

THE GOD STRATEGY

HOW RELIGION BECAME
A POLITICAL WEAPON IN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION



A NEW RELIGIOUS POLITICS

On the evening of July 17, 1980, in Detroit's Joe Louis Arena, Ronald Reagan delivered his acceptance speech for the Republican Party's presidential nomination. Addressing a crowd of typically raucous delegates and a national television audience, Reagan was approaching the end of his speech when he departed from the prepared remarks he had supplied to the news media, a move certain to capture journalists' attention. Reagan abruptly said: "I have thought of something that is not part of my speech and I'm worried over whether I should do it." He paused, then continued:

Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen held in savage captivity.

He went on: "I'll confess that"—and here his voice faltered momentarily—"I've been a little afraid to suggest what I'm going to suggest." A long pause ensued, followed by this: "I'm more afraid not to. Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?" The entire hall went silent, and heads bowed. Reagan then concluded: "God bless America."¹

It was grand political theater. It was a moment when religion and partisan politics were brought together through mass media as never before. It was a moment when religious conservatives became a political force in the United States. It was, simply put, a moment when a new religious politics was born.

It also was strategic to the hilt. Modern political communications are carefully scripted and rehearsed, with meticulous management of every detail—from the knowing smiles and poignant pauses to the clothes worn, backdrops used, and words chosen. The Reagan campaign and presidency did not create this dynamic, but they perfected it. The 1980 campaign was Reagan’s third run for the White House, and his message was sharp this time out. His advisers had put his convention speech through five drafts over six weeks to make sure it appealed simultaneously to Christian conservatives—fundamentalists and evangelicals who had come together to form a crucial voting bloc—and to the broader American public.² When the moment arrived, the former Hollywood actor and two-term California governor offered a vision of America grounded in faith and morality, punctuated by his closing words and polished delivery. All of it came through.

Consider the reaction of *Newsweek* magazine: “In a rite as peaceful and as triumphal as a beatification, the Republican Party finally anointed Ronald Reagan as its Presidential nominee last week and sent him forth on what he called a ‘crusade’ to save America from its recent past.” In a similar vein, *Washington Post* media critic Tom Shales said: “A more than faintly religious tone is being maintained by the Reagan candidacy. He has spoken repeatedly of leading a ‘crusade,’ and beginning a crusade with prayer is not exactly unheard of in the old history books. At times, the convention resembled the new breed of evangelical talk shows carried on TV stations throughout the country.” Reagan’s message found both of its intended audiences. In a poll of the general public taken in the days following the GOP convention, 67% expressed a favorable reaction to the event. Four months later, Reagan won the presidency with a coalition that included a significant number of evangelicals.³ In succeeding years, conservative Catholics joined them, drawn by the same blending of morality, faith, and nation that Reagan offered. A new era of religious politics had arrived—to the delight of many, to the chagrin of others, and with enduring impact on all.

Twelve years later, it was the Democratic Party’s turn. Having endured three terms of Republican rule in the White House, Democrats in 1992 saw an opportunity for revival in a sagging economy and an election season turned on its head by the on-again, off-again saga of Ross Perot’s third-party candidacy. For three presidential elections, Democrats had done little to publicly appeal to religious Americans. In his party nomination acceptance address in 1980, the pious Jimmy Carter made no mention whatsoever of God. Walter Mondale in 1984 and Michael Dukakis in 1988 made between them only a handful of religious references. In 1992, however, Bill Clinton, the Arkansas

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governor upon whom Democrats had pinned their hopes, decided to travel a very different pathway in his challenge to Republican president George H. W. Bush. Clinton selected Al Gore as his running mate to produce the first all-Southern Baptist presidential ticket in the nation's history—a choice that captured the attention of this traditionally conservative religious community. Further, from the opening gavel, the Democratic Party's national convention at New York's Madison Square Garden struck a decidedly religious tone. Speakers from Jesse Jackson to Mario Cuomo wove faith into their addresses. The result, one commentator put it, was that the convention felt “like a cross between the Academy awards, a Las Vegas nightclub act and a religious revival meeting.”⁴

