

Faith in the Vote

Religiosity and the presidential election

By John C. Green, James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt and Corwin E. Smidt

The 2000 presidential race will be remembered not only as one of the closest in American history, but also for the unusual prominence of religion in the campaign. From George W. Bush's proclamation of Jesus Christ as his favorite political philosopher to Joseph Lieberman's quotes from Hebrew Scriptures, religious rhetoric played an important role in appealing to America's diverse faiths.

But how did the faithful vote? A just completed national survey, conducted at the University of Akron as part of a larger project of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, offers some answers to this question, revealing old and new patterns. Longstanding political differences among the religious groups undergirded support for George Bush and Al Gore, as did increased polarization among the faithful. Both factors contributed to the closeness of the contest.

The Bush vote was substantially an alliance among observant white Christians, led by evangelical Protestants, and joined by less observant white Protestants. Together, these groups made up about three-quarters of the Texas Governor's total. In contrast, the Gore vote was essentially a coalition of minority faiths, especially black Protestants, plus secular voters and less observant white Christians. In total, these groups accounted for about three out of four of the Vice President's ballots.

John C. Green is professor of political science, University of Akron. James L. Guth is professor of political science, Furman University. Lyman A. Kellstedt is professor of political science, Wheaton College. Corwin E. Smidt is professor of political science, Calvin College.



The great diversity of American religious faiths can be captured in two politically relevant ways: by religious tradition and religious commitment. Four large religious traditions are commonly recognized: evangelical, mainline and black Protestants, and Roman Catholics. Another large group is the secular population, a group not affiliated with organized religion but analogous to a religious tradition. Other groups considered here are other Christians (such as Mormons, Eastern Orthodox, Christian Scientists, Unitarian/Universalists) and Jews. Although they do not constitute a separate religious tradition, Hispanic Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) are also included because their voting behavior differs from their white counterparts.

Religious traditions influence the vote by shaping their members' values and providing them with information on issues. Religious commitment can have an independent impact on the vote as well. For example, regular worship attenders often have more conservative values and issue positions than their less observant co-religionists. They are also more likely to vote, partly because of their greater social involvement and partly because they are easier targets for electioneering.

Table 1 reports the two-party presidential vote in 2000 for the groups identified above. The Republicans received especially strong support from white Protestants. For example, 84% of regularly attending evangelicals voted for Bush. This

Table 1

Religious Tradition and Commitment Influence Candidate Choice

	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Gore</i>		<i>Bush</i>	<i>Gore</i>
White Evangelical Protestants			Black Protestants	4%	96%
<i>Regular worship attenders</i>	84%	16%	Hispanic Christians	30	70
<i>Less regular worship attenders</i>	55	45	Other Christians (n=91) ¹	52	48
White Mainline Protestants			Jews (n=72) ¹	23	77
<i>Regular worship attenders</i>	66	34	Seculars	35	65
<i>Less regular worship attenders</i>	57	43			
White Roman Catholics					
<i>Regular worship attenders</i>	57	43			
<i>Less regular worship attenders</i>	41	59			

¹Category contains less than 100 respondent interviews. Use caution in generalizing vote margins to respective groups in the US population.

Note: Asked of survey respondents who were first interviewed in early 2000. Two-party presidential vote; minor party votes excluded.

Source: Survey by the University of Akron Survey Research Center for the Ethics and Public Policy Center, November 10-December 15, 2000.

figure was even higher than in 1996, when Bob Dole received 70% of their votes. Observant white mainline Protestants were also strongly Republican, backing Bush with 66%, a margin that also grew from Dole's 58% in 1996.

Less regularly attending white evangelical and mainline Protestants resembled each other, backing Bush by 55% and 57%, respectively. These figures also increased over 1996, when Bob Dole and Bill Clinton nearly tied among these voters (some surveys showed the Democrats prevailing by small margins).

White Catholics were more evenly divided than evangelicals or mainline Protestants. Regular attenders supported Bush with 57%, while the less regular backed Gore with 59%. These patterns were even stronger than in 1996, when Dole won the former and Clinton the latter.

Bush edged Gore among other Christians, 52% to 48%. This division reflects the diversity of faiths in this category, which includes both Mormons (who tend to vote Republican) and Unitarians (who tend to vote Democratic).

Black Protestants were the strongest Democratic group, giving Gore 96% of their votes. This margin differed little from 1996, but increased turnout benefited the Democrats. (The overall Republican vote among African Americans fell into the single digits.) The Democrats also won the Hispanic Christian vote with 70% support, roughly the same proportion as in the previous election, despite Bush's purported appeal to this group.

