BROOKINGS

The Religion and American Politics: More Secular, More Evangelical...or Both?

E.J. Dionne Jr.
Senior Fellow
Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution

John C. Green
Senior Fellow
Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

This paper has been published for *The Future of Red, Blue and Purple America*, a joint project from The Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute. Project papers will appear together in an edited volume from Brookings Press in Fall 2008.

This paper has not been through a formal review process and should be considered a draft. Please contact the authors for permission if you are interested in citing this paper or any portion of it. This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.

Abstract

This paper investigates the mix of secular and religious politics in the United States during the post-war period. Using survey data from 1944 to 2004, it finds strong evidence of a "secular" and an "evangelical" trend: the religious Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical Protestants have become relatively more numerous and shifted their partisan preferences in opposite directions. Each have become the single largest source of votes for their parties' presidential nominees and give their parties regional strengths in the Electoral College. Taken together, these developments have contributed to political polarization. At the same time, the effects of religious observance on politics were more complex, introducing more variation into the major parties' voter coalitions, a pattern which was reinforced by increased religious diversity. Thus faith-based polarization is far from comprehensive. These patterns are likely to persist in the 2008 presidential election, but the implications for the election's outcome are unclear since the mix of secular and religious politics could benefit either party depending on the circumstances and conduct of the campaign. In the longer term, present trends may continue, but there are other possibilities as well.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Is American politics becoming more secular or more religious? Even casual observation reveals evidence for both these tendencies, apparently associated with the recent polarization of national politics. [1] On the one hand, the least religious Americans have become more prominent in recent times and have been strongly supportive of the Democratic Party. But on the other hand, many of the most religious Americans have also become more prominent politically, offering strong support for the Republicans. The simultaneous appearance of these apparently opposite trends has caused considerable confusion about the role of religion in American politics. Where did this mix of secular and religious politics come from? Is it contributing to political polarization? And will it continue in the future?

This essay seeks to address these questions. Using survey data from 1944 to 2004, it documents changes in the *size* of the major religious groups as well as shifts in their *partisan preference* in presidential elections. On the first count, we find a substantial increase in both the number of Americans who are unaffiliated with organized religion and those who are actively engaged in Evangelical Protestant churches. And on the second count, these growing groups have shifted their partisan preferences at the ballot box in opposite directions. Taken together, these developments have contributed to the polarization of American politics. However, the many other religious groups have showed more varied patterns of demographic and political change, so that faith-based polarization has been less than comprehensive.

[1] For good overviews of this evidence see, Andrew Kohut, John C. Green, Scott Keeter, and Robert Toth, *The Diminishing Divide: Religion's Changing Role in American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000), and E.J. Dionne, "Polarized by God? American Politics and the Religious Divide" in David W. Brady and Pietro S. Nivola, eds. *Red and Blue Nation? Vol I.* (Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 2008).

We conclude by speculating about the political impact of religion in the short and longer term. While it is likely that this mix of secular and religious politics will continue for the present, it is not clear which party will capture the White House in 2008. Indeed, the present mix of secular and religious politics can benefit either party depending on the circumstances and conduct of the campaign. In the longer term, the present trends may continue, but there are other possibilities as well.

How Religion Matters in Politics

Over the last sixty years there have been at least three tendencies in American religion with potentially important political consequences.[2] One tendency might be labeled as a "secular" trend. Prime evidence for this trend is the increasing number of individuals who report no affiliation with organized religion in the last two decades. In addition, there is evidence of a decline of traditional religiosity since the 1960s, such as the frequency of worship attendance. This evidence fits well with theories of modernization which posit secularization as an inevitable consequence. The United States is certainly a modern society, and perhaps increasing so, and thus the decline of religious affiliation and traditional religiosity could make American politics more secular.[3]

However, the simple association between modernization and secularization has been challenged by the persistence of traditional forms of religion around the world. In the American context, the growth of Evangelical Protestantism, and the decline of Mainline Protestant churches, is prime evidence of this phenomenon. Thus this tendency

[2] For a fuller discussion see John C. Green, *The Faith Factor* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2007).
[3] A good overview of this perspective can be found in Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

might be labeled an "evangelical" trend. In addition, the level of traditional religiosity, including frequent worship attendance, has remained largely unchanged in recent decades. It may well be that these patterns are a reaction to modernization (and even secularization), but it also reveals the adaptation of traditional religious groups to modern circumstances. Thus the "evangelical" trend could make American politics more religious.[4]

A third tendency in American religion deserves attention: increased ethnic and religious diversity. In keeping with American history, immigration has continued to bring new religious groups into the country. Most immigrants have been affiliated with the major Christian traditions, but practice their own versions of these faiths. But other immigrants belong to world religions that have been less common in the United States, such as Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. These developments might be labeled as a "pluralist" trend, and it could reinforce—or mitigate—the secular or evangelical trends. In fact, the secular and evangelical trends could be understood as parts of a broader pluralism in American society.[5]

These major trends raise a basic question: how does religion matter in American politics? Historically, religious affiliation was the most common connection between faith and politics in the mass public.[6] Simply put, religious communities developed distinctive political perspectives, based in part on their special religious beliefs, but also on their members' ethnic, racial and regional values as well as their material interests.

---

[4] See Peter Berger, "Religion in a Globalizing World." Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life [http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=136]. On the special politics of Evangelical Protestants in the Unted States, see John C. Green, "Seeking a Place: Evangelical Protestants and Public Engagement in the 20th Century." In *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*. Ronald Sider and Diane Knipper, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Press, 2005).

[5] Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005).

[6] Green, *The Faith Factor*, chapter 2.

Religious affiliation has fostered such political connections directly or indirectly, and such connections were typically strongest among members most engaged in religious life. The unaffiliated represent a special case of this phenomenon: the absence of religious belonging removes one kind of communal connection but also allows other kinds of communities to develop.

Perhaps the clearest measure of the political connections of religious affiliation has been voting in presidential elections.[7] Typically some religious groups have been aligned with one or the other of the major political parties, while other groups have been divided between them. As a consequence, religious groups have been among the "building blocs" of the major party voter coalitions throughout American history. These religious "blocs" regularly produced large "affiliation gaps" in the presidential vote. However, these coalitions varied by region and shifted over time. Perhaps the best known example is the party coalitions of the New Deal era: the Democrats were in part an alliance of Catholics, Jews and Evangelical Protestant voters, while the Republicans were in part an alliance of the various kinds of Mainline Protestants. Although the details differ, religious affiliation remains a staple of contemporary party coalitions. Indeed, the affiliation gap in the recent presidential elections has been larger than the better known gender or generation gaps in recent elections.[8]

In recent times, a new connection between religion and politics has appeared, with religious beliefs and practices having an impact apart from religious affiliation.[9] The best

[7] Lyman A. Kellstedt, John C. Green, James L. Guth, and Corwin E. Smidt. "Faith Transformed: Religion and American Politics from FDR to George W. Bush," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present* 2d ed. Mark A. Noll and Luke E. Harlow eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 269-295.
[8] On the size of the various gaps, see Laura R. Olson and John C. Green. "Symposium—Voting Gaps in the 2004 Presidential Election." *PS* 39:443-472, 2006.
[9] See Green, *The Faith Factor*, chapter 3.

known of example is the “worship attendance” gap in the presidential vote, wherein the more observant members of religious communities tend to vote Republican while their less observant co-religionists tend to vote Democratic. This attendance gap has been largest among the white Christian traditions, but has appeared in a more modest form within nearly all religious affiliations. Put another way, active engagement with faith no longer reinforced the dominant political connections within religious affiliations, but instead fostered different political connections. Thus many of most important religious groups in contemporary politics are defined by both religious affiliation and level of religious observance.