On the convention's final night, July 16, 1992, Clinton brought it to a crescendo. He centered his acceptance speech on “the New Covenant”—a phrase rich in biblical grounding, most notably in the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. The new covenant, Clinton said, was to be “a solemn agreement between the people and their government” that would undergird his plans to address the nation's economic woes, balance the budget, improve education, and expand health care. Clinton also quoted Scripture, spoke of the importance of religious faith, and invoked God several times. The address reached its peak when Clinton expressed his desire for a more inclusive U.S. society, saying: “There is no them, there is only us.” With the audience chanting “us,” Clinton's pacing became more deliberate. “One nation,” he began. Each word came slowly: “under God”—and here he let slip enough of his southern drawl to momentarily extend the word God—“indivisible.” The audience took its cue, and joined Clinton for the exclamation point: “with liberty and justice for all!” As the crowd erupted, Clinton hammered home his vision for America: “That—That, is our Pledge of Allegiance, and that's what the New Covenant is all about.”⁵ Twelve years nearly to the day from Reagan's 1980 address, Clinton had delivered a speech with a similar combination of faith, morality, and nation.

Clinton's message was impossible to miss. The *New York Times* characterized the speech as “steeped in the values of faith and family,” and a *Chicago Sun-Times* commentator quipped that Clinton “quoted Scripture almost as much as [evangelist] Robert Schuller on Sunday morning TV.” Conservatives were immediately concerned. Vice president Dan Quayle accused Clinton of taking a page out of the Republicans' book, fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell charged Clinton with “misquoting and manipulating the Holy Scripture for political purposes,” and televangelist and one-time GOP presidential candidate Pat Robertson said Clinton's use of the phrase new covenant was a sort of “pseudo-Christianity” that bordered on blasphemy. Clinton was

not cowed. Within days, he was in a Presbyterian church in West Virginia fielding questions about his faith—a conversation broadcast over the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network to more than 15 million homes nationwide. All of this prompted the *Boston Globe* to declare, “After years of secular squeamishness, the Clinton-Gore ticket is bringing God and country back to the Democrats.”⁶ It is no coincidence that the only successful Democratic presidential candidate since 1976 was one willing and able to present himself to the public in religious terms. Clinton had well learned what has become perhaps the most important lesson in contemporary American politics: to compete successfully, politicians need not always walk the religious walk, but they had better be able to talk the religious talk.

For good or for ill, God has always been a part of American politics. Religion formally entered the U.S. presidency at its inception, when George Washington, in his 1789 Inaugural address, declared that “it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe.” In the years since, presidents have spoken of a higher power, prayed and been prayed for, sought divine favor for America, and expressed gratitude for providential outcomes. This confluence of faith and American politics has commonly been called “civil religion,” a phrase coined in the 1960s by sociologist Robert Bellah. Building upon ideas of earlier philosophers and thinkers, Bellah defined civil religion as “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” through which a society “interprets its historical experience in light of transcendent reality.” In general, civil religion in America has been perceived—by many scholars, at least—to be a benignly symbolic practice, without distinctly partisan motivations or implications.⁷ But something profound has changed in recent decades.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy became the only Catholic ever to be elected U.S. president. To do so, he had to overcome concerns that his administration would be a tool of the Vatican. In a pivotal address in September 1960, Kennedy declared: “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote.” It was a welcome message then; it would be almost unimaginable today. Consider that during the 2004 presidential campaign Jerry Falwell proclaimed, “For conservative people of faith, voting for principle this year means voting for the re-election of George W. Bush. The alternative, in my mind, is simply unthinkable.” Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, whose theologically conservative radio programs, magazines, videos, and books reach more than 200 million people worldwide, broke with

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his traditionally nonpartisan ways to endorse Bush. And the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops decreed that Communion could be withheld from Catholics in public office who dissent from church teachings, claiming that politicians “have an obligation in conscience to work toward correcting morally defective laws”—those which allow abortion, in particular—“lest they be guilty of cooperating in evil.” This forced Democratic Party presidential candidate John Kerry to explain how his Catholic faith accorded with his prochoice position on abortion.⁸ It was the reverse of 1960: whereas Kennedy had worked to show independence from the Vatican, Kerry had to fend off criticism for insufficient fealty to the Catholic church.

