



Do Religious Voters Still Matter?

The answer to the above question is an emphatic “Yes.” Evangelical Protestant voters account for 40 percent of U.S. Republican primary voters. Catholic voters account for about 25 percent of the entire electorate, and over half of these Catholics voted for Romney in 2012. Furthermore, Jewish voters play a critical role in certain key states. Although the majority of voters, especially young voters, are secular and may be repelled by the so-called “Religious Right,” a Republican candidate seeking the party’s nomination cannot win without the religious vote and will not win the general election if religious voters do not go to the polls.¹

On the other hand, religiously motivated voters by themselves cannot win presidential elections. In 2012, Mitt Romney won overwhelmingly the evangelical Protestant vote, and he took the majority of the Catholic vote, but he lost the general election. The dilemma for the Republican Party is that it cannot desert social issues, but at the same time many voters, including independents, are less concerned about social issues than they are with economic and national security issues. The Republican Party needs to maintain a strong stance on social issues, remaining anti-abortion and defending religious freedom, without alienating voters less interested in these issues.

Republicans: An Uneasy Coalition

The Republican ascendancy began in the late 1970s and continued through 2008 by persuading religious voters—evangelical Protestants and many Catholics—that the Democratic Party no longer reflected their interests. Mobilizing evangelical Protestants, traditional Catholics and Mormons, the Republican Party expanded its voter base and made the once-Democratic stronghold of the South into a GOP stronghold.² The key to this success lay in focusing on issues such as abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment and gay marriage.

The emergence of the Religious Right came with costs. Democrats, the media and pundits attacked Republicans as

religious zealots, theocrats and racial bigots. It did not seem to matter to those making these charges that many African Americans were evangelical voters, albeit aligned with Democrats. Democrats exploited a theme that Republicans were hypocrites when it came to proclaiming themselves for small government. Democrats asked, “If Republicans want small government, why are they insisting that the federal government enter America’s bedrooms?”

At the same time, tensions within the Republican Party grew between social conservatives and economic conservatives. These tensions were especially pronounced in upper-income suburbs, which went heavily for Obama in 2008. Of course, not all of this swing in the suburbs should be attributed to hostility towards the evangelical right, but many of the affluent suburban voters were secular in outlook.

Since long before Republicans mobilized religious voters, American politics has been about putting together coalitions. For example, the Whig Party in the antebellum period was composed of a coalition of Christian reformers, manufacturers, pro-bank politicians and slaveholders in the South. Eventually the coalition fell apart over slavery and the Whig Party collapsed. The Republican Party which then emerged remained an uneasy coalition of anti-slavery, largely evangelical Protestants, and pro-business interests. This coalition remained steadfast in its opposition to slavery and the South following the Civil War. “Waving the Bloody Flag” against Democrats accused of being pro-Confederate during the Civil War continued well into the late 19th century. Throughout the late 19th century and into the early 20th century the Republican Party included evangelical Christian voters, establishment Lutherans and Episcopalians, and manufacturing interests—all at odds over a range of issues including alcohol temperance, women’s suffrage, gambling prohibition and immigration.

The Republican Party today reflects similar divisions. Although religious voters remain a potent force within the political arena, running just on social issues is likely not enough to win the presidential primary or the White

House in 2016. Social issues cannot be ignored, however. Evangelical Christian voters are especially important in early primary states such as Iowa and Super Tuesday primaries in the South. While issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage should be addressed by candidates, social issues should not distract from focusing on economic and national security issues. Religious voters still rank the economy and national security issues as their highest concerns.

Can the Evangelical Base Be Expanded?

Candidates running only on social issues can sometimes win a few presidential primary states. Rick Santorum and Mike Huckabee showed this in previous primaries. It is doubtful, however, that a candidate running mainly on social issues or a Christian identity can win the nomination or a general election. Of course, Ben Carson might prove past political wisdom wrong. The problem for such a candidate, though, is that many voters increasingly consider themselves secular. If Republicans could expand the evangelical Protestant or traditional Catholic voter base, they would not have any problem in the general election. Some evangelical Christian political activists such as Ralph Reed, director of Faith and Freedom Coalition, believe that a huge reservoir of Christian potential voters are out there waiting to be tapped for the next election. He has been joined in this argument by Mike Huckabee.³ They note correctly that more than 50 percent of evangelical Christians did not vote in the last presidential election.

This argument presumes that even if all these evangelical voters did bother to vote, most were going to vote Republican. Many evangelical Christians are African Americans or Hispanics, who are not necessarily Republican voters. Furthermore, the evangelical turnout in key swing states such as Florida and Ohio ranged between 75 and 80 percent, the highest turnout of any segment of the electorate. These evangelical Christian voters went overwhelmingly for Mitt Romney, a Mormon. Most of the missing voters who did not turn out were not evangelical Christians, but working-class whites primarily in industrial northern states.

