



The 2004 Election

A Matter of Faith?

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Few observers of American politics deny that in recent years religion has come to play an increasingly important role in the nation's elections, especially the presidential election. To some, perhaps many, religion may appear to be a new factor in national politics. But today's focus on religion is really just a variation on what has been a common theme throughout U.S. history. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson had to deal with accusations that he was an atheist; in the late 1800s, William Jennings Bryan invoked biblical themes to support economic policy; in 1928, Al Smith faced anti-Catholic mobs on the campaign trail; in 1960, John F. Kennedy too had to forestall anti-Catholic sentiment that, while muted when compared with what Smith faced in 1928, lingered nonetheless.

Religion, then, has long been a feature in national elections. Yet that does not mean that the religious cleavages of the past correspond to those of the present. Rather, the last thirty years have seen a re-sorting of the parties' electoral coalitions along religious lines. No longer are Democrats and Republicans divided along the old lines, defined by whether they are Catholic or Protestant. Instead of religious *denomination*, the parties are divided by religious *devotional style*—that is, a way of being religious. People who are more devout—regardless of denomination—are more likely to favor the GOP. Obviously, such a statement is a generalization. There are exceptions; notably, as shown

by Eric McDaniel in chapter 12 of this volume, religious devotion among African Americans does not lead them to favor the GOP. And as seen in chapter 13, by Lyman Kellstedt, Corwin Smidt, John Green, and James Guth, there are pockets of support for the Democrats among the devout. Nonetheless, these exceptions almost prove the rule, as Kellstedt and his coauthors also argue that there are few prospects for a religious left movement to rival that on the right.

How did the country reach the point that many voters cast their ballots along devotional rather than denominational lines? How did it get from the denominational fissures laid bare by John F. Kennedy's Catholicism to George W. Bush's "coalition of the religious," which brought together evangelicals and traditionalist Catholics? There are a number of milestones marking the way, with none as prominent as Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign. Carter's candidacy centered on his identity as a personally devout churchgoer who had been "born again." He did not emphasize the content of his beliefs or his denominational affiliation but simply reassured voters that his religious background meant that he was a moral and ethical person.

It is one of the great ironies of American politics that by injecting his personal religiosity into presidential politics, Jimmy Carter—a Democrat—was at the vanguard of the movement that has come to define the Republican Party. Beginning around 1980, pundits and scholars alike began to speak of the New Christian Right as a movement closely associated with the GOP. Religious conservatives' influence within Republican circles increased to the point that in 1992, delegates at the Republican national convention cheered Pat Buchanan's declaration of a culture war in America. While conventional wisdom holds that the Republicans pushed the rhetoric appealing to religious conservatives too far in 1992, Buchanan's once-prominent role in the GOP is nonetheless instructive. As a Catholic with a strong following among evangelical Protestants, Buchanan embodies the cross-denominational nature of the new face of religion in American politics. There is, perhaps, a parallel between Buchanan's failure to rally the nation in 1992 and Barry Goldwater's landslide loss in the 1964 election. Both showed party strategists the outer edge of support for themes that later came to fruition in more moderate form. Goldwater's harsh libertarianism set the stage for the ascendance of Reagan's sunny version of small-government conservatism in 1980. Likewise, Buchanan's incendiary rhetoric paved the way for George W. Bush's more subtle use of language and references to themes that resonated among the growing evangelical base of the GOP while also attracting social conservatives from other religious traditions.

And then came 2004, when religion took center stage. In the immediate wake of Bush's reelection, the pundits were abuzz with the discovery that exit polls showed that a plurality of voters had selected "moral values" as the most important issue affecting their vote. Of those who gave priority to moral values, a strong majority went for Bush. Similarly, many commentators suggested that Bush mobilized the Republicans' socially conservative base by stressing his opposition to gay marriage, which was the subject of referenda in eleven states on election day—including the critical battleground state of Ohio. The moral values interpretation of the election, however, was quickly contested. Op-ed pages were filled with columns debating whether the election of 2004 turned on moral values or whether it was really about the economy, the Iraq war, and terrorism.