And it’s not only conservatives who are mixing faith and politics. In October 2004, more than 200 U.S. seminary and religious leaders signed a statement condemning what they called a “theology of war” in the Bush administration’s rhetoric about terrorism. In 2005, Rabbi Michael Lerner launched the Network of Spiritual Progressives with a founding conference in Berkeley, California, that drew more than 1,300 religious leaders, politicians, and activists. In the spring of 2006, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops again waded into the political arena—this time with a Justice for Immigrants campaign that directly challenged proposals in Congress which would have made it a crime to provide food and shelter to undocumented immigrants. And in the autumn of 2006, the liberal religious magazine *Sojourners*—whose founder and editor, Jim Wallis, penned the bestselling book *God’s Politics* in 2005—and the organization Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good produced voter guides that challenged conservatives’ long-time dominance of these publications.⁹ As will become apparent in this book, this liberal-leaning religious politics was capitalized upon by a number of Democratic Party candidates.

On issue after issue, U.S. public debate today includes—and often is dominated by—faith-based perspectives espoused by politically adept individuals and organizations. Religion has always been part of the political subtext in the United States, but it is now a defining fault line, with citizens’ religious affinities, regularity of worship, and perceptions of “moral values” among the strongest predictors of presidential voting patterns. Political leaders have taken advantage of and contributed to these developments through calculated, deliberate, and partisan use of faith. We call this the *God strategy*, and we document how it has been implemented, who has used it and why, and what it means for democracy. Central to this approach is a series of carefully crafted public communications employed by politicians to connect with religiously inclined voters. Sometimes these religious signals are intended for the eyes and ears of all Americans, and other times they are implemented in targeted ways, as

veritable “dog whistles” that only distinct segments of the population fully receive.¹⁰ In combination, these approaches seek to entice both the many religious moderates who want leaders to be comfortable with faith, as well as devout Protestants and Catholics who desire a more intimate convergence of religion and politics. The God strategy moved to the fore in 1980 and, in the years since, politicians—especially those in the Republican Party, though Democrats are now responding in kind—have utilized and refined this model to accrue political capital and transform the role of religion in American politics.

Few have used this approach more adeptly than George W. Bush. During his father’s presidential campaigns in 1988 and 1992, the younger Bush helped to coordinate outreach efforts to religious conservatives. He learned their concerns, their language, and how to turn both into political advantage. Bush’s response to this experience, according to a close friend and campaign colleague, was “I could do this in Texas. I could make this work in Texas.” Bush did just that. Despite never having held political office, he scored a surprising victory in the 1994 governor’s race and then easily won reelection in 1998. In 1999, Bush met with leading pastors in Texas, asked for their prayers, and told them he had been “called” to seek the presidency. Throughout the 2000 presidential campaign, he and strategist Karl Rove worked assiduously to attract religious conservatives and, once in the White House, Bush immediately issued an executive order to implement “faith-based” initiatives that eased restrictions on government funding of religious organizations’ social service programs.¹¹ In subsequent years, this intertwining of religion and politics—tailored to fit a distinctly conservative ideology—has been a centerpiece of Bush’s presidency. It does not always work for Bush or other politicians, but it often does.

In early 2003, for example, Bush faced a critical juncture in his administration’s push toward war with Iraq: public support was lukewarm as the president delivered his State of the Union address to Congress and a U.S. television audience of 62 million. Many have fixated on “16 words” in the president’s speech, since disavowed by the administration, about Iraq’s alleged attempts to purchase uranium from Africa.¹² However, every bit as crucial in building U.S. public support for the war were 17 words delivered in the final minute of the address: “The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity.” It was a bold linkage of administration goals with divine wishes, but Bush had the benefit of a platform built by more than two decades of religious politics. So he drove his message home: “We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know—we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing

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our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history. May He guide us now. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.” Polls showed that 75% of U.S. adults “approved” of Bush’s speech and 71% of registered voters said its content was “excellent” or “good.” Three weeks later, U.S. adults were asked by pollsters, “Do you like the way George W. Bush talks in public about his religious beliefs, or does this bother you somewhat?” Fully 63% said they liked it.¹³ The God strategy was operating at full force, and many, many Americans were on board.

This book is an attempt to understand how this came to be. We focus on political communications and tactics—particularly within the presidency—to understand the nexus of faith, politics, and public opinion in America. Specifically, we examine the historical and social forces that laid the foundation for the ascendance of today’s religious politics, then systematically track Republican and Democratic leaders’ use of a series of religious signals in recent decades. We consider the nature of this approach, its electoral strengths and limitations, and the implications of its now-dominant presence. The evidence will reveal that Republicans generally have been more inclined and better positioned to capitalize on a convergence of religion and politics. Still, Democrats have occasionally been successful and are making substantial inroads, especially since the 2004 elections. Throughout the ensuing pages, we will argue that the substantial presence of God and faith in American politics over the past few decades did not occur by chance. It was not by chance that Reagan and Clinton used the religious imagery they did, in the manner they did, while addressing their parties’ convention delegates and the nation. Nor was it by chance that Bush staked much of his electoral hopes in 2000 and 2004 on religion. It was the God strategy.