Shifts in the affiliation gap and the rise of the attendance gap in the presidential vote reveal another important fact: the political impact of religion depends to a substantial degree on politics itself. Religious groups that are aligned with the Democrats or Republicans at one point in time may have realigned or dealigned at another point. A key factor is the issue agenda, which can maintain or alter the religious elements of party coalitions. In addition, coalition building can have its own internal dynamics, with some religious groups joining one party because a rival religious group joined the other. And much depends on the attention that candidates and party leaders pay to particular religious groups. Here the need to assemble majorities of voters to win elections is a critical factor—a calculus well understood by many political and religious leaders alike.

Thus how a particular religious group matters in politics depends in part on the votes it can contribute to the major parties, which in turn depends on the group’s relative size and its partisan alignment. This means that the political impact of the secular,

evangelical, and pluralist trends depend both on the growth of the relevant religious groups as well as shifts in their partisan preferences.

Religion and the Presidential Vote in 2004

A good place to begin investigating these trends is with the impact of the major religious groups in the 2004 presidential election, starting with their relative size, then turning to their partisan preferences at the polls, and finally putting both features together to look at the Democratic and Republican voter coalitions. This description relies on data from the 2004 National Election Pool.[10]

Size of Religious Groups in 2004. Table 1 reports the relative size of the religious groups most relevant to the secular, evangelical, and pluralist trends. The eleven categories are defined by religious affiliation and worship attendance (the "observant" report attending worship at least once a week and the "less observant" attend less often). With one exception, these groups are listed in the order of the Kerry vote, broken into "Democratic" and "Republican" groups, plus "swing" groups that were evenly divided between the major party candidates (see Table 1 below). These figures reflect both the relative size of these religious groups in the adult population (see the second column of Table 6 for a 2004 estimate of the latter) as well as their level of turnout in 2004.

[10] The National Election Pool is the 2004 "exit poll" conducted by Edison/Mitovsky. These data and more information can be obtained at www.RoperCenter.UConn.edu. The NEP has fairly crude religion measure and they were used to construct the eleven categories in Table 1 as follows: Unaffiliated (no religious affiliation, less than weekly worship attendance); Black Protestants (African American Protestants, divided into weekly and less than weekly worship attenders); white Catholics (divided into weekly and less than weekly worship attenders); white Mainline Protestants (white non-born again Protestants, divided into weekly and less than weekly worship attenders); white Evangelical Protestants (white born again Protestants, divided into weekly and less than weekly attenders); the Other Faiths is a composite category containing all other religious groups (and divided into weekly and less than weekly attenders). For ease of presentation, weekly attenders are labeled as "observant" and less than weekly attenders as "less observant."

Table 1 Size of Religious Groups in the Electorate, 2004

	All
Democratic Groups	
Unaffiliated	**12.3**
Less Observant Black Protestants	**3.2**
Observant Black Protestants	**4.4**
Less Observant Other Faiths	**9.2**
Swing Groups	
Observant Other Faiths	**9.7**
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	**14.0**
Less Observant White Catholics	**11.5**
Republican Groups	
Observant White Mainline Protestants	**4.5**
Observant White Catholics	**9.3**
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**7.5**
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**14.3**
Total	**100.0**

Source: 2004 National Election Pool

The exception in the table order is the very first category: voters unaffiliated with organized religion (and also less observant).[11] This group is at the heart of the secular trend. It was the largest of the Democratic groups in 2004 and the third largest group overall, accounting for one-eighth of the total vote cast (12.3 percent). The Unaffiliated were substantially larger than that of the other Democratic groups, such as Less Observant and Observant Black Protestants (3.2 and 4.4 percent, respectively) as well as Less Observant Other Faiths (9.2 percent), a composite category of many smaller religious communities, including Latino Protestants and Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and Muslims.

The composite category of Other Faiths was assembled for ease of presentation, but these apparently disparate religious communities have more in common that one might expect. For one thing, they all lie outside of the historically white Christian

[11] To be consistent, the handful of Unaffiliated respondents who reported weekly worship attendance were put into the Other Faiths category.

traditions and most voted Democratic in 2004. In addition, many of these communities have grown rapidly in recent decades, embodying the pluralist trend in American religion. Finally, this category is large enough to subdivide by religious observance, facilitating an investigation of the secular and evangelical trends.

The religious categories among the swing groups were fairly large: Less Observant Mainline Protestants was the second largest group over all, at about one-seventh of the electorate (14.0 percent) and Less Observant Catholics were the fourth largest at a little less than one-eighth of the total (11.5 percent). These less observant groups are associated with the secular trend in general due to the impact of the level of religious observance. If the Unaffiliated and the less observant categories among the Democratic and swing groups are combined, they summed to roughly one-half of the electorate in 2004.

The single largest group in the electorate was Observant White Evangelical Protestants, with about one-seventh of all 2004 voters (14.3 percent). This group is central to the evangelical trend, and if added to Less Observant Evangelicals (7.5 percent), the total comes to more than one-fifth of all voters in 2004. Observant White Catholics (9.3 percent) and Observant Mainline Protestants (4.5 percent) round out the Republican groups, while the composite category of Observant Other Faiths completes the swing groups. These last three categories are associated with the evangelical trend in general terms because of the impact of religious observance. If combined with the two categories of Evangelical Protestants, the total accounted for a little less than one-half of the 2004 electorate as well.

Presidential Vote in 2004. Table 2 reports the details of how these religious groups voted for president in 2004. Starting at the top of the table, the Unaffiliated were solidly Democratic, providing John Kerry with nearly three-quarters of their votes (72.9 percent). However, they were not the strongest Democratic religious constituency in Table 2. That honor went to Less Observant Black Protestants (91.5 percent for Kerry), followed closely by Observant Black Protestants (83.1 percent). The composite category of Less Observant Other Faiths came in a bit behind the Unaffiliated (65.8 percent).[12]

Table 2 Religious Groups and Two-Party Presidential Vote, 2004

	Kerry	*Bush*
Democratic Groups		
Unaffiliated	72.9	27.1
Less Observant Black Protestants	91.5	8.5
Observant Black Protestants	83.1	16.9
Less Observant Other Faiths	65.8	34.2
Swing Groups		
Observant Other Faiths	48.1	51.9
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	47.5	52.5
Less Observant White Catholics	46.8	53.2
Republican Groups		
Observant White Mainline Protestants	42.7	57.3
Observant White Catholics	38.2	61.8
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	28.3	71.7
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	17.6	82.4
Total	***48.5***	***51.5***

Source: 2004 National Election Pool

George W. Bush won slim majorities among all of the swing groups, including the composite category of Observant Other Faiths (51.9 percent), Less Observant White Mainline Protestants (53.5 percent), and Less Observant White Catholics (53.2 percent).

[12] On the voting behavior of the religious communities in this composite category, see See John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, James l. Guth, and Lyman A, Kellstedt, "The American Religious Landscape and the 2004 Presidential Vote: Increased Polarization," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=64.