The debate over moral values continues in the pages that follow. In chapter 4, Sunshine Hillygus argues that when the electorate is viewed as a whole, moral values hardly seemed to have been a priority for most voters in the 2004 election; instead, it was largely about other issues. Scott Keeter elaborates on that conclusion in chapter 5 by demonstrating that while moral issues like gay marriage and abortion did not matter to most voters, they were very much on the minds of a crucial constituency for the GOP—white evangelical Protestants.

The question of whether the 2004 election hung on moral values is important, if only because it figured so heavily in postelection commentary and for many observers has become the defining theme of the election. Nonetheless, the role of moral values is only a starting point for understanding how religion was woven into the 2004 presidential election. As a primer for the more extensive discussion in the chapters to follow, the remainder of this introductory chapter briefly examines three other ways in which religion left an imprint on the 2004 campaign. Each provides a window into both the present and the likely future role of religion in shaping the American electoral landscape. The first is George W. Bush's *evangelicalism*, the second is John Kerry's *Catholicism*, and the third is Howard Dean's *secularism*.

Bush's Evangelicalism

Viewed from a distance, George W. Bush's religious background broadly resembles that of most American presidents, including his father's. Bush grew up attending establishment Protestant churches within both the Episcopalian and Presbyterian traditions; on marrying his wife, Laura, he formally affiliated with the United Methodist Church. A closer look, however, makes clear that when it comes to religion, Bush is more like Jimmy Carter than his own

father. Bush's faith is better understood through his devotional style than his denomination, for he is an evangelical Christian. Evangelicalism is not a denominational affiliation per se, such as Catholicism or Lutheranism. Rather, evangelicals are defined by their strong emphasis on Bible study and a personal embrace of Jesus Christ, often following a turning point in their life. If there is any doubt about Bush's faith, one need only consult the small library of books and DVDs¹ on the subject that are widely disseminated within the growing evangelical subculture.² As detailed in chapter 10, by Geoffrey Layman and Laura Hussey, Bush is widely thought to have a bond with the evangelical community (or at least among highly committed evangelicals); he is seen as "one of their own." No single moment better captures the connection Bush has made with the evangelical community than a well-known comment he made during a debate in the early stage of the 2000 Republican primaries. When asked to name his favorite political philosopher, Bush paused and then said plainly, "Christ, because he changed my heart." I have no idea whether Bush's response was a cleverly orchestrated effort to establish his bona fides among evangelical voters or simply a spontaneous remark. Whatever the motivation, his comment was pitch-perfect to the evangelical ear.

Because Bush's religion has received a lot of attention, one might assume that his public remarks are replete with religious comments. In fact, statements like his reference to Christ in the 2000 primary season are rare. While Bush does use language with a religious theme in many of his speeches, so have other presidents. Indeed, Bush's religious language is often subtle, consisting of allusions to hymns or phrases used in religious discourse that still have meaning when unmoored from their religious context. Most famously, Bush has often used the term "a culture of life," which he borrowed from Pope John Paul II.

In other words, when speaking to the electorate, Bush's use of religious language is not substantially different from that of other recent presidents. Where Bush differs from his predecessors is in the way that the evangelical community has embraced him; as either a cause or a consequence of that embrace, Bush has directed a lot of attention and resources to mobilizing the

1. Consider the following examples: David Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004); Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004); Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Tarcher, 2003); and *George W. Bush: Faith in the White House* (New York: DVD distributed by Good Times DVD).

2. Smith (1998).

evangelical vote. In the wake of Bush's popular vote loss to Al Gore in 2000, his chief campaign strategist, Karl Rove, even went so far as to suggest publicly that Bush had failed to capitalize on his evangelicalism by not energizing enough evangelicals to get to the polls. Since Rove's words, spoken during a forum sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute in December 2001, are referenced in multiple chapters, they are quoted here:

We probably failed to martial [sic] support among the base as well as we should have. If you look at the model of the electorate, and you look at the model of who voted, the big discrepancy is among self-identified, white, evangelical Protestants, Pentecostals, and fundamentalists. If they were a part of the voters of what they should have been if you had looked at the electoral model, here should have been 19 million of them and instead there were 15 million of them. Just over 4 million of them failed to turn out and vote. And yet they are obviously part of our base. They voted for us, depending on who they were and where they were, by huge margins, 70 and 80 percent margins. And yet 4 million of them didn't turn out to vote that you would have anticipated voting in a normal presidential election year. I think we may have failed to mobilize them.³

This is a remarkable statement given that, as shown by John Green, Lyman Kellstedt, Corwin Smidt, and Jim Guth in chapter 2, traditionalist evangelicals constituted 25 percent of Bush's voting coalition (having given Bush 87 percent of their votes and turned out to vote at a rate exceeded by only Jews and atheists/agnostics, groups that are mere slivers of the population).

