other</b>	2	0	4	0	1	2
<b>Don't know/Refused</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1

Other than the economy what was the NEXT most important issue to your vote for Congress this year?\*

	Total	White Evangelical	White Mainline Protestant	Black Protestant	White Catholic	Unaffiliated
<b>Immigration</b>	8	6	9	19	4	10
<b>The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan</b>	17	11	14	21	12	24
<b>Health care</b>	40	45	41	45	39	32
<b>The size and role of government</b>	27	34	25	6	37	26
<b>Same-sex marriage</b>	3	0	6	9	0	2
<b>Abortion</b>	2	3	1	0	4	0
<b>Other</b>	2	0	3	0	0	2
<b>Don't know/Refused</b>	1	1	0	1	2	3

\*Only asked of voters who said the economy was most important to their vote.

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Because it was obvious before the election that a large proportion of the electorate would see the economy as the election's dominant issue, the survey asked voters who picked the economy as the most important voting issue for their next most important priority. This only underscored how small a role same-sex marriage and abortion played in this year's vote. Only 3 percent of voters listed same-sex marriage as their primary voting issue, and only 2 percent listed abortion, trailing far back from all other concerns, notably health care and the size and role of government.

There were, however, significant differences in the economy's relative importance as a voting issue across groups. While 37 percent of white evangelicals listed the economy as the most important issue, 66 percent of black Protestants gave the economy primacy, as did 49 percent of white Catholics and 44 percent of white Mainline Protestants. But neither abortion nor same-sex marriage accounted for most of these differences. Reflecting white evangelicals' generally Republican and conservative political views, the size and role of government was the second most frequently cited voting issue among that group, at 21 percent, tied with health care.

Among white evangelicals, only 7 percent listed abortion as a primary voting issue, while 6 percent of white Catholics did so. In addition to the 7 percent of white evangelicals who listed abortion as the most important voting issue, an additional 3 percent who said the economy was their primary voting issue listed abortion as the next most important issue. The same was true for 4 percent of Catholics. This suggests that even in an election dominated by economic concerns, abortion remains a key concern for a noticeable minority of the American electorate. And it is more important to more conservative than to more liberal religious groups. Among white mainline Protestants, for example, less than 1 percent listed abortion as a first tier voting issue.

By contrast, same-sex marriage does not enjoy the same status as a voting issue among more conservative voters. It was the first choice of only 3 percent of white evangelicals and 1 percent of Catholics. Same-sex marriage was, in fact, more important to white Mainline Protestants and to African-American Protestants.

Overall, only 9 percent of PRRI respondents say they heard clergy at their places of worship speaking out for or against particular political parties or candidates. Black Protestants (at 15 percent) were slightly more likely to hear such talk than were members of other religious groups, while 8 percent of Christian conservatives—but only 4 percent of white evangelicals as a whole—heard talk for or against candidates or parties in their churches. Black Protestants were considerably more likely than other groups to have heard their clergy speak out on health care reform (34 percent as against 14 percent among all respondents) and the proper role and size of government (21 percent of black Protestants versus 11 percent of the whole sample). On the other hand, 65 percent of white Catholics, 41 percent of Christian conservatives, and 31 percent of white evangelicals heard their clergy speak out about abortion, compared to only 17 percent of white mainline

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Protestants and 14 percent of black Protestants. It is notable in light of the Catholic social tradition that only 7 percent of white Catholics said their clergy spoke about the role and size of government, and only 13 percent said they heard preaching about health care.

Other differences in voter priorities across religious groups emerged from the PRRI survey — though many of these are probably best explained by the political and ideological leanings of the groups in question rather than by factors directly related to religious belief or commitment.

Among those that said the economy was the most important voting issue, white evangelicals were twice as likely to name the bailouts of the financial industry as the economic issue that mattered most to them. They were significantly more likely to say this than were conservatives or any other religious group. Conversely, white evangelicals were significantly less likely to name the gap between rich and poor as their top economic concern. White Catholics were identical to white evangelicals in this regard, again a finding that may be surprising in light of the Church's tradition of social teaching. Both white evangelicals and white Catholics cited the size and role of government as a major determinant of their vote more frequently than did voters as a whole.