Bush had more success among the counterparts of these last two groups, listed among the Republican groups near the bottom of the table: Observant White Mainline Protestants (57.3 percent) and Observant White Catholics (61.8 percent). The two strongest Bush constituencies were Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants (71.7 percent) and Observant White Evangelical Protestants (82.4 percent).

Thus the Unaffiliated bolstered the Democratic cause in 2004, revealing an impact of the secular trend, while Observant Evangelicals backed the GOP, revealing the impact of the evangelical trend. Each trend was extended somewhat by the impact of religious observance: the less observant always voted more Democratic than their observant counterparts, who always voted more Republican. This pattern was evident even among the strongest Democratic and Republican groups. For instance, there was an 8.4 percentage point attendance gap in the Kerry vote between Less Observant and Observant Black Protestants, and a 10.7 percentage point attendance gap between Less Observant and Observant Evangelicals. These gaps were often smaller than many of the affiliation gaps, such as the difference between Observant Evangelical and Mainline Protestants (25.1 percentage points). But note that the combination of affiliations and observance typically had a larger impact on the vote. For example, there was a 55.3 percentage point gap in the Kerry vote between the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical Protestants.

Presidential Voter Coalitions in 2004. How important were these religious groups to the Kerry and Bush campaigns in 2004? Table 3 addresses this question by listing the proportion of the each party's voter coalition made up by the eleven religious groups, combining the relative size of the groups (from Table 1) with their presidential preferences (from Table 2).

Table 3 Religious Groups and Voter Coalitions, 2004

	Kerry	*Bush*
Democratic Groups		
Unaffiliated	18.5	6.5
Less Observant Black Protestants	6.0	0.5
Observant Black Protestants	7.6	1.5
Less Observant Other Faiths	12.5	6.1
Swing Groups		
Observant Other Faiths	9.6	9.8
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	13.8	14.3
Less Observant White Catholics	11.1	11.9
Republican Groups		
Observant White Mainline Protestants	4.0	5.0
Observant White Catholics	7.3	11.2
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	4.4	10.4
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	5.2	22.9
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: 2004 National Election Pool

The Unaffiliated were the single largest source of Kerry's ballots in 2004, at almost one-fifth of the total (18.5 percent). If one were to combine the Unaffiliated with the less observant Catholics, Mainline and Evangelical Protestants, the total would account for nearly one-half of all the Kerry votes. And if Less Observant Black Protestants and the composite category of Less Observant Other Faiths were added as well, the total swells to two-thirds of the Democratic vote. The remaining one-third of the Kerry vote came from the various observant groups, especially Observant Other Faiths and Black Protestants.

The source of Bush's ballots was a sharp contrast: Observant Evangelical Protestants were the single largest group, with more than one-fifth (22.9 percent—roughly the same as the contribution of the Unaffiliated to the Kerry vote). If Less Observant Evangelicals were added, the total rises to one-third of the Bush vote. And if

the Observant White Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Other Faiths, and Black Protestants were also included, then the total grows to about three-fifths of the Republican presidential vote. The remaining two-fifths of Bush's ballots came from the various less observant groups, especially White Mainline Protestants and Catholics.

Differences by Region. The first column in Table 4 looks at these patterns in yet another way: the net advantage the candidates had in each religious group, taken as a percentage of all the votes cast in the 2004 election. Here a positive figure means a net Kerry advantage and a negative figure a net advantage for Bush. From this perspective, Kerry's largest net advantage was among the Unaffiliated, with 5.6 percent of all ballots cast. Meanwhile, Bush's biggest advantage was with Observant Evangelicals, at 9.3 percent of the total vote.

Table 4 Religious Groups and Net Party Advantage, 2004

	National	*Northeast*	*West*	*Midwest*	*South*
Democratic Groups					
Unaffiliated	**5.6**	1.7	1.5	1.2	1.2
Less Observant Black Protestants	**2.6**	0.6	0.2	0.4	1.4
Observant Black Protestants	**2.9**	0.5	0.1	0.5	1.8
Less Observant Other Faiths	**2.9**	1.4	0.7	0.5	0.3
Swing Groups					
Observant Other Faiths	**-0.4**	0.6	-0.6	0.1	-0.4
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	**-0.7**	0.2	0.4	0.1	-1.4
Less Observant White Catholics	**-0.7**	-0.3	0.3	-0.1	-0.6
Republican Groups					
Observant White Mainline Protestants	**-0.7**	0.2	0.0	-0.1	-0.8
Observant White Catholics	**-2.2**	-0.8	0.1	-0.5	-1.0
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-3.3**	-0.1	-0.8	-0.8	-1.5
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-9.3**	-0.9	-1.4	-2.3	-4.7
ALL		**3.2**	**0.4**	**-1.0**	**-5.7**

Source: 2004 National Election Pool

The rest of Table 4 reports the distribution of the net 2004 vote by the religious groups across the four major regions of the country.[13] These patterns provide a rough measure of how the votes of religious groups translated into the Electoral College. Kerry enjoyed a net advantage among the Unaffiliated in every region, but it was largest in the Northeast and West, the "blue" regions where he did best at the polls. A similar pattern obtained for the composite category of Less Observant Other Faiths, and in these two regions, Kerry also won two of the three swing groups and one of the Republican groups. Interestingly, Kerry received the largest advantage from Black Protestants in the South, a region won by Bush.

In an analogous fashion, Bush had a net advantage among the two groups of Evangelicals in all regions, but it was largest in the South and Midwest, the "red" regions where he was the most successful at the ballot box. In the South, Bush was also well ahead among Observant Mainline Protestants, Observant Catholics, and all the swing groups. But in the highly competitive Midwest, his net advantage was reduced overall, and extended only to Less Observant Catholics among the swing groups. Interestingly, Bush obtained the largest net advantage among the Catholic groups in the Northeast, where Kerry won all the states.

In part, these regional patterns reflect the geographic distribution of the religious groups. For example, the West contains the most Unaffiliated voters, the Midwest and Northeast the most Catholics, and the South the largest number of Evangelicals and Black Protestants. Thus the political import of the religious groups varies enormously. In addition, the particular politics of each region—and each state—can affect the voting behavior as well. Table 5 illustrates this point with exit poll data from four states, one

[13] For a more detailed look at religion by region, see Green, *The Faith Factor*, chapter 6.

from each of the major regions: Pennsylvania, California, Iowa, and Georgia. Because the exit polls did not ask the same religion questions in every state, the table pieces together five common measures across the states: Unaffiliated, Black Protestants, white Catholics and Evangelicals, and the less observant voters. For each state, the table reports the percentage of the religious group in the 2004 electorate and the percentage that voted for Kerry.