However, while evangelicals' identification with Bush is an important aspect of his coalition, its significance at the polls should not be overstated. Just as Catholics had been voting Democratic before John F. Kennedy ran for president, evangelicals had been voting Republican before Bush appeared on the scene. Bush's bond with evangelicals is, then, perhaps analogous to the connection between Kennedy and his fellow Catholics. Such ties are based on a common identity. Because he was universally identified as a Catholic, Kennedy did not need to speak publicly about his Catholicism; because he is widely identified as an evangelical, Bush does not need to say much about his faith.

That Bush himself may not say much about his religion hardly means that religious themes have been absent from the appeals made by the Bush campaign, particularly in 2004. Because religion can be an explosive topic with the potential for alienating voters uncomfortable with overt religious rhetoric, the Republicans narrowly targeted only those voters most likely to respond

3. American Enterprise Institute (2001, p. 5).

positively to such appeals. As Quin Monson and Baxter Oliphant demonstrate in chapter 6, in 2004 the parties employed new technology to accomplish a timeless political strategy—delivering the right message to the most receptive voters. In years past, precinct captains knew their party’s supporters in the neighborhood and made personalized appeals to ensure that they turned out on election day. In a telling sign of the times, technology has replaced the neighborhood precinct captain. The parties draw on extensive databases to learn everything they can about voters: their party registration, marital status, magazine subscriptions, and even church membership. That wealth of information means that direct mail can be designed—the term of art is “microtargeted”—to match voters’ interests. Voters profiled as likely social conservatives because of, say, the church that they attended or the magazines to which they subscribed were targeted to receive campaign mail that highlighted “morality issues,” such as abortion and gay marriage. Even on those potentially inflammatory topics, however, the ad copy is much like the speeches in which Bush invokes religious language: subdued and inclusive. In chapter 7, Quin Monson and I describe how Bush’s ads never described him as opposing marriage for homosexuals; rather, they emphasized his support for traditional marriage. Never was anything derogatory said about homosexuals *per se*.

The reason for the subtlety is no secret. While Bush received strong support from social conservatives, that single constituency was not enough to win a presidential election. He also needed support from voters for whom social issues take a backseat to economic or, especially in 2004, national security issues. These other Bush voters are likely to be social moderates. Even within the social conservative camp, the GOP needs to cast as wide a net as possible, which is why Bush typically avoids specifics on the subject of religion. He can attract the widest possible coalition by finding common cause with those who think of themselves as “religious” rather than adherents of a particular religious tradition. Indeed, the creation of a new coalition that transcends denominational boundaries is what James Davison Hunter originally meant by the term “culture war.”⁴ Hunter was speaking of alliances that link people of orthodox beliefs across denominational lines—whether Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, or followers of other traditions. Take the example of evangelicals and Mormons, which is particularly revealing. These two groups seem to compete for the distinction of being the religious group with the highest level of support for the GOP, even though they have deep theological differences

4. Hunter (1991).

and a history of mutual antagonism. The Republicans have also managed to win considerable support from traditionalist Catholics, who are more important numerically. To think that groups with such long-standing disagreements could unite politically represents a historically remarkable development that is not fully appreciated by many political observers.