CHAPTER ONE



ONE NATION UNDER GOD, DIVISIBLE

Almost 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States and took stock of the nation's fledgling experiment in democracy. He wrote that "the religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States." Visitors might say the same today. More than any other Western or industrialized nation, America is a place where one's beliefs about God are a significant component of daily life. A Pew Research Center study of 44 nations in 2002, for example, showed that religion is much more important to Americans than to people living in other affluent nations. Nearly six out of every ten U.S. adults told Pew researchers that religion plays a "very important" role in their lives. This roughly doubled what was found in Canada, in Western Europe, and in Japan and Korea. Even in heavily Catholic Italy, fewer than three in ten people said religion was very important. In-depth analysis by Pew found a steady decrease in citizens' religiosity as a nation's per-capita income rose, with one exception: the United States. The Pew report concluded that on matters of religious importance, "Americans' views are closer to people in developing nations than to the publics of developed nations." Every one of the nations in which citizens placed greater importance on religion was in Latin America, South Asia, Africa, or conflict-laden areas of the Middle East.¹

Additional public opinion data among U.S. adults buttress these statistics. In survey after survey, more than 90% of Americans say they believe in God or a universal spirit. In the words of pollster George Gallup, Jr., "So many people in this country say they believe in the basic concept of God, that it almost seems unnecessary to conduct surveys on the question." Further, large majorities of American adults have integrated elements of faith into their daily experiences. On a consistent basis, roughly 70% say they pray several times a week or more,

and about 60% claim that faith provides a “great deal” or “quite a bit” of guidance in their day-to-day lives. Similar results can be found in the confidence of U.S. adults about their religious beliefs: nearly 90% consistently say “I never doubt the existence of God,” and slightly more than 80% consistently say that people will be called before God on a judgment day.² In short, faith runs wide and deep in America.

It is perhaps inevitable that religion and politics have converged now and again in U.S. history. Tocqueville followed his impression of American religiosity with these words: “The longer I stayed in the country, the more conscious I became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation.” Theology and ideology have periodically formed a powerful nexus, including during the abolition movement, the post–Civil War recapture of power by southern whites, the Social Gospel activism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the temperance movement that led to Prohibition, Cold War fears of “godless communism,” and the civil rights movement.³ Today, this religious heritage—deeply ingrained in the American imagination—is increasingly used for partisan purposes. This is occurring across a range of leaders and institutions, but in recent decades public debate on religion and politics has been driven by Christian conservatives—specifically, fundamentalists, conservative evangelical Protestants, and conservative Catholics, who since the late 1970s have been finding common political ground. These voices have been louder and more politically determined than their liberal counterparts, and we will show how the God strategy emerged as a direct response to the rising prominence of these voters.

Our inquiry begins with what scholars have identified as the origin of the modern presidency: the Inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. Roosevelt is an appropriate place to start for a number of reasons. For one, during his administration the United States changed significantly, with presidential, federal governmental, and national power growing substantially. Beginning with FDR allows us to largely hold constant the cultural place of presidents. Second, radio and television gained prominence starting roughly at this time, giving presidents a greater capacity to speak to the public en masse and increasing the need for political leaders to carefully craft their messages. Both of these factors are particularly pronounced during the high-state occasions of Inaugural and State of the Union addresses. Third, U.S. demographics and citizenship participation expanded in this modern period, with greater racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. Presidents today must appeal to, respond to, and represent a much more diverse nation; in such an environment, the confluence of religion and politics takes on greater import for national inclusion and exclusion. Fourth, scholars have identified the late 1940s and the 1950s as a period

of “unparalleled rhetorical escalating of the American civil religion.” The Roosevelt administration was the lengthy predecessor to those that governed during this period.⁴ Finally, the Scopes trial in 1925 was an important moment for religious conservatives, reverberating into Roosevelt’s tenure as president and marking the start of today’s religious politics.

