

Keeping the Faith

How Progressives Can Connect With
People of Faith

The Problem

- 2000 Exit Polls: Bush beat Gore 61-38 among Americans saying they attended religious services more than once a week (15 % of the electorate), and won by 56-42 among those saying they attended services once a week (28% of the electorate).
- 2002 Exit Polls: Republican Congressional candidates beat Democratic candidates 61-37 among the more-than-once-a-week category (16% of the electorate) and by 57-41 in the once-a-week category (29 % of the electorate)
- White voters identifying themselves with the “Religious Right” rose from 15% of the electorate in 2000 to 20% in 2002.
- Note: Not a “Clinton Problem!” And the Religious Right has not gone away.

Not an Intractable Problem

- According to a 2000 Pew study, when asked which party is most concerned with protecting religious values, 39% said Republicans, 30% said Democrats, 31% said “neither.” Among Independents, it was 33% Republicans, 28% Democrats, 39% “neither.”
- In 1996, an identical survey showed a 45-26 margin for Republicans among Independent voters.
- In other words, Republicans are not intractably identified as the “home” for people of faith.

Many Mansions

- Don't believe the stereotypes. There's no such thing as the "Catholic vote" or the "evangelical vote." Religious Americans are more diverse and nuanced than generalizations allow.
- Catholics are divided almost evenly between "traditionalists" and "moderns." Gore won by 59-41 among white "modern" Catholics. Gore also won Hispanic Catholics 76-24.
- Frequency of attendance can be more important than denomination. Bush won only 55% of "less observant" white evangelical Protestants, but won 66% of "more observant" white mainline Protestants.

Targets for Success

- There are two big groups of religious Americans who represent swing voter categories that Democratic might target:
- “Freestyle Evangelicals”—40% of evangelical Christians, 10% of the population—heavily suburban, socially conservative, politically independent
- “Convertible Catholics”—culturally moderate-to-conservative, strong commitment to social justice
- Hispanic Catholics: big target for GOP, but still heavily Democratic; strongly concerned about education and economic opportunity

Rules for Religious Expression

- Silence is not golden. 70% of Americans agree it's important for a president to have strong religious beliefs. If you are a person of faith, don't keep it a secret
- But also don't be conspicuously pious: 50% of Americans aren't comfortable "when politicians discuss how religious they are."
- Good indicator of the right balance: by a 63-24 margin (58-29 among Independents), Americans "like the way George W. Bush talks in public about his religious beliefs."

Use of Religious Language

- The issue is not whether religious language can be used in politics, but how.
- Natural use of scriptural language and allegories connects with people of faith
- Identify with faith, not with a particular religious point of view
- Connect policies with religious values: e.g., protecting the environment promotes stewardship of “God’s green earth;” we “honor our fathers and mothers” by working for retirement security.
- Think “inclusion.” Language that acknowledges a common ground of values underlying different policies can reduce religion-based opposition while exposing the extremism of conservatives.

Scratching the Itch

- Voter fears about Democrats and religion are often motivated by concerns about our willingness to reflect and promote their basic values. Identify and address those concerns wherever possible. For example:
 - Express your belief that there are moral absolutes that must be reflected in public policy.
 - Share voters concerns about declining moral values, and advocate policies to address them (e.g., Clinton’s “values” agenda in 1996, Lieberman’s criticism of “trash culture,” various strategies for supporting families raising kids).

Fight Fire With Fire

- When opponents aggressively promote an agenda based on conservative appeals to religious values, one option is to respond with progressive appeals to religious values.
- Even conservative evangelicals acknowledge a “social gospel” addressing the needs of the poor and or society; remind them of it and appeal to the “better angels of their nature.”
- As of 2002, 79% of Americans believed “people should do more to help the needy, even if that entails some personal sacrifice,” and 67% favored more generous government assistance to the poor. Those with strong religious commitments tend to favor anti-poverty efforts (public or private) the most.

Support Faith-Based Initiatives

- Despite George W. Bush's (partially abandoned) focus on this subject, Democrats have more than Republicans to gain from support of efforts to engage religious and other civic organizations in public delivery of social services.
- It's a uniter: A new survey shows that government funding for religious social services is supported by 70% of Americans, including 83% of African-American Protestants, 75% of white Catholics, 72% of evangelical Protestants, 67% of mainline Protestants, and even 57% of non-religious "seculars."
- It's a "three-fer," allowing Democrats to support a new attack on poverty and other social problems while expressing support for religious values and also their willingness to explore alternatives to traditional government programs.
- Don't be bashful about supporting limits on how religious groups can use public funds: 79% of Americans think such groups should not be allowed to discriminate against those

Remember: You're Not From the Government!

- Much of the chilliness expressed by people of faith towards Democrats reflects a belief that the party is wedded to big government in any conflict with civil society (church, neighborhood, locality, family, or the private sector generally).
- Declaring your independence from government-only solutions—and from pro-government or anti-religious interest groups—addresses that concern powerfully.
- Your attitude towards Government is really the fourth “G” along with God, Guns and Guts.

It's All About Seizing the Center

- Never forget: a majority of Americans are self-described moderates.
- That's true as well of people of faith: 65% of black evangelical Protestants; 54% of white Catholics, 47% of white mainline Protestants, and even 37% of white evangelical Protestants self-identify as “centrists.”
- Seizing the Center best positions you with Democratic and swing voters, and best positions you to expose the extremism of the Right. Silence on religious values confirms negative stereotypes, while trying to neutralize opposition by moving “hard right” can divide your supporters and won't work anyway.
- Embrace a “values centrism” that combines progressive policies, inclusive language, a commitment to mainstream cultural aspirations, and an openness to non-government avenues for addressing social problems.