Table 5 Religion and the Vote: Selected States, 2004

	Pennsylvania		**California**		**Iowa**		**Georgia**	
	% Voters	***% Kerry***	*% Voters*	***% Kerry***	*% Voters*	***% Kerry***	*% Voters*	***% Kerry***
Unaffiliated	*7.3*	**70.4**	*14.7*	**66.6**	*8.2*	**73.1**	*5.2*	**63.4**
Black Protestants	*8.1*	**80.5**	*4.5*	**76.4**	*1.0*	**86.4**	*14.5*	**86.0**
Less Observant	*59.5*	**56.6**	*67.3*	**57.6**	*55.5*	**55.5**	*49.0*	**47.7**
White Catholics	*30.8*	**47.9**	*14.3*	**53.5**	*21.2*	**52.5**	*8.0*	**20.0**
White Evangelical Protestants*	*9.2*	**37.0**	*14.6*	**12.9**	*26.1*	**31.1**	*33.6*	**15.3**

** For Pennsylvania and California, the figure for Evangelicals comes from the national exit poll; Source: 2004 National Election Pool and state surveys.*

The first thing to note about Table 5 is the variation in the size of the religious groups by state. The Unaffiliated were the largest in California (14.7 percent) and smallest in Georgia (5.2 percent). And although Kerry won the Unaffiliated vote everywhere, he did worst in the least competitive states—California and Georgia. In contrast, Kerry's support matched the national figures in highly competitive Iowa and approached that figure in competitive Pennsylvania. There was a similar variation in the size of Black Protestants, ranging from a high in Georgia (14.5 percent) to a low in Iowa (1 percent). Kerry did very well among this core Democratic constituency in Georgia and with the tiny black electorate in Iowa, but less well in California and Pennsylvania.

White Catholics and Evangelicals also showed considerable state-by-state variation. Catholics were most numerous in Pennsylvania (30.8 percent), where Kerry did most poorly with them, but he won majorities among the smaller Catholics electorates in California (14.3 percent) and Iowa (21.2 percent)—and lost the small group of Georgian Catholics by a large margin. A one might expect, Kerry also lost big with the large Evangelical vote in Georgia (33.6 percent) and also with the smaller group of voters in California (14.6 percent). However Kerry got one-third or more of the Evangelical vote in Iowa (26.1 percent) and Pennsylvania (9.2 percent).

Some across-state variation also occurred among the less observant voters (those who reported attending worship less than once a week regardless of affiliation). Their numbers also varied across states from a high in California (67.3 percent) to a low in Georgia (49 percent). Here Kerry did best in the states that he won and less well in the states that he lost. However, the differences for the "worship attendance" gap were relatively small.

These state-by-state patterns underscore the contingent nature of the political impact of religion. The special circumstances of the individual states are important, including the size and partisan preferences of the religious groups. If there was this much variation in the politics impact of religious group in the highly polarized and hard fought 2004 election, it is likely that there would be more variation in other electoral circumstances and over time.

Religion and the Presidential Vote, 1944-2004

We now turn to an investigation of the secular, evangelical and pluralist trends, using the results of four surveys conducted at twenty years intervals, in 1944, 1964, 1984 and 2004.[14] These surveys cover a variety of political contexts. The 1944 survey was taken right before the end of the Second World War, thus providing a data point at the very beginning of the post-war period. The presidential elections in these four years varied considerably. Both 1944 and 2004 were relatively close, but 1964 and 1984 were landslides; the Democrats won the first two of these contests and the Republicans the last two. Despite the limitations of these data,[15] they are a good deal more precise than the exit poll data that produced such powerful results in 2004. We will first review changes in the size of these religious groups, then look at changes in their presidential preferences at the ballot box, and then bring these patterns together to describe the major party voter coalitions.

Size of Religious Groups 1944-2004. Table 6 lists the religious categories used in the previous tables in a slightly different order. The first column reports the percentage point change in the size of each religious group from 1944 to 2004, measure as a percentage of the adult population; the remaining columns report the relative size of the

13 The 1944 data come from a Gallup Poll (AIPO335) conducted November 1944 (2529 cases); the 1964 data come from "Anti-Semitism in the United States" survey conducted in 1964 (N=1975) by Charles Glock and his associates at the University of California, Berkley. The 1984 data come from the 1984 National Election Study conducted at the University of Michigan (2257 cases); the 2004 data come from the Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics (N=6000) conducted at the University of Akron.

[15] The religious categories used in this analysis are based on denominational affiliation (see Green, *The Faith Factor*, chapter 2 and Appendix A). Although the religious affiliation questions were not asked the same way, each survey produced a detailed list of specific denominations, which were coded so as to be as consistent as possible across the four surveys. The surveys also did not ask worship attendance in the same way, but for these purposes the measures were recoded to be as consistent as possible. For details, please contact the authors.

groups for each year. Overall, Table 6 shows a great deal of change in the size of these religious communities.

Table 6 Size of Religious Groups, 1944-2004

Religious Groups	Change 1944-2004	2004	1984	1964	1944
Unaffiliated	**9.8**	14.4	8.9	6.1	4.6
Less Observant Black Protestants	**-0.7**	4.0	3.8	6.1	4.7
Observant Black Protestants	**2.2**	5.7	5.1	6.1	3.5
Less Observant Other Faiths	**3.3**	9.4	7.8	3.5	6.1
Observant Other Faiths	**8.1**	9.7	5.4	2.5	1.6
Less Observant White Catholic	**1.5**	8.0	10.2	5.6	6.5
Observant White Catholic	**-3.3**	7.7	9.9	18.5	11.0
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	**-19.9**	11.4	17.1	16.6	31.3
Observant White Mainline Protestants	**-6.6**	6.5	9.8	14.3	13.1
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-2.1**	9.3	11.1	10.3	11.4
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**8.0**	14.1	11.0	10.4	6.1
Total		***100.0***	***100.0***	***100.0***	***100.0***
% Observant (at least weekly worship attendance)	*0.9*	*43.3*	*41.1*	*51.8*	*42.4*

Source: 1944 Gallup Poll; 1964 Anti-Semitism Study; 1984 National Elections Study; 2004 National Survey of Religion and Politics

The Unaffiliated showed the largest increase over the post-war period, expanding by 9.8 percentage points. The rate of increase was steady, rising from 4.6 percent of the adult population in 1944 to 6.1 percent in 1964, 8.9 percent in 1984, and 14.4 percent in 2004. However, during the same time period, the third largest increase was for Observant Evangelical Protestants, growing by 8.0 percentage points. Here, too, the increase was steady, rising from 6.1 percent of the adult population in 1944 to 14.1 percent in 2004. By 2004, the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelicals were about equal in size in the adult population.

Thus the religious groups at the center of the secular and evangelical trends expanded in relative terms over the last sixty years. But the patterns for other religious groups were a good bit more complex. For example, changes among the less observant varied considerably. Less Observant Black Protestants (-.7 percentage points) and Evangelicals (-2.1 percentage points) declined modestly over this sixty year period, while the composite category of Less Observant Other Faiths (3.3 percentage points) grew slightly. By far the biggest change was the -19.9 percentage point decline of Less Observant Mainline Protestants. This trend was fairly steady, falling from 31.3 percent of the adult population in 1944 to 11.4 percent in 2004. This change is part of the much commented upon decline in Mainline Protestantism in the post-war period.[16]

Disparate patterns also occurred among the observant groups. The composite category of Observant Other Faiths increased by 8.1 percentage points (just edging out Observant Evangelicals for second place), rising from 1.6 percent of the adult population in 1944 to 9.7 percent in 2004. This change is strong evidence of the pluralist trend. Observant Black Protestants also grew modestly (2.2 percentage points), while Observant Catholics (-3.3 percentage points) and Observant Mainline Protestants (-6.6 percentage points) experienced declines.