Also among those that named the economy as the most important issue to their vote, white evangelicals were far more likely than any other religious group to cite balancing the federal budget as their top economic priority for the new Republican congressional majority. Forty percent of white evangelicals espoused this position, as against 30 percent of white Catholics, 28 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 32 percent of all voters for whom the economy was the most important issue.

White evangelicals and Christian conservatives share a more hawkish outlook on foreign policy that differentiates them from all other religious groups, and from the electorate as a whole. When asked to choose between two propositions — “In foreign policy the best way to ensure peace is through military strength” or “Good diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace” — white evangelicals chose the former by a margin of 53 to 44 percent, as did the overlapping group that described themselves as Christian conservatives (by 56 to 42 percent). On the other hand, 53 percent of white mainline Protestants preferred diplomacy, as did 58 percent of white Catholics and 73 percent of black Protestants. In the electorate as a whole, good diplomacy prevails over military strength, 59 percent to 38 percent.

## **God, American Exceptionalism, and the Role of Government**

The PRRI survey underscored the extent to which a religiously-based belief in American exceptionalism is alive and well. This may have had little direct impact on the 2010 election, but its importance is likely to influence the rhetoric of American politicians going into the 2012 presidential election.

The survey found that 58 percent of all Americans mostly or completely agreed

with the proposition that “God has granted America a special role in human history.” And responses to this question did not break entirely in predictable directions. For example, this was a view held across racial and ethnic lines: by 64 percent of Hispanics, 56 percent of whites, and 60 percent of African Americans. It did, however, divide the political parties to some degree: 75 percent of Republicans but only 49 percent of Democrats held this view. A belief in God’s grant of a special role to the United States was held by 75 percent of conservatives and 54 percent of moderates but only 38 percent of liberals.

Not surprisingly, 86 percent of Christian conservatives and 83 percent of white evangelicals held this Providential view – more than the 58 percent of black Protestants, 53 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 49 percent of white Catholics. Only 32 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans held this position, though it may be a comment on the depth of American exceptionalist feeling that nearly one-third of the unaffiliated—a group that is, on the whole, less religious than the rest of the country—saw a special role for America as ordained by the Almighty.

A majority of Americans see religion as the solution for social ills. Fifty-six percent mostly or completely agreed with the statement that “If enough people had a personal relationship with God, social problems would take care of themselves.” This majority included 72 percent of African Americans and 56 percent of whites but only 45 percent of Hispanics; 73 percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Independents but only 45 percent of Democrats; 70 percent of conservatives and 53 percent of moderates but only 40 percent of liberals; 82 percent of Christian conservatives, 76 percent of white evangelicals, 57 percent of white Catholics, and 56 percent of white mainline Protestants, but only 25 percent of unaffiliated Americans. It is a comment on the depth of African-American religious commitment that the group which, on the whole, most strongly supports government engagement with the solution of public problems nonetheless sees faith in God as key to resolving social ills.

But African-Americans are the exception to another finding: that those who see that having a personal relationship with God would solve social problems also tend to see American society as more fair and just than those who don’t. This suggests a classic divide deeply rooted in American history—the difference in view that animated splits on social and political questions between conservative and Social Gospel Christians. It is a division between those who see social problems as caused primarily by individual shortcomings and those who see such difficulties as arising mainly from social and structural injustices. Among Americans who agree that having a personal relationship with God could solve social problems, less than half (46 percent) say that “one of the big problems in the country today is that not everyone is given an equal chance in life.” Among Americans who disagree, six in ten say that not giving everyone an equal chance is one of the big problems in the country.

Yet if a majority saw personal relationships with God as key to resolving social

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problems, a narrow majority, of 52 percent to 45 percent, rejected the statement that “government is providing too many social services that should be left to religious groups and private charities.” Responses to this question appear to have been shaped more by attitudes toward government and its proper role than by an assessment of the work of the religious or non-profit groups.

The survey found that 59 percent of Americans over age 65 agreed that government was providing too many services, as against only 31 percent of those aged 18 to 29. Among whites, 48 percent took this view, as against only 32 percent of African Americans and 31 percent of Hispanics. Among religious groups, 60 percent of white evangelicals, and 56 percent of white Catholics, but only 43 percent of white mainline Protestants, 33 percent of black Protestants, and 28 percent of the religiously unaffiliated saw government as playing too large a role in the provision of social services. Partisan and ideological leanings played an important, if perhaps predictable, role in shaping responses: 66 percent of Republicans, and 66 percent of conservatives, but only 23 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of liberals agreed with the statement.