A POLITICAL AWAKENING

In the early years of the twentieth century, a group of Bible teachers and evangelists published a series of paperback volumes titled *The Fundamentals*. These writings offered a vigorous articulation of a theologically conservative version of Christianity in the face of perceived threats by communism, modern science, and historical criticism. Over time, these volumes became a point of reference for a broader movement. In particular, fundamentalists rallied around opposition to the teaching of evolution in public schools. With William Jennings Bryan as a public advocate, antievolution sentiment gained momentum, and laws against the teaching of evolution were put on the books in several states. Such laws were rarely enforced, but a showdown was inevitable. It came in 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. In the now-famous trial that was a forerunner of today’s culture wars, public school teacher John Scopes was convicted of teaching evolution. Despite this ostensible victory for religious conservatives, the national media depicted fundamentalists as backward buffoons outside the mainstream.⁵ In the aftermath, many fundamentalists chose to retreat from civic life.

It was not a surrender, though. Scholar Nancy Ammerman suggests that “[w]hat may have appeared as the demise of a movement may better be seen as its transformation.”⁶ Fundamentalists began to build denominations, clergy networks, church-connected institutions such as schools and colleges, book and magazine publishing houses, and radio, television, and direct-mail operations, all of which yielded a “dense, sophisticated, multicentered national cultural infrastructure.”⁷ This subculture combined literalist biblical beliefs with the technological and institutional realities of modern life while avoiding discrete public domains, including the political arena. It was an approach that allowed Franklin Roosevelt to draw heavily upon liberal-leaning Protestants and Catholics to build the New Deal coalition in the 1930s. The Social Gospel orientation of Roosevelt and his successor, Harry Truman, did not go unnoticed, however, and during World War II a group of moderate fundamentalists began to reengage with the broader society. These individuals called themselves “evangelicals” to highlight their interest in public engagement, and

they formed the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, opened Fuller Seminary in 1947, and instituted National Prayer Breakfasts in the early 1950s to bring together political and religious leaders, a tradition that continues to this day.⁸ As the Cold War dawned, these developments produced a convergence of religion and politics.

The United States was a nation anxious about communism in the early 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy was at the apex of his pursuit of communists in America, and the U.S. government's plan to stop communism and the Soviet Union in Korea ended in stalemate after the deaths of more than 33,000 U.S. soldiers. A poll by the National Opinion Research Center in January 1954 asked adult Americans, "Do you think the Communist Party in the United States is tied up with a world-wide organization aiming to overthrow our government by force?" Almost 75% said yes. So substantial was the perceived threat that in another poll the same month an identical percentage said no when asked whether "members of the Communist Party in this country should be allowed to speak on the radio?" And in May 1954, when asked by Gallup pollsters if "a man can believe in Communism and still be a loyal American," 87% said no. At the heart of many Americans' concerns was a belief that communism stood in direct opposition to Western values of religious liberty, freedom, and individualism. Talk of "godless communists" became commonplace, and some leading U.S. clergy—including Billy Graham, who rose to national prominence during this era—organized days-long "crusades" that merged patriotism and Christian teachings.⁹

In this environment, political leaders in Washington took steps to formally enshrine Judeo-Christian traditions in America. In June 1954, following years of lobbying by the Catholic organization Knights of Columbus, the U.S. Congress passed and President Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill that added the words "under God" to the nation's Pledge of Allegiance. The congressional vote was unanimous in support of this change, and the House of Representatives in an accompanying report said:

At this moment of our history the principles underlying our American Government and the American way of life are under attack by a system whose philosophy is at direct odds with our own. Our American Government is founded on the concept of the individuality and the dignity of the human being. Underlying this concept is the belief that the human person is important because he was created by God and endowed by Him with certain inalienable rights which no civil authority may usurp. The inclusion of God in our pledge therefore would further acknowledge the dependence of our people

and our Government upon the moral directions of the Creator. At the same time it would serve to deny the atheistic and materialistic concepts of communism with its attendant subservience of the individual.