Owing to its coalition of the religious, the Republican Party faces a difficult balancing act. On one hand it has at its base a core of evangelical supporters who have been fully incorporated into the internal party apparatus of the GOP and play a role not unlike the role once played by labor unions in the Democratic Party. It is thus extremely unlikely that anyone could ever win the Republican nomination for the presidency without receiving, as it were, the blessing of key evangelical leaders. On the other hand, evangelicals alone do not make for election victories. Successful Republican candidates must also appeal to voters who, while perhaps socially conservative, are not evangelicals themselves. As of this writing, each of the leading contenders for the 2008 Republican nomination has his (to date, they are all men) own particular challenge in achieving a balance between shoring up the evangelical base and reaching beyond it to other voters. John McCain, for example, must convince evangelicals that he did not really mean it when, during the 2000 campaign, he said that certain leaders of the religious right were “agents of intolerance.”⁵ Similarly, Rudy Giuliani must play up his heroic post-9/11 image and play down his social liberalism and marital history. Perhaps the contender with the rockiest religious road to travel is Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. Such a statement may seem puzzling, as Romney would appear to have a lot going for him. After all, he has held firm on gay marriage by convincing the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court that same-sex nuptials should be limited to residents of Massachusetts only; he opposes stem cell research; and, over time, he has become increasingly pro-life on abortion. When his positions on those issues are combined with his business background, his turnaround of the once corruption-ridden Salt Lake City Olympics, and his squeaky-clean private life, it would seem that he deserves a place on the top tier of Republican presidential hopefuls. But whether his bid for the presidency has legs rests on whether evangelicals in the GOP primaries are willing to vote for someone of Romney’s faith. He is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as the Mormons. Even though evangelicals and Mormons share a lot of political ground, in religious terms they are miles apart. To see

5. “Excerpt from McCain’s Speech on Religious Conservatives,” *New York Times*, February 29, 2000, A16.

the gulf that Romney needs to bridge, walk into almost any Christian bookstore, where you will find a shelf of books disparaging his faith as a “cult.” Many of the devout Christians who shop in such bookstores also vote in Republican primaries. Romney’s candidacy therefore will be an interesting test of how far the Republican coalition of the religious extends. Only time will tell whether he will become the Mormons’ Al Smith (who suffered an ignominious defeat, thereby reinforcing the perception that Catholics were viewed with suspicion by the Protestant establishment) or John F. Kennedy (whose victory marked the official acceptance of Catholics into the American mainstream).

Kerry’s Catholicism

Bush’s evangelicalism demonstrates the significance of evangelicals, a relatively new group, to the GOP coalition. The candidacy of John Kerry, on the other hand, demonstrates the exodus from the Democratic coalition of Catholics, a group that was once squarely at its center. There is no better way to analyze the changing Catholic voter than by comparing Kerry in 2004 to Kennedy in 1960, as Matthew Wilson does in chapter 9. As has been widely noted, there are enough uncanny surface parallels between Kennedy and Kerry (not to mention their shared initials) to rival the supposed parallels between Kennedy and Lincoln. Both Kennedy and Kerry were highly decorated military veterans serving as Democratic senators in Massachusetts. Even more important, both were Catholic. It is almost as though the Democratic Party decided to run a controlled experiment to compare the electoral fortunes of a Catholic candidate in 1960 and 2004. As described by Wilson in his chapter, since 1960 the Catholic electorate has undergone a dramatic shift. While Kennedy—hardly a model of Catholic piety—took a stratospheric 82 percent of the Catholic vote, Kerry took less than 50 percent. In other words, Kerry did no better among Catholics than among the population as a whole. That probably says more about contemporary American Catholics than about Kerry, since that was about the same share of the Catholic vote won by Al Gore in 2000. Catholics have so fully assimilated into the larger American culture that they are no longer a distinctive political group. Even more significant is that Bush actually beat Kerry—by a long shot—among churchgoing Catholics, taking 74 percent of their votes. Here again is evidence that the salient religious divide in America is no longer defined by denomination but by devotion. If Al Smith or John F. Kennedy had been told that one day an evangelical Protestant would attract a majority of votes from churchgoing Catholics, they undoubtedly would have laughed the prediction away.

As Wilson compellingly argues, Catholic voters have changed because they no longer see their attachment to the Democratic Party as a matter of group loyalty. Today's Catholics are far more likely to vote on the basis of issues rather than the legacy of an institutional connection to the party that historically had been their political home, at least in part because Catholics often were of low socioeconomic status. While some of the Catholic shift is owed to the rising socioeconomic status of American Catholics, the fact that churchgoing Catholics vote Republican to a greater extent than nominal Catholics suggests that the devotional divide applies to Catholics as well as Protestants.