If it is arguable whether the evangelical voter base can be expanded, two things are certain: 1) the overall electorate is becoming more secular; and 2) evangelical Protestants and traditional Catholics cannot be written off by any Republican presidential candidate.

The Growing Secular Electorate

In May 2014 the Pew Research Center released the results of an extensive survey of religion in America that showed a continuing rapid decline of the Christian share of the

U.S. population.⁴ This decline in U.S. adults identifying themselves with any organized Christian (or Jewish) religion confirmed an earlier 2007 study conducted by Pew. Although Americans remain the most religious people in Western society, those describing themselves as Christian dropped nearly 8 percent from the previous 2007 study. Roughly seven in ten Americans identify themselves as affiliated with a religious denomination. Those identifying themselves as atheists, agnostics or nothing in particular have grown to 28 percent. The greatest decline has been in mainline Protestant churches and Catholic churches. The rapid growth in evangelical membership in the late 20th century has leveled, and evangelical Protestant church membership is no longer growing.

In America today there are about 36 million people who belong to mainline Protestant churches, about 60 million evangelical church members, and about 51 million Roman Catholics. Approximately 178 million Americans belong to Christian churches.

This decline in church membership is spread across age groups, income levels and regions. Nearly a third of Generation Xers, those who came of age in the 1990s, consider themselves atheists or agnostics. Nearly one in five adults who grew up Christian now identify with no religion. In the South today, 19 percent of adults list themselves as unaffiliated. Similar numbers are found in the Midwest, where about 20 percent of the adult populations say they are unaffiliated. Unaffiliated adults are even higher in the Northeast (25 percent) and the West (28 percent).

Especially disconcerting is the far more precipitous decline in religious affiliation among the young. Most 18- to 25-year-old millennials are religiously unaffiliated. Many consider themselves conscious atheists. Nonetheless, not all is dismal in this age cohort. Close to 50 percent of millennials are affiliated with a church. Overall, 16 percent are Catholic, 11 percent mainline Protestant, and 20 percent evangelical Protestant.

Not All Is Lost

No doubt, American Christianity appears in decline. Certainly the culture and the American people at this point are more secular. Protestants are no longer the majority of the population. Still, America remains a highly religious people. Often overlooked by many in the media, Hollywood and some progressive circles, 70 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians. Moreover, three in ten Americans identify themselves as born-again Christians. Close to 70 percent of recent immigrants describe themselves as Christian.

Christians are relatively conservative on social issues. The Pew Study found that 38 percent of evangelical Protestants oppose same-sex marriage, compared to 33 percent of white Catholics and 33 percent of Hispanic Catholics. Black and Hispanic Protestants are even more opposed to same-sex marriage.

If religious affiliation is declining generally in the U.S., the many who are religious are voting more Republican than ever. Evangelical Protestants, including young white evangelicals, mostly consider themselves Republican. Among those over 30 years of age who consider themselves evangelical Protestants, close to 70 percent will vote Republican. White Catholics, old and young, are leaning more Republican. Fifty-four percent of white Catholics under 30 now consider themselves Republican. For Catholics over 30 years of age, 49 percent are Republican to 43 percent Democratic. (Yes, for those readers not numbed by the numbers, you read it correctly: More younger Catholics are voting Republican than older Catholics.) Older Catholics might harbor fond memories of FDR and JFK, but for younger Catholics they are ancient history.

Religious voters—evangelical Protestants, traditional Catholics and Mormons—remain essential to the Republican Party. The February caucuses and primaries to be held in Iowa and New Hampshire are a case in point. In Iowa, 38 percent of the voters identified themselves in the 2012 presidential election as evangelical. In New Hampshire, a more moderate Republican electorate, 12 percent identified themselves as evangelical Protestant. These primary states will be followed by a wave of primaries in March.

A glance at the states holding March primaries reveals the importance of the evangelical Protestant vote, based on exit polls in 2012:

Alabama: 47 percent evangelical

Minnesota: 23 percent evangelical

North Carolina: 35 percent evangelical

Virginia: 23 percent evangelical

Mississippi: 50 percent evangelical

Michigan: 28 percent evangelical

Ohio: 31 percent evangelical

Florida: 24 percent evangelical

Illinois: 20 percent evangelical

Missouri: 37 percent evangelical

Not all of these evangelical Christians vote Republican. These 2012 exit polls included all voters, Republican and

Democratic, white, black and Hispanic.⁵ African-American evangelical Protestants tend to vote Democratic. But most white evangelical Protestants do vote Republican.