Perhaps most revealing is the fact that Tea Party supporters were significantly more likely than either white evangelicals or self-described Christian conservatives to see government as playing too large a role vis-à-vis religious or private charities. Among Tea Party members, 82 percent took this view, but only 64 percent of Christian conservatives did – and, as we have seen, only 60 percent of white evangelicals. It is fair to conclude, we think, that while the ideas that fell under the heading “compassionate conservatism” still have some resonance among white evangelicals and Christian conservatives, such ideas are largely rejected by members of the Tea Party movement. It is to the distinction among these groups that we turn next.

## **Evangelicals, Conservatives, and the Tea Party**

The idea of the Tea Party as a movement independent of the Republican Party has largely been discredited. So, too, has the idea of the Tea Party as a more libertarian alternative to the Religious Right. As the PRRI survey released earlier this year at Brookings showed, 47 percent of Americans who consider themselves part of the Tea Party movement also say they are part of the Religious Right or Christian conservative movement. Yes, there are many “Tea evangelicals.” Moreover, nearly two-thirds of Tea Party movement members say that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. And 45 percent of Tea Party members say there should be no legal recognition for same sex couples, compared with only 33 percent of the public as a whole.

On the whole, in short, Tea Party supporters are staunch conservatives who have much in common with the rest of the right. They are distinguished in large part by a new level of activism and what is often a rather extreme view of the Constitution and the limitations it places on the federal government. But there is

another way to understand the Tea Party's distinctiveness: as a revolt against what the historian Gary Gerstle has called the "religiously inflected multiculturalism" of former President George W. Bush – an approach Gerstle also describes as a "multiculturalism of the godly."<sup>5</sup>

In an essay in the recently published *The Presidency of George W Bush: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton, 2010), Gerstle argues that Bush and his political strategist Karl Rove developed a brand of Republicanism that they believed "offered groups of minority voters reason to rethink their traditional hostility to the G.O.P." Gerstle notes that on "questions of immigration and diversity, Bush was worlds apart from Patrick Buchanan and the social-conservative wing of the Republican Party that wanted to restore America to its imagined Anglo Saxon and Anglo Celtic glory." After all, Bush "was comfortable with diversity, bilingualism and cultural pluralism, as long as members of America's ethnic and racial subcultures shared his patriotism, religious faith, and political conservatism." It is particularly notable, Gerstle adds, that "[d]uring a time in which the United States was at war and Europe was exploding with tension and violence over Islam, Bush played a positive role in keeping interethnic and interracial relations in the United States relatively calm." Gerstle concludes that Republican politicians are likely some day to return to Bush's "multiculturalist project .... as a way of building winning electoral coalitions."

But in the medium term, Bush's approach created a quiet backlash on the right that has come, ironically perhaps, to haunt Barack Obama. In a column in the Nov. 13-14 edition of the *Financial Times*, columnist Christopher Caldwell characterized Bush's multicultural accomplishments, as seen by a conservative critic:

His 'faith-based initiatives' were not a harbinger of creeping theocracy, but they did funnel a lot of federal money to urban welfare and substance abuse programmes. He expanded Bill Clinton's ill-advised plans to increase minority home ownership. His No Child Left Behind Act, meant to improve educational outcomes for minorities, did so at the price of centralising authority in Washington. Mr Bush hoped for a free trade and migration zone for the Americas, deepening the North American Free Trade Agreement so that it would become more like the European Union. Conservatives' angry rejection of his 2007 immigration reform – which resembles Mr Obama's ideas – was the clearest sign that he was losing the ear of his party.<sup>6</sup>

Caldwell argues that "many of the Tea Party's gripes about President Barack Obama can also be laid at the door of Mr. Bush." He concludes provocatively that if Obama "has come to grief through his failure to realize the electorate is poor soil for cultivating social democracy," then Bush failed to realize that "Christian Democracy was just as alien a plant."