The uneven patterns for the less observant and observant groups reflect the overall pattern for religious observance in the post-war period, shown in the very last row of Table 6. Note that there is very little change in the percentage of the adult population that reported attending worship once a week or more between 1944 and 2004. However, there was a sharp increase in observance between 1944 and 1964. This “worship attendance

[16] The classic description is Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1972).

boom" occurred at the beginning of the post-war period and was much commented upon at the time. But this increase had dissipated by 1984, a fact also widely noted. Between 1984 and 2004, the level of reported observance was essentially stable.[17] Overall, these patterns complicated the secular and evangelical trends, which became clearer after 1964.

What caused these changes in the relative size of religious groups between 1944 and 2004? Although a full assessment is beyond the scope of this essay, several factors are clearly important. One is differential birth rates. Some of the groups that declined, including Mainline Protestants and white Catholics, had fewer children during this sixty year period, while some of the groups that grew had more children, such as Observant Evangelicals and Black Protestants. Immigration was also a factor, especially for many of the religious communities in the composite Other Faiths category. A complex of modernizing factors, such as higher levels of education and geographic mobility, may have had an impact as well, especially for the growth of the Unaffiliated. Finally, some religious institutions, such as among Evangelical Protestants, may have adapted more effectively to new social circumstances, while others, such as among Mainline Protestants, may not have done so. Such adaptations may have helped Evangelical retained their children in the faith and also attract adherents from other faiths.[18]

---

[17] On the post-war attendance increase see Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976); on the post-1960s decline in attendance see Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York, Simon and Shuster, 2000); on the recent stability of worship attendance see Stanley Presser and Mark Chaves, "Is Religious Service Attendance Declining?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46:417-423, 2007. On measurement problems related to worship attendance see Green, *The Faith Factor*, chapter 3.

[18] For an overview of these issues, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005). Also see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Presidential Vote, 1944-2004. Table 7 reports the percentage point change in presidential vote of the religious groups between 1944 and 2004. The first two columns report the percentage point change for Democrats and Republicans (these are reciprocal because the figures are based on the two-party vote); the remaining columns report the two-party vote in each of the four presidential elections.

Table 7 Religious Groups and Two-Party Presidential Vote, 1944-2004

Religious Groups	Dem Change 1944-2004	*Rep Change 1944-2004*	2004 Dem	*Rep*	1984 Dem	*Rep*	1964 Dem	*Rep*	1944 Dem	*Rep*
Unaffiliated	**12.9**	*-12.9*	**71.9**	*28.1*	**53.3**	*46.7*	**76.4**	*23.6*	**59.0**	*41.0*
Less Observant Black Protestants	**11.3**	*-11.3*	**86.3**	*13.7*	**92.6**	*7.4*	**97.3**	*2.7*	**75.0**	*25.0*
Observant Black Protestants	**21.4**	*-21.4*	**81.0**	*19.0*	**90.2**	*9.8*	**98.8**	*1.3*	**59.6**	*40.4*
Less Observant Other Faiths	**-16.5**	*16.5*	**65.9**	*34.1*	**68.5**	*31.5*	**93.9**	*6.1*	**75.0**	*25.0*
Observant Other Faiths	**-21.3**	*21.3*	**43.0**	*57.0*	**53.6**	*46.4*	**69.7**	*30.3*	**64.3**	*35.7*
Less Observant White Catholic	**-4.7**	*4.7*	**58.2**	*41.8*	**40.5**	*59.5*	**83.6**	*16.4*	**62.9**	*37.1*
Observant White Catholic	**-31.4**	*31.4*	**37.3**	*62.7*	**46.5**	*53.5*	**82.5**	*17.5*	**68.7**	*31.3*
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	**7.8**	*-7.8*	**49.5**	*50.5*	**28.8**	*71.2*	**58.4**	*41.6*	**41.7**	*58.3*
Observant White Mainline Protestants	**7.6**	*-7.6*	**44.4**	*55.6*	**26.2**	*73.8*	**56.0**	*44.0*	**36.8**	*63.2*
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-12.5**	*12.5*	**43.2**	*56.8*	**38.0**	*62.0*	**53.0**	*47.0*	**55.7**	*44.3*
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-34.1**	*34.1*	**17.0**	*83.0*	**20.3**	*79.7*	**39.7**	*60.3*	**51.1**	*48.9*
ALL	**-3.3**	*3.3*	**48.9**	*51.1*	**41.5**	*58.5*	**69.6**	*30.4*	**52.2**	*47.8*

Source: 1944 Gallup Poll; 1964 Anti-Semitism Study; 1984 National Elections Study; 2004 National Survey of Religion and Politics

In the post-war period, the Unaffiliated voted more Democratic by 12.9 percentage points, a shift in partisan preferences that occurred at the same time that the Unaffiliated were growing as a percentage of the population. However, this partisanship shift was uneven, with the Democrats doing best among the Unaffiliated in the 1964 landslide (76.4 percent) and the Republicans nearly breaking even in the 1984 landslide

(53.3 percent Democratic). During the same time period, Observant Evangelicals moved sharply in a Republican direction, posting a 34.1 percentage point gain in the post-war period, at the same time that they were increasing in relative size. Here the change was fairly even, rising from 48.9 percent Republican in 1944 to 83.0 percent in 2004. In 2004, the Unaffiliated were less strongly Democratic than the Observant Evangelicals were Republican.

Here, too, the religious groups that are central to the secular and evangelical trends displayed substantial and opposite shifts in partisan preferences at the polls. However, the patterns were once again less clear for the less observant groups. The Democrats gained among Less Observant Black Protestants (11.3 percentage) over 1944, but in 2004 showed a decline from the high points in 1984 and 1964. But note that these gains were about half the size of the increase among Observant Black Protestants (21.4 percentage points). The Democrats also improved among Less Observant Mainline Protestants (7.8 percentage points) during the period when this religious group experienced a sharp decline in size. Here, too, the pattern was uneven, with the 2004 figures representing a major gain over 1984. (The party made very similar gains among Observant Mainline Protestants as well). In contrast, the Democrats also lost ground among the composite category of Less Observant Other Faiths (-16.5 percentage points), Less Observant Catholics (-4.7 percentage points) and Less Observant Evangelicals (-2.5 percentage points). For the first two of these groups, the high-water mark for the Democrats was in 1964, and for the last two, the low point was in 1984. In fact, for Less Observant Catholics and Evangelicals the 2004 Democratic vote represented a recovery over 1984.

The patterns were somewhat clearer among the observant groups. Over the period, the Republicans gained nearly as much among Observant Catholics (31.4 percentage points) as with Observant Evangelicals. They also made gains with the composite category of Observant Other Faiths (21.4 percentage points). In all three cases, the trend was steady across all four elections. However, the GOP lost ground among the Observant Mainline Protestants, despite winning a majority of this group in 2004—a pattern that was very similar for Less Observant Mainliners. Here the trend was quite unstable, fluctuating with the election returns, and shifting Democratic after 1984. As noted above, Republican ballots increased among Less Observant Evangelicals and Catholics over the period and among Black Protestants after 1984.

The different patterns across the four presidential elections suggest that many political factors may have caused these shifts in voting behavior, with some being specific to a particular election. The differences in the quality of the candidates and campaigns are clearly important. Surely regional shifts likely mattered as well, especially the change of the South from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican, but also similar shifts toward the Democrats in the West and Northeast. Changes in the issue agenda may have been crucial as well, with civil rights and social issues likely to have played a major role, especially among Black Protestants and Observant Evangelicals. It is worth noting the great volatility of the presidential vote from election to election.