Will the Democrats ever be able to win back the Catholic vote? Barring a political earthquake, it appears that the same devotional divide found within the general electorate will continue to be replicated among Catholics, at least in the short to medium term and at least among Anglo whites. Latinos, however, are a fascinating and important exception. Latino Catholics, who because of immigration and high birth rates are an increasing share of the overall American Catholic population, lean heavily Democratic—just like earlier waves of immigrant Irish, Italians, and Poles. At the same time, Latino evangelicals look more like Anglo evangelicals than other Latinos. As David Leal explains in chapter 11, which discusses religious influences on the Latino vote, Latino Catholics supported Kerry while Latino evangelicals favored Bush. The Latino example is a reminder that today, neither religion nor ethnicity is political destiny.

Dean's Secularism

The final religious theme from the 2004 election comes not from the general election but from Howard Dean's failed campaign for the Democratic nomination. What makes Dean interesting is not the religion that he professes but the perception that he is not very religious at all. Next to Bush's evangelicalism and Kerry's Catholicism, Dean's perceived secularism—and the reaction to it—is equally revealing about the role of religion in the American electoral process.

The arc of Dean's rise and fall should be familiar to students of presidential primaries: a fresh face appears on the national stage, only to stumble in the early stage of the primaries, never to recover. Dean had a meteoric rise to the top of the Democratic charts, followed by a fall of Shakespearean proportions. While many people remember the infamous Dean scream as the ostensible reason for his implosion, the reality is that underlying the reaction to the scream was a lot of uneasiness about Dean among leading Democrats. Long before his holler made him the butt of late-night comedians' jokes, many

prominent Democrats had expressed concern that he was unelectable because he was too liberal. Tied up in the indictment of Dean's liberalism were related accusations that he was too secular to win in the heartland. In January 2004, the *New Republic* put Dean on its cover and said that he had a "religion problem." More accurately, Dean could be said to have an *irreligion* problem: Franklin Foer labeled him as "one of the most secular candidates to run for president in modern history."⁶

My point is not to delve into Dean's religious background or the question of whether his religious beliefs had any bearing on whether he would make a good president. What matters is the belief among some prominent Democrats that a winning presidential candidate must not be perceived as too secular. To quote Foer again: "One day, a truly secular candidate might be able to run for president without suffering at the polls. But that day won't be soon."

Dean's popularity with the Democratic base, coupled with uneasiness about his perceived secularism, underscores the dilemma facing Democrats. Just as the Republicans need to be careful that their core evangelical supporters do not push the GOP too far in an overtly religious direction, so the Democrats need to be careful that their secular base does not alienate religious moderates who, as shown by Kellstedt and his coauthors, constitute a sizable share of Democratic supporters. Some in the Democratic Party see a hopeful model for reconciling these two countervailing forces in the recent campaign of Virginia governor Tim Kaine. Kaine, a Mass-attending Catholic Democrat, won convincingly in the red state of Virginia, at least in part by highlighting his background as a missionary overseas. Perhaps even more important, he couched some of his more controversial, liberal-leaning policy positions in religious terms. When criticized by his Republican opponent for opposing capital punishment, he ran television ads in which he said, "My faith teaches life is sacred. That's why I personally oppose the death penalty."⁷

As in any election, there are many reasons why this particular candidate won that particular race, including the fact that he ran in the wake of a popular Democratic predecessor. It is therefore difficult to know the extent to which his religious background was a factor in the election. Perhaps the most judicious conclusion is that it certainly did him no harm and likely did him some good.

Inevitably, two consecutive losing presidential bids have led the Democratic Party to search for a winning strategy in 2008. Should the "Kaine model"

6. Foer (2003–04).

7. Dao (2005, p. A23).

come to be seen as the way forward by the Democratic rank and file, the attention paid to religion in 2008 will dwarf the attention it received in 2004. If so, perhaps the devotional divide will cease to be the salient cleavage that it has been in recent presidential contests.