We believe that Gerstle is on to something important about the Bush

presidency, and while we don't necessarily agree with Caldwell's views, we think he has identified a central cause of the Tea Party revolt and has shrewdly sketched the substantial difference between Tea Party politics and the politics of compassionate conservatism. While white Christian conservatives and Tea Party supporters are in broad agreement on many issues, there is a harder edge to Tea Party views on immigration, multiculturalism and Islam.

Table Three points to both of these factors. Tea Party members, white evangelicals and Christian Conservatives are on the same side on many questions, but Tea Party members feel even more strongly on issues related to immigration, Islam, equal opportunity and Obama himself. For example, while 57 percent of white evangelicals believe that the values of Islam are at odds with American values, 66 percent of Tea Party members do. Sixty-five percent of white evangelicals say that Obama's religious views are different from their own; 76 percent of Tea Party members do. While 50 percent of white evangelicals and 46 percent of Christian conservatives say "it is not a big problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others," 64 percent of Tea Party supporters felt this way. Tea Party supporters were also less likely to support an increase in the minimum wage than either white evangelicals or Christian conservatives.

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Tea Party members feel even more strongly on issues related to immigration, Islam, equal opportunity and Obama himself.

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**Table Three**

	White Evangelicals	Christian Conservatives	Tea Party Members
Percent Agree:*			
Values of Islam At Odds With American Values	57	61	66
Discrimination Against Women No Longer A Problem	46	49	58
Obama has Different Religious Beliefs from Yours	65	72	76
Government Should Do More to Protect Morality In Society	44	44	31
Discrimination Against Whites As Big a Problem As Discrimination Against Blacks	57	53	61

**Table Three – Continued**

	White Evangelicals	Christian Conservatives	Tea Party Members
Percent Agree:**			
From September Survey Raise the Minimum Wage	58	63	48
Immigrants a Burden on Country	65	59	64
Blacks and Minorities Receive Too Much Attention	38	48	58
Equal Opportunity Not a Problem In the U.S.	50	46	64

\* Questions from Post-Election American Values Survey, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute, November 4-7, 2010.

\*\* Questions from Pre-Election American Values Survey, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute, September 1-14, 2010.

We do not want to exaggerate the importance of these differences, yet we do think they suggest that behind the “take our country back” slogans of the Tea Party lies an assertive nationalism fed in part by a reaction to a sharp increase in immigration in recent decades and a mistrust of Islam created after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. And in at least one contest in which one of the loudest spokesmen for that assertive nationalism gained a large vote as a third party candidate, the evidence for the difference between the Tea Party movement and religious conservatism was especially dramatic.

Colorado had an unusual gubernatorial contest in 2010 because the winner of the Republican primary, Dan Maes, was badly discredited in the eyes of the public, including members of his own party, by a series of personal revelations that emerged after the primary. Former Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo, who was on the ballot as the candidate of the right-wing Constitution Party, stepped into the breach and emerged as the main challenger to Democrat John Hickenlooper, the Mayor of Denver. Tancredo is best-known for his vociferous opposition to illegal immigration and his extreme hostility to Obama. At a Tea Party convention in early 2010, he declared of the 2008 election that “people who could not even spell the word 'vote' or say it in English put a committed socialist ideologue in the White House. His name is Barack Hussein Obama.”<sup>7</sup> Harkening back to the Jim Crow South that denied the right to vote to African Americans on the basis of “literacy tests” that called for potential black registrants to answer

questions that would have stumped PhDs. in political science, Tancredo said Obama won “mostly because I think that we do not have a civics literacy test before people can vote in this country.”

**Table Four**

Vote in Colorado for Governor, 2010 By Selected Groups <sup>8</sup>			
	All Conservatives (40 percent of all)	White Evangelicals (21 percent)	Strong Tea Party Supporters(20 percent)
Hickenlooper D	14	20	3
Maes R	18	24	16
Tancredo C	66	54	80

Hickenlooper won the election with 51 percent of the vote to 37 percent for Tancredo and 11 percent for Maes. But as Table Four above shows, there were striking differences in the voting patterns of conservatives and white evangelicals on the one hand and those who told exit pollsters they strongly supported the Tea Party on the other. White evangelicals gave Tancredo only 54 percent of their ballots, but strong Tea Party supporters gave him 80 percent of theirs. This 80 percent figure was also substantially larger than the 66 percent he received among self-described conservatives. We believe that what might be called the “Tancredo Difference” has important implications for conservative and religious politics. While many accounts have emphasized the possibility of splits in the Republican Party between its “establishment” and the Tea Party, there is the potential for other divisions between religious conservatives with more moderate views on immigration and more compassionate views on poverty and members of a Tea Party movement still rebelling against certain distinctive aspects of the Bush presidency.