Voter Coalitions, 1944-2004. What was the combined impact of the change in size and partisan preference of the religious groups on voter coalitions? The first two columns of Table 8 report the change in the proportion of the Democratic and Republican

presidential ballots from these groups 1944 to 2004; the remaining columns provide this information for each of the elections.

Table 8 Religious Groups and Presidential Vote Coalitions, 1944-2004

Religious Groups	**Dem Change 1944-2004**	*Rep Change 1944-2004*	**2004**		**1984**		**1964**		**1944**	
			Dem	*Rep*	**Dem**	*Rep*	**Dem**	*Rep*	**Dem**	*Rep*
Unaffiliated	**13.7**	*3.4*	**18.2**	*6.8*	**9.8**	*6.1*	**7.4**	*5.3*	**4.5**	*3.4*
Less Observant Black Protestants	**1.4**	*-0.7*	**5.5**	*0.8*	**5.1**	*0.3*	**8.0**	*0.5*	**4.1**	*1.5*
Observant Black Protestants	**5.0**	*-0.4*	**8.0**	*1.8*	**9.4**	*0.7*	**8.6**	*0.3*	**3.0**	*2.2*
Less Observant Other Faiths	**0.9**	*1.7*	**10.6**	*5.2*	**10.2**	*3.3*	**5.0**	*0.8*	**9.7**	*3.5*
Observant Other Faiths	**6.2**	*9.0*	**8.0**	*10.1*	**6.1**	*3.8*	**2.5**	*2.5*	**1.8**	*1.1*
Less Observant White Catholic	**1.6**	*1.5*	**9.7**	*6.7*	**10.0**	*10.4*	**6.7**	*3.0*	**8.1**	*5.2*
Observant White Catholic	**-7.1**	*4.7*	**7.5**	*12.0*	**15.2**	*12.3*	**24.2**	*11.8*	**14.6**	*7.3*
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	**-12.6**	*-26.2*	**12.8**	*12.5*	**11.7**	*20.5*	**13.3**	*21.8*	**25.4**	*38.7*
Observant White Mainline Protestants	**-3.5**	*-11.4*	**7.3**	*8.8*	**8.8**	*17.6*	**12.2**	*22.1*	**10.8**	*20.2*
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-4.8**	*-1.4*	**6.7**	*8.5*	**7.8**	*9.0*	**6.8**	*13.8*	**11.5**	*9.9*
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-0.9**	*20.0*	**5.7**	*26.8*	**5.7**	*16.0*	**5.2**	*18.3*	**6.6**	*6.8*
Total			**100.0**	*100.0*	**100.0**	*100.0*	**100.0**	*100.0*	**100.0**	*100.0*

Source: 1944 Gallup Poll; 1964 Anti-Semitism Study; 1984 National Elections Study; 2004 National Survey of Religion and Politics

In the post-war period, the Unaffiliated increased their share of the Democratic voter coalition by 13.7 percentage points. This change was fairly steady, rising from 4.5 percent in 1944 to 18.2 percent in 2004. Most of these gains came from the increase in the size of the Unaffiliated, while fewer gains came from a Democratic shift at the ballot box (a point illustrated by the Republican gain of 3.4 percentage points over the period). During the same period, Observant Evangelicals became even more important to the Republican voter coalition, expanding by 20 percentage points over the period. This change was also fairly steady, rising from 6.8 percent in 1944 to 26.8 percent in 2004. Both increased in size and the Republican shift at the ballot box contributed to this

change (a point illustrated by the very modest .9 percentage point loss the Democrats sustained over the period).

Thus the secular and evangelicals trends altered the shaped of the major party coalitions in the post-war period. At the same time, the less observant groups became relatively more important to the Democratic voter coalition, including the composite category of Less Observant Other Faiths (.9 percentage points), Black Protestants (1.4 percentage points), and Catholics (1.6 percentage points). These gains were also fairly steady, reflecting for the most part changes in the relative size of these groups. Indeed, the Democrats also made gains among the Observant Black Protestants (5.0 percentage points) and Observant Other Faiths (6.2 percentage points) for this same reason. But Democrats lost groups among Observant Catholics due to a combination of declining size and shifting party preference.

Meanwhile Less Observant Mainline Protestants became substantially less important to the Democratic presidential coalition, falling by 12.6 percentage points in the post-war period. This shift occurred in the face of a pro-Democratic shift at the polls and was caused mostly by the sharp decline in the size of the group. A smaller decline of 4.8 percent occurred among Less Observant Evangelicals and here the change was due to both changes in relative size and voting behavior.

The observant groups showed a similar mixed pattern with regard to the Republican voter coalition. The GOP received relative gains from the composite category of Observant Other Faiths (9.0 percentage points) and Observant Catholics (4.7 percentage points). The former reflected both change in size and presidential vote, the latter largely represented change in voting preferences. (The party also made some

modest gains among the less observant counterparts of these groups.) However, the Republican coalition lost ground among Observant Mainline Protestants (11.4 percentage points) and suffered an even sharper decline among Less Observant Mainliners (26.4 percentage points). Here, too, the major factor was the declining size of Mainline Protestantism. Finally, GOP candidates lost some ground among Black Protestants largely because of shifts in partisan preference.

For the most part, it appears that changes in the size of religious groups had a larger impact on the parties' voter coalitions than shifts at the ballot box. This pattern is particularly true for the decline of Mainline Protestants and the growth of the composite category of Other Faiths. But for the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical Protestants increases in size were reinforced by large shifts at the ballot box.

Differences by Region. Table 9 reports changes in Table 8 in a slightly different way, showing the net change in partisan advantage as a percentage of the total vote cast; in this table, a positive figure means a net Democratic advantage and a negative figure a net Republican advantage over time. By this measure, the Democrats enjoyed the biggest net gains among the Unaffiliated, posting a 4.7 percentage point gain net advantage over the post-war period. Meanwhile, the Republicans experienced the largest net gains among the Observant White Evangelicals, picking up 10.9 percentage point net advantage over the period.

Table 9 Religious Groups and Change in Net Party Advantage, 1994-2004

	National	*Northeast*	*West*	*Midwest*	*South*
Unaffiliated	**4.7**	1.6	2.5	0.9	-0.3
Less Observant Black Protestants	**1.3**	-0.2	0.1	0.3	1.1
Observant Black Protestants	**3.8**	0.5	0.8	0.4	2.1
Less Observant Other Faiths	**-1.3**	-1.8	0.4	-0.4	0.5
Observant Other Faiths	**-1.9**	0.0	-1.8	0.0	-0.1
Less Observant White Catholic	**-1.0**	0.6	-0.6	-0.3	-0.7
Observant White Catholic	**-7.2**	-3.1	-0.4	-2.9	-0.8
Less Observant White Mainline Protestants	**4.1**	3.1	-0.3	2.0	-0.7
Observant White Mainline Protestants	**2.5**	0.9	-0.1	3.0	-1.3
Less Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-2.5**	0.8	-0.3	0.1	-3.1
Observant White Evangelical Protestants	**-10.9**	-1.1	-1.5	-3.3	-5.0
Total	**-8.4**	**1.3**	**-1.2**	**-0.2**	**-8.3**

Source: 1944 Gallup Poll; 1964 Anti-Semitism Study; 1984 National Elections Study; 2004 National Survey of Religion and Politics

The remaining columns in Table 9 report the gains of next advantage by the four major regions. The Democratic net advantage among the Unaffiliated grew in all the regions except the South and was the largest in the West. Meanwhile, the Republican net advantage grew for Observant Evangelicals in all regions, but especially in the South and the Midwest. The Republicans experienced a similar net gain for Observant Catholics in all regions, and especially in the Northeast and Midwest. All the other religious groups show a mixed pattern across the regions. For example, Democrats benefited from a gain in net advantage among Mainline Protestants in the Northeast and Midwest, while the GOP made such gains in the South. Thus the regional patterns observed in 2004 were in part the result of long term changes in the size and partisanship of the religious groups.