Perhaps. The Democrats, however, are a long way from endorsing the Kaine model, and any such prediction is extremely premature. As shown by John Green and John Jackson in their chapter on delegates to the 2004 party conventions, the Democrats have a strongly secular base, many of whom will presumably object to using religious language for *any* purpose—including the advocacy of traditionally liberal positions. Even among the many devout Americans who vote Democratic, there is an almost palpable reluctance to employ religion in the service of electoral politics. The more likely scenario for 2008 therefore is the continuation of the trend observed in 2004—and in 2000, 1996, 1992, and before. The Republican Party will be the one to use overt displays of religiosity, phrased to include all Judeo-Christian faiths but nonetheless having evangelical undertones. In that case, the devotional divide will continue and likely deepen.

A Guide to the Book

The three themes highlighted here hardly exhaust the ways in which religion worked its way into the 2004 presidential election. But I hope that they have whetted the reader's appetite for a deeper discussion of whether the 2004 contest was "a matter of faith," which is the central question of the chapters to follow. The remainder of the book begins with a section entitled "The Big Picture," which includes two chapters that scan the horizon of the 2004 electoral landscape. First is "How the Faithful Voted," by John Green, Lyman Kellstedt, Corwin Smidt, and James Guth. These four scholars draw on the Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, the single best source of data on how religion relates to the political choices of the mass public, to lay out the facts of who voted for whom. John Green and John Jackson then provide a complementary chapter on religion and the 2004 party activists, namely the delegates to the Republican and Democratic national conventions. Next is a section entitled "The Moral Values Election?" which centers on the debate over the degree to which moral values determined the outcome of the 2004 contest. First, Sunshine Hillygus reminds readers that moral values were hardly the only thing on voters' minds in 2004, while Scott Keeter demonstrates that, of those who were thinking of moral values, many were evangelicals. These two chapters offer a thorough discussion of the debate over moral values in 2004. As the

specifics of that debate fade in years to come, these two chapters will remind readers of how moral values did or did not matter in 2004.

The third section, “Mobilizing the Faithful,” delves into the specifics of how religious conservatives were mobilized in 2004. As noted, one tactic that came to the fore during 2004 was the use of highly targeted direct mail appeals. Using an innovative new survey, J. Quin Monson and Baxter Oliphant detail how and how often those appeals used moral and religious themes. The following chapter, by J. Quin Monson and me, is a case study of how the appeals actually affected the 2004 vote. It shows that contrary to the opinions expressed by a number of political scientists in the immediate wake of the election, gay marriage was a key issue in the vote for Bush. Barbara Norrander and Jan Norrander then explore public opinion on stem cell research, which, because it parallels the abortion debate, has the potential to be a divisive issue with staying power.

In the fourth section, “Religious Constituencies,” the book narrows the focus to specific religious groups, with chapters on the voting behavior of different segments of the population. Matthew Wilson uses the contrast between the sharply divergent experiences of John F. Kennedy in 1960 and John Kerry in 2004 as a lens through which to view the changing political allegiances of American Catholics. Geoffrey Layman and Laura Hussey present another story of change over time as they highlight the growing allegiance of evangelicals to both the Republican Party and George W. Bush. David Leal and Eric McDaniel then add ethnicity and race as further dimensions to the story of religion in American politics. Leal explains how religion affected the Latino vote in 2004, while McDaniel discusses the politics of the black church. In the final chapter in this section, Kellstedt, Smidt, Green, and Guth examine one of the more intriguing topics in the volume: the prospects for a religious left movement to counterbalance the religious right.

The book concludes with a chapter by David Legee, who interprets the preceding chapters through a variety of theoretical lenses and offers recommendations for a future research agenda to explore the intersection of voting behavior, religion, and politics.

What, then, can the reader expect to learn from this book? For the most part, the authors concur that the 2004 election *was* a matter of faith, although there are some healthy differences of opinion on the degree to which faith mattered. Religion thus endures as a theme in the politics of the present, as it has been in the past. And by all indications, religion’s influence seems likely to persist into the future. As we look forward to 2008 and beyond, any attempt to understand the direction of American presidential politics without accounting for the religious factor will be incomplete at best—and futile at worst.