This provides some background for understanding our findings on attitudes toward Islam, and toward the President’s own religious faith.

### **Islam, Religious Tolerance, and President Obama’s Challenge**

In light of the attacks of 9/11, it is not surprising that attitudes toward Islam are a potentially neuralgic matter in American politics. Yet in some ways, divisions on these questions may be deeper now, nearly 10 years on, than they were in the period closer to Sept. 11. This owes in part to the influence of President Bush on the conservative movement, which was at its height during his first term in office,

and to Bush's efforts to tamp down anti-Muslim feeling. As Gerstle points out, Bush, in one of his first public speeches after 9/11, "called on Americans to respect the legitimacy of Islam and the law-abiding Muslims who practiced it." Gerstle contrasts Bush's response favorably to that of two of his predecessors, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt—toward German-Americans in the case of both and toward Japanese-Americans as well in the case of FDR. At a Cabinet meeting after Sept. 11, Gerstle notes, Bush referred to his Transportation Secretary, Norm Mineta, a Japanese-American who had been "relocated" in 1942. The president said he didn't "want what happened to Norm in 1942 to happen again" to Muslim and Arab Americans.

But all this was before the war in Iraq and the many controversies it unleashed, and before the election of the first president to have a Muslim parent in the person of his father – not to mention, as Tom Tancredo was among many on the right in pointing out, to have the middle name "Hussein." If the mobilization of anti-Muslim feeling was not functional for the conservative movement in the years of the Bush presidency (and if Bush himself made serious efforts to combat anti-Muslim feeling), it became a major part of the campaign against Obama on the farther reaches of the right after his election.

Thus the sharp divisions in attitudes toward Islam along both partisan and ideological lines that we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, including the two-thirds of Tea Party members who see Islamic and American values as incompatible.

It is worth putting some qualifications around observations on this question. For example, 20 percent of Americans say they "completely agree" that Islamic values and American values are at odds, while 22 percent "completely" disagree. This creates a large middle ground of 25 percent who "mostly" agree and 27 percent who "mostly" disagree. This indicates that opinion on this question could be subject to change, that many Americans hold nuanced views, and that a majority may not hold their views very strongly.

Nonetheless, the divisions in the country are clear. Strong disagreement with the statement was especially powerful among African-Americans as well as among those under 30 years old, and the religiously unaffiliated. Strong agreement was most common among Americans over 65 years old, among Christian conservatives and white evangelicals. Catholics and white mainline Protestants were close to the national norm.

In our view, a serious threat of further national division lies in the politicization of this question, a genuine possibility in light of the strong differences of view along partisan and ideological lines. Where 33 percent of Republicans said they "completely" agreed that Muslim and American values were incompatible, only 11 percent of Democrats said this. And while 31 percent of conservatives (and 43 percent of Tea Party members) completely agreed, only 8 percent of liberals and 16 percent of moderates did.

We suspect that these findings are related in some ways to the survey's finding

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about President Obama's religious faith. As we have pointed out already, attitudes on the president's faith are related closely to more general attitudes toward the president's political views and performance. Thus, attitudes toward Obama's religious faith might be altered in the president's favor by a simple increase in his overall popularity.

Yet the political contours of opinion on the question about Obama's faith were strikingly similar to those on the question about Islam. Among the groups most likely to say that the president's religious beliefs were "very different" from their own were Tea Party members (66 percent), Republicans (57 percent), Christian conservatives (53 percent), and conservatives and white evangelicals (both at 50 percent). Those who saw the president's religious view as "very similar" to their own included African-Americans (33 percent), Democrats (28 percent), and liberals (22 percent). It is noticeable, however, that groups generally supportive of President Obama were less certain that they shared his religious views than groups opposed to him were certain that they didn't.