What about 2008?

The results of our investigations can be summarized succinctly. In the post-war period, there is strong evidence for *both* the secular and evangelical trends: the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical Protestants have become more numerous and shifted their partisan preferences in opposite directions. Each has become the single largest source of votes for their parties' presidential nominees and gives their parties regional strengths in the Electoral College. Taken together, these trends have contributed to the polarization of politics. At the same time, the effects of religious observance were not as clear cut, producing a more complex set of religious coalitions, a pattern which was reinforced by the pluralist trend. Thus the faith-based polarization has not been comprehensive.

These trends developed steadily over a sixty-year period and are very unlikely to change in the short run. Thus chances are that the same basic patterns of religious affiliation and observance evident in 2004 will appear again in 2008: the Democratic presidential candidate will drawn support from the Unaffiliated, racial ethnic and religious minorities, and less observant white Christians, while the Republican nominee will receive backing from Observant Evangelical Protestants and observant white Christians. But these patterns provide no clear guidance on who will win the 2008 presidential election. After all, the 2004 election was very close and even modest variations in the effects of affiliation and observance could have produced a different outcome at the polls. Put another way, the present mix of secular and religious politics could benefit either party depending on the circumstances and conduct of the 2008 presidential campaign.

Some clues about how this mix of secular and religious politics might result in a different outcome than in 2008 can be gleaned from the results of the 2006 congressional elections. Here it is instructive to review two accounts of the role of religion in that election.[19]

Writing on November 26, 2006, *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Thomas Fitzgerald began a front-page analysis of the role of religion in the midterm election with these arresting words: "A minor miracle occurred this month: The 'God Gap' in American politics narrowed." But ten days earlier, the Pew Research Center had issued a postelection report by analyst Scott Keeter that was just as definitive in declaring: "The 'God Gap' Widens."

Who was right?

Both accounts were based on fact, not speculation. "While the most religious voters in recent years have tended to favor Republicans, a slice of them voted Democratic in the Nov. 7 midterm congressional elections," Fitzgerald wrote. "The shift has raised eyebrows among pollsters and strategists." He reported that "Democrats took back the Catholic vote they lost in 2004" and "trimmed the GOP advantage among weekly churchgoers, and even gained ground with the most loyal segment of the Republican base: white evangelicals."

"In this year's campaign, same-sex marriage and abortion were less dominant issues than they were two years ago," Fitzgerald wrote. "Postelection analyses also suggest that many religious voters were concerned most about the war in Iraq and corruption in Washington."

[19] For a fuller discussion of these issues, see E. J. Dionne, *Souled Out* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008).

The *Inquirer* writer naturally focused on the U.S. Senate contest in Pennsylvania, where Democrat Bob Casey, an economic progressive and an opponent of abortion, defeated Republican incumbent Rick Santorum, an across-the-board conservative. Fitzgerald noted that Casey "got 59 percent of the Catholic vote against fellow Catholic Santorum, and the Democrat also won a narrow majority of all those who said they attend religious services weekly. Casey won 29 percent of self-described evangelicals." He added that while Bush "carried the Harrisburg television market, which encompasses much of the state's conservative middle, by 34 percentage points over Democratic Sen. John Kerry in 2004," in 2006, "Santorum won that essential Republican turf by just 10 percentage points over Casey, a 24-point shift."

By contrast, Pew's Keeter found that the Democratic Party's gains in the election were "concentrated among non-Christians and secular voters, suggesting that there was a larger political divide between Christians and the rest of American society." Keeter offered ample support for this view: The GOP held on to voters who attend religious services at least once a week (55 percent voted Republican versus 58 percent four years ago). But less frequent churchgoers were much more supportive of Democrats than they were four years ago. Among occasional churchgoers, 59 percent voted Democratic. In 2002, just 51 percent did so. And among those who never go to church, 67 percent voted Democratic—four years ago, only 55 percent did so. Thus, the gap in Democratic support between the most and least religious has grown from 16 percentage points in 2002 to 24 points today.

Republicans, he said, "did very well among white evangelicals: 72 percent voted Republican in races for the U.S. House nationwide, and they gave strong support—about

two thirds or more—to Republican Senate candidates in several key states including Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, and Virginia." These levels of support, he noted, are comparable to those registered by evangelicals in 2004 and in 2002 (about 75 percent for Republican candidates).

As for Bush, his approval rating among evangelicals on Election Day, 2006, "was 70 percent, far higher than in the general electorate." That was down 10 points from its level two years earlier, Keeter noted, "but the decline was no greater among evangelicals than among the rest of the electorate." Evangelicals were clearly more inclined to vote on the old moral issues than other voters. While 59 percent of these voters said that "values issues such as gay marriage and abortion" were "extremely important" to their vote, just 29 percent of other voters said this. Lest there be any doubt about who drove the Democratic victory, Keeter added this: "In fact, the Democratic Party's gains came largely among non-Christians. Democratic House candidates gained 25 points among Jews and 7 points among those of other non-Christian faiths, compared with 2002. They also picked up 10 points among secular voters."

That two intelligent analysts could reach such starkly different conclusions suggests how slippery and controversial the matter of religion and voting has become. But reconciling the two views is not that difficult. Remember, the Inquirer's Fitzgerald claimed only that "a slice" of the religious vote had gone Democratic. Democrats did, in fact, post gains among religious voters in 2006, including white evangelicals. But, as Keeter suggested, Democrats gained even more from less religiously inclined voters.

A fair way to summarize the results is that Keeter is quite right in asserting that the gap between the more and less religious voters actually widened between 2004 and

2006; but the religious gap turned from being a disadvantage to the Democrats into an advantage. They modestly cut their losses among more religious voters (all that new organizing among voters of faith paid off at least to some degree) while at the same time vastly expanding their advantages in the rest of the electorate. Put another way, Republicans did so badly among less religious voters in 2006 that their continuing, if slightly diminished, advantage among the more religious was not enough to save them.

Part of the clue to what happened is the distinction between the affiliation gap and the attendance gap in the vote. In 2006 election, both gaps were in play. As Keeter suggests, the attendance gap expand and did so in the Democrats' favor. And as Fitzgerald noted the affiliation gap also expanded to the benefit of the Democrats as they gained a majority of the white Catholics while expanding their already large majorities among Jews and ethnic minorities.

Much was made among students of religion and politics of 2006 Democratic victories in Ohio, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The first two states supported Bush over Kerry in 2004, and Pennsylvania saw the nomination of a Catholic Democrat opposed to legal abortion. So it's worth examining how much (and also how little) the religious gap changed from the first election to the second in these states.