Jews were also strong Gore supporters. Unfortunately, given the small number of Jews in the survey, it is difficult to know for certain what effect Joseph Lieberman, the first Jewish vice presidential nominee, had on Jewish support for the Democratic ticket. Finally, secular voters strongly backed Gore with 65%, a margin quite similar to their vote for Clinton four years before.

Table 2 reports these same data, but from a different perspective: as a percentage of each candidate's total ballots.

For Bush, observant white evangelical Protestants were by far the most

important group, accounting for almost one-third of his vote total. Less observant white evangelicals made a more modest contribution of 8%. Taken together, the evangelical tradition provided two-fifths of Bush's popular vote.

Each white mainline Protestant group accounted for about one-tenth of the Bush vote, combining for one-fifth of the total. White Catholics also made up one-fifth, with the observant providing one-eighth and the less observant about one-twelfth. Seculars contributed only one-tenth of the Bush vote, and all the remaining groups combined for one-twelfth.

Looked at another way, evangelicals were the dominant group in the Republican presidential coalition. Only by combining all white mainline Protestants and Catholics does one equal the support provided by evangelicals. Regular church attenders were also dominant: all the observant white Christians combined for more than one-half of Bush's ballots, while the sum of all less observant groups made up about one-quarter—or exactly half as much.

Table 2

Candidate Coalitions Reveal Sharp Divisions

	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Gore</i>	<i>All Voters</i>		<i>Bush</i>	<i>Gore</i>	<i>All Voters</i>
White Evangelical Protestants							
<i>Regular worship attenders</i>	32%	6%	19%	Black Protestants	1%	19%	10%
<i>Less regular worship attenders</i>	8	7	7	Hispanic Christians	2	6	5
White Mainline Protestants				Other Christians (n=91) ¹	4	3	4
<i>Regular worship attenders</i>	10	5	7	Jews (n=72) ¹	1	5	3
<i>Less regular worship attenders</i>	11	8	10	Seculars	11	19	15
White Roman Catholics							
<i>Regular worship attenders</i>	12	9	10				
<i>Less regular worship attenders</i>	8	11	9				

¹Category contains less than 100 respondent interviews. Use caution in generalizing candidate support to respective groups in the US population.

Note: Asked of survey respondents who were first interviewed in early 2000. Other non-Christians excluded from table.

Source: Survey by the University of Akron Survey Research Center for the Ethics and Public Policy Center, November 10-December 15, 2000.

The religious composition of the Gore vote presents a sharp contrast. Black Protestants and seculars were significant Democratic constituencies, each accounting for about one-fifth of the total. Jews made up one-twentieth, and Hispanic Christians and other Christians combined for about one-tenth of the Gore total.

Gore's support from white Catholics, one-fifth of his total, was the same as Bush's. And the impact of worship attendance was almost the mirror image, with regular attenders providing slightly less, and less regular attenders slightly more, than one-tenth of the Gore vote. Gore received less support from the white Protestant groups. White mainliners and evangelicals each contributed less than one-seventh of his ballots, with the less observant somewhat more numerous.

In sum, there was no dominant group in the Democratic presidential coalition. All the less observant white Christians summed to one-quarter of all Democratic ballots, a little more than either black Protestants or seculars.

And observant white Christians accounted for one-fifth of the Gore total, equaling the impact of black Protestants or seculars.

These findings persist even when other important demographic factors, such as gender, income and education are taken into account, revealing the basic religious underpinnings of the presidential vote. Bush and Gore successfully mobilized the core religious constituencies of their respective parties, and in the process further polarized the faithful.

The Republican's deft handling of traditional moral issues, from abortion to presidential scandals, helped attract observant white Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, while at the same time gaining support among less observant white Protestants. But the narrowness of this religious alliance nearly cost Bush the election: he lost New Mexico, Oregon, Iowa, and Wisconsin by tiny margins—and faced a contested result in Florida. Indeed, if Bush had done as well as Bob Dole among black

Protestants and Hispanics, he could have won the popular as well as the electoral vote.

In contrast, the Democrats used other moral questions, including appeals to racial, environmental and social justice interests, to rouse key groups, including black Protestants, seculars, and less observant white Christians. But here, too, the limitations of Gore's religious coalition created problems. Partly because of his weakness among white Protestants, Gore lost his home state of Tennessee, Bill Clinton's Arkansas, and the Democratic stronghold of West Virginia. Victory in any of these states would have given Gore a majority in the Electoral College, no matter how the contested ballots in Florida were resolved.

Thus, old patterns of religious group voting and a new polarization of the faithful help explain the closeness of the 2000 election. America's many faiths were part of the divisions revealed at the ballot box, reflecting the unusual prominence of religion in the campaign. ●