Arise Ye Faithful

Most religious voters express anxiety about their place in American society, which is becoming more secular. In the late 1970s, Republicans tapped into a similar anxiety among religious Americans, which translated into votes. Traditional Catholics, evangelical Christians and Mormons felt under attack—as well they should have. Supreme Court decisions banning prayer in public school and the legalization of abortion were especially upsetting to many traditional Christians and Jews. Rising divorce rates and heavy drug and alcohol abuse suggested cultural decay in society. The rise of radical feminism and the war on “stay-at-home” mothers and traditional marriage increased this sense of alienation. Evangelical Protestants and Catholics, once the linchpin of the Democratic Party, deserted their party loyalty and switched to the Republican Party.

This anxiety has not abated, and recent actions legalizing marijuana in states such as Washington and Colorado, the Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalizing same-sex marriage, and the continued decline of the traditional family has intensified concerns among traditional Christian, as well as traditional Jewish, religious voters. The assault on Christian symbols in public places, political correctness that discourages sales clerks, teachers and government officials from saying “Merry Christmas,” college campus bans on Christian groups that refuse to allow the election of leaders who do not accept same-sex marriage, and anti-Christian movies and TV programs have angered many Christians.

In the 2012 presidential election, Republican candidate Mitt Romney won 76 percent of the “Born-Again/Evangelical Vote.” This equaled George W. Bush’s percentage in 2004 and upped John McCain’s 73 percent share of the evangelical vote. At the same time, Barack Obama’s support among evangelical Christians dropped 6 points from 26 percent in 2008 to 20 percent in 2012. Even this drop is skewed by the large number of black evangelical Protestants who continued to vote Democratic. The greatest share of pro-Romney evangelical Protestant votes, unfortunately, came in reliable red states and declined in purple and blue states. Furthermore, Romney won the Catholic vote. For the first time in modern American politics, the candidate who won the Catholic vote did not win the White House. The fact that Catholics voted Republican against an incumbent president revealed that Republicans at last can begin to count on the Catholic vote, especially if they can pick up more Hispanic votes.

The sweep of Republican victories in the 2014 midterms shows how solid social conservative candidates can win elections. Victorious candidates such as David Perdue in Georgia, Tom Cotton in Arkansas, Cory Gardner in Colorado, and Joni Ernst in Iowa won their Senate races as conservatives not backing away from social issues. Attempts by Democratic candidates to attack their conservative Republican opponents as religious zealots backfired. Why? Republican candidates did not back down on social issues, but focused as well on the economy, job creation and, to a lesser degree, national security. These are the major issues that are of most concern to all voters.

In the end, Americans want a well-ordered, prosperous society. Religion is essential to a well-ordered society. Christian conservatives understand this. They are voting in large numbers and will continue to vote in large numbers. There is much reason to be optimistic about the continuing importance of religious voters in American politics.

So in this season of joy, let's vow to cast an informed vote and to heartily wish everyone a Merry Christmas.

Oh Holy Night

The late Dean Clarence Manion of Notre Dame Law School wrote long ago: "When Jesus Christ was born [over] 2,000 years ago, the long march of measured time suddenly stopped. It then did an about-face and started to march in another direction and to a different drum, straight through the ensuing centuries of Christ and Christendom." Like other important anniversaries camouflaged by our news media, the real enduring significance of Christmas will not be fully explained in the news organs of 2015. Nonetheless, as Dean Manion pointed out, "B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini, the Year of the Lord) mark each one of the only reliable milestones along the path of world history. The end of the first time-chain, and the beginning of the second, came together on the night that Christ was born in Bethlehem. The first Christmas Day thus stands as the Great Divide for the timing and recording of all people, things and events that have lived or taken place on this earth."

*On that Holy Night,
the magnetic needle of history stood vertical,
pointing up. It was the night when
mankind would forever note that history
reversed direction.*

The Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation wishes all of you a most blessed Christmas season.

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- 1 Pew Research Center, "How the Faithful Voted: 2012 Preliminary Analysis, November 7, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/11/07/how-the-faithful-voted-2012-preliminary-exit-poll-analysis/>.
 - 2 Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).
 - 3 Napp Nazworth, "Huckabee: If 10 Percent More Evangelicals Had Voted, Obama Would Not be President," *Christian Post*, September 27, 2014. Also, "Your Vote Matters," *Providence Forum*, June 29, 2015.
 - 4 Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015.
 - 5 These numbers can be found in Gallup Research, "Election Polls: Historical Trends," <http://www.gallup.com/polls>.
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POPE FRANCIS, CAPITALISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE. Our Argentine pope's focus on helping the poor is admirable, but his sharp criticism of capitalism indicates a limited understanding of the power of free markets to lift people out of poverty. Ask for 11/15

A NEW CRACKDOWN ON CHINESE CHRISTIANS. Chinese Communist government leaders, long deeply suspicious of Christianity and other religions, have ordered the destruction of more than 400 church crosses and the demolition of more than 60 Christian churches in 2014 and 2015. Catholic and Protestant clergy and worshippers in China have strongly protested. Despite the history of persecution, there appear to be more Christians than Communist Party members in China. Ask for 10/15

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