Ohio, the state on which Bush's Electoral College victory hung, saw a massive swing toward the Democrats, fueled by local Republican corruption, the sharp decline in manufacturing jobs, and the same discontent over Iraq and the Bush administration that affected much of the rest of the nation. Ohio had significant races for both governor and the U.S. Senate, and both jobs shifted from the Republicans to the Democrats. The Democratic nominee for governor, Representative Ted Strickland, was a moderate and

also a Methodist minister who spoke often of his faith. He opposed Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, closely and proudly aligned with the religious conservative movement. In the Senate race, a staunch liberal and tough critic of free trade, Representative Sherrod Brown, opposed Mike DeWine, the moderately conservative incumbent.

Both Democrats swept the state, Strickland with 60 percent of the vote, Brown with 56 percent. Much was made of Strickland's strength among religiously active voters. He won 38 percent among Ohio voters who attended religious services more than once a week, a 7-point gain over Kerry's showing, and 55 percent among those who attended religious services weekly, a 19-point gain. But he did best of all among voters who said they never attended religious services, winning 81 percent of their ballots, an 18-point gain over Kerry. Strickland also did well among occasional church-attenders, winning 68 percent in this group, an 11-point gain on Kerry.

In other words, even though Strickland gained substantial ground on Kerry among religious voters, the attendance gap was actually higher in 2006 because of profound Republican weakness among nonreligious voters. The patterns were similar in Brown's victory, although the gains were generally smaller. Brown did gain as much ground as Strickland did among those who attended religious services more than once a week, somewhat less in the other groups. Interestingly, Brown, the more liberal candidate, ran 7 percentage points behind Strickland among voters who never attended religious services—partly, perhaps, because nonreligious voters were more inclined to cast ballots against the conservative and openly devout Blackwell than against the more moderate DeWine.

In Pennsylvania, as Fitzgerald's account suggests, Democrats were very pleased with the staunchly Catholic Casey's success over the equally staunchly Catholic (and much more conservative) Santorum. But the evidence suggests that Casey's strong showing was built by moderately religious voters or voters who were not religious at all. Casey actually lost marginally from Kerry's showing among voters who attended religious services more than once a week, down 3 points (though this was within the margin of error). He gained 7 points among weekly attenders, but 12 points among occasional attenders and 10 points among those who said they never attended religious services. Casey, like Strickland and Santorum, did best among the nonobservant, securing 78 percent of their ballots. As we have seen, Casey did improve the Democrats' share of the Catholic vote by 8 points, to 59 percent. But he also gained 6 points among Protestants, and a remarkable 14 points among the roughly one tenth of the voters who said they had no religion. As in Ohio, a strongly anti-Republican secular vote played an important role in the Pennsylvania result.

The key Virginia contest between incumbent Republican Senator George Allen and Democrat Jim Webb underscores how political change in 2006 cannot be ascribed simply to religious shifts. Webb won a 50 to 49 percent victory, defeating Allen by just over 7,000 votes out of more than 2.3 million cast. What is striking about the Virginia race is how minor the religious shifts were between 2004 and 2006. Allen's support among white evangelical Christians in the home state of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell was as solid as George W. Bush's had been two years earlier. White evangelicals voted 80–20 for Allen, and his performance was a statistically insignificant single point better that Bush's two years earlier. Allen ran slightly better than Bush among those who

attended religious services more than once a week, slightly worse among weekly attenders. Webb, like Democrats in the other states, gained the most ground on Kerry among the least observant voters—those who attended religious services a few times a year, or never.

These races suggest in 2008, the particular mix of issues, candidates, and the campaigns themselves may determine which party is favored by the affiliation and attendance gaps.[20]

Toward the Future

What about the longer term? As we have seen, American religion can change substantially over a span of decades, and there no reason to suppose that it will remain static for the next several decades. Here three possibilities suggest themselves. The easiest to imagine is the continuation of the present trends. Another approach is to imagine a reversal of those trends, and yet another possibility is to imagine a new kind of trend. Each of these possibilities is worth considering briefly.[21]

A continuation of the present trends would mean the expansion of the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical population. If taken to their logical conclusions, the country would be further polarized between the secular and traditionally religious politics. The attendance gap would deepen within other religious communities to the point that religious affiliation would largely cease to matter politically. Eventually even the pluralist trend would be drawn into these divisions, with the less observant members of ethnic

[20] For evidence on the volatility of many of these religious groups in the early part of the 2008 election cycle, see John C. Green, E.J. Dionne, and Michael Barone, "The Religion Factor in 2008," Faith Angle Conference, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=163).
[21] For a fuller discussion of these possibilities, see Green, *The Faith Factor*, chapter 8.

faiths and new religious communities joining with the Unaffiliated and the observant joining the Evangelicals. This is the kind of future envisioned by the sociologist James Davison Hunter in his book *Culture Wars*.[22] Although few analysts believe that Hunter's analysis is an accurate picture of the contemporary mix of secular and religious politics, this kind of development is certainly possible if the trends of the last sixty years continued for sixty more. However, there is some evidence that the "culture war" approach to politics may have passed its high point and may have begun to decline. In any event, the modest expansion of the attendance gap in the 2006 congressional elections is an illustration of what this possibility would look like.

A reversal of the present situation is another possibility. In effect, this would mean an abatement of the secular and evangelical trends, followed by a reassertion of the affiliation gap in politics. If taken to its logical conclusion, worship attendance (as well as other religious behaviors and beliefs) would cease to be relevant politically. Although the details would surely be different, the situation would resemble the situation in the 1940s and 1960s, where religious belief and behavior reinforced the political connection of religious affiliation. The pluralist trend may encourage new departures in American religion. Such a change might well require a reorientation of the major religious traditions to reduce or reverse the growth of the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical populations. But it would also require different political priorities among religious groups.

There are, in fact, new religious voices calling for such a change in priorities. The best-known examples are among Evangelicals, including Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community, megachurch pastors Rick Warren and Joel Hunter, and Richard Cizik of the

[22] James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars*: *The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

National Association of Evangelicals. Of course, such developments would require similar voices among the unaffiliated population, and indeed, in other religious groups. The modest expansion of the affiliation gap in the 2006 congressional election is an illustration of what this possibility might look like.[23]

The final possibility is for another aspect of religion to become important politically, supplementing religious affiliation in much the same way as religious behavior and beliefs did a few decades ago. Such a change could make the Unaffiliated and Observant Evangelical populations less distinctive politically. Of course, it is difficult to imagine something that has not happened and might not occur for several decades. But for purposes of illustration one might imagine spirituality becoming politicized around an issue like protecting the environment. Certainly there is evidence of such features in American religion, documented by sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who writes about a "subtle reordering" of "how Americans understand the sacred itself," and "a new spirituality of seeking" replacing the "traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places." Others have gone a step farther, such as activist Michael Lerner, who advocates "spiritual Progressives" in politics.[24]

If it is foolish to ignore history, it is equally foolish to assume that history always repeats itself. A particular mix of secular and religious politics has become important in American politics in recent times, but it is not the only possibility. The causes and consequences of the secular and evangelical trends may be give birth to new relationships between religion and politics.

---

[23] For more on these developments, see Dionne, *Souled Out*.
[24] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America after the 1950s* (Berkley, University of California Press, 1998); Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God* (New York, Harper Collins, 2006).