Our colleagues Robby Jones and Dan Cox also observe that "among Americans who attend religious services more often, views of Obama's religious faith are more closely linked to evaluations of him." They note that among Americans who attend religious services at least weekly, there is 74-point favorability gap between those who say he has similar religious beliefs (92 percent) and those who say he has different religious beliefs (18 percent). Among Americans who seldom or never attend religious services, the favorability gap is about half as large. Among these less frequent attenders, Obama had an 87 percent rating among those who said he had similar religious beliefs to theirs, but he also maintained a 52 percent rating among those who said his views were different – a 35-point gap that speaks to Obama's relatively strong support among less religious Americans.

Interestingly, Jones and Cox also found that despite Obama's former affiliation with a mainline Protestant church, Catholics are significantly more likely than Protestants to say that Obama has similar religious beliefs to their own (49 percent to 40 percent respectively). In fact, they note, only 4-in-10 white mainline Protestants say the President has similar religious beliefs; a majority says they are different.

There is, we acknowledge, a certain chicken-and-egg problem to establishing whether attitudes toward Obama's religious views drive political attitudes toward him, or whether political views are the primary driver. Our suspicion from these data is that political considerations are more important. However, given the extent to which political views generally are still driven in substantial part by cultural and religious attitudes, it's not surprising that these attitudes are so closely correlated.

And the survey contained some evidence that the new religious politics may be altering the old. Respondents were asked to choose between two statements: "Government should do more to protect morality in society" and "I worry the government is getting too involved in the issue of morality." Only 33 percent of

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"Among Americans who attend religious services more often, views of Obama's religious faith are more closely linked to evaluations of him."

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those surveyed said the government should do more to “protect morality;” 63 percent were worried about excessive government involvement.

Under the expectations of the old religious politics, this is a question that would divide along ideological and philosophical lines: Conservatives, particularly social and religious conservatives, would be expected to support government doing more to protect morality and liberals would be expected to oppose this. And in a 2007 PRRI survey, those expectations were largely confirmed. Back then, 50 percent of conservatives said government should do more to protect morality, a view held by only 36 percent of moderates and 28 percent of liberals.<sup>9</sup>

But in the new survey, the proportion of conservatives saying government should “protect morality” dropped to 37 percent, putting them not far from moderates (at 32 percent) and liberals (at 27 percent). Even among white evangelicals, more worried about excessive government involvement (54 percent) than expressed a desire for government to protect morality (44 percent). The numbers were similar – at 52 to 44 percent – for self-described Christian conservatives. Among Tea Party members, the margin was even greater, with 66 percent worried about and only 31 percent supportive of government involvement in issues of morality.

In their own analysis of the data, Jones and Cox point to the key cause of this shift: Attitudes on this question are now greatly affected by attitudes toward President Obama. Conservative groups seem to be saying that they do not want this government to protect morality. As Jones and Cox write: “Support for government action on moral issues is closely related to views of President Obama. Among Americans with a very favorable opinion of the President, four in 10 say government should do more to protect morality in society compared to 28 percent of those with a very unfavorable view of the President.” Underscoring their observation is the fact that African-Americans, the president’s strongest supporters, favor government doing more to protect morality by a margin of 51 percent to 46 percent; whites split the other way, 29 percent to 67 percent.

Finally, in this roiled religious landscape, neither Republicans nor Democrats can take much comfort in the public’s view of their own respective relationships to the role of faith in public life. The survey posed the same question about Republican and Democratic candidates, offering two choices: that they didn’t “pay enough attention to religion,” or that they were “too close to religious leaders.”

By a margin of 47 percent to 28 percent, respondents said that Democratic candidates did not pay enough attention to religion. And by a margin of 54 percent to 27 percent, they said Republican candidates were too close to religious leaders. This is an area in which both parties have work to do, even if their tasks may be quite different.

As for President Obama’s dilemma, we do not pretend to offer a detailed solution here. What we do know is that he has proven himself adept in the past at addressing both religious issues and national divisions. We also know that he has shied away from expressing himself on these matters as president and has been

extremely circumspect about his own religious views and practices. These findings suggest that it would be in his interest and the country's for him to find his voice again on issues that are of particular importance in the United States, which has been described for good reason as a nation with the soul of a church.

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## Endnotes

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