These sentiments were echoed by Eisenhower: “[I]n this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America’s heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource in peace and war.” In 1956, Congress and the president acted again, making “In God We Trust” the national motto. By the late 1960s, the motto had made its way onto all U.S. currency.¹⁰

Even in this setting, though, religious conservatives restrained their political engagement. Anthropologist Susan Friend Harding points out that “leaders refrained from overtly ‘mixing’ religion and politics in public venues or events, avoided partisan activities, and restricted themselves to private ‘fellowshipping’ activities and to lobbying along the lines already established by mainline church organizations.” The result, she said, was that there was little challenge to “secular modernity’s presumption that the public arena was off-limits to openly Bible-believing voices.” The dramatic social changes of the 1960s and 1970s proved a turning point, however, prompting many Americans to seek the stability offered by fundamentalist beliefs and fostering among religious conservatives a sense of urgency about the state of America.¹¹ In particular, Ammerman suggests that Supreme Court decisions outlawing prayer in public schools in 1962 and 1963 and U.S. duplicity and failures in Vietnam

raised fears that the nation might no longer enjoy its world supremacy. Fundamentalists cared deeply about that possibility, partly because they feared the growth of communism, but also because they saw American military and economic might as guarantors of their ability [to] evangelize the world. For fundamentalists the United States has always been the “city on a hill” ordained by God as the light to the nations. From the beginning they had been committed to foreign missions, and now they wondered if the light of the gospel might go out because it would have no great chosen nation to carry it.¹²

Just as important was the civil rights movement, which relied heavily on the religious infrastructure of the black community and became a fault line among whites. Some segregationists drew upon religious rhetoric and institutions in

their opposition to the movement, organizing formal church protests and allying with sympathetic religious leaders. At the same time, considerable segments of the white religious community, including the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention, accepted desegregation after the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. As these cultural concerns coalesced and the Democratic Party behind Lyndon Johnson stepped forward to promote racial equality, many white evangelicals in the South—a part of the nation that since the Reconstruction era had been a Democratic bastion known as the “solid South”—began a long and marked migration to the GOP.¹³

Richard Nixon was the first Republican president to capitalize upon these trends. He emphasized his conservative thinking on the issue of abortion, appealed to a “silent majority” to support U.S. military actions in Vietnam, and spoke at a Billy Graham revival in Tennessee—the only time Graham ever allowed a president to join him onstage. It did not last, of course: national outrage over the Watergate scandal doomed Nixon and his successor, Gerald Ford, and in 1976 the White House was won by Democrat Jimmy Carter, a former governor of Georgia and a devout Southern Baptist. *Newsweek* magazine proclaimed it “the year of the evangelicals” and an analysis of presidential voting trends reveals a significant movement among evangelical Protestants toward Carter. It was a shift not lost on political conservatives, particularly when the trend held in the 1978 midterm elections.¹⁴ Over time, however, Carter's rhetoric and policies—particularly his perceived weakness as a leader and his strict separation of church and state—disappointed conservative religious leaders. An important breaking point was a meeting between Carter and a group of evangelicals in January 1980, on the anniversary of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which had legalized abortion. Religious leaders left unimpressed. As a result, a “relationship that already had been strained was irretrievably broken.”¹⁵ It was unclear, though, whether religious conservatives would find what they wanted in the Republican Party.

Jerry Falwell, the pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, and host of *Old Time Gospel Hour*, a television show that reached millions of viewers each Sunday, began a public push for evangelicals and fundamentalists to unite under the label “born again.” In *America Can Be Saved*, a sermon series published in 1979, Falwell argued:

For too long we have sat back and said politics are for the people in Washington, business is for those on Wall Street, and religion is our business. But the fact is, you cannot separate the sacred and the secular. We need to train men of God in our schools who can go on to

Congress, can go on to be directors in the largest corporations, who can become the lawyers and the businessmen and those important people in tomorrow's United States. If we are going to turn this country around, we have to get God's people mobilized in the right direction and we must do it quickly. Did you know that the largest single minority block in the United States that has never been capitalized on by anybody is the fundamentalist movement? If all the fundamentalists knew who to vote for and did it together, we could elect anybody. If every one of these people could be intelligently taught and mobilized, brother, we could turn this nation upside down for God!¹⁶

Falwell joined with a few political organizers to launch the Moral Majority, with an agenda focused on families, abortion, prayer in schools, and traditional notions of sexuality and gender. Upon discovering that only about half of religious conservatives were registered voters, Falwell adopted a mantra: "Get them saved, baptized, and registered." And then he offered those new votes to presidential hopeful Ronald Reagan, but with strings attached. Prior to the Republican Party convention in the summer of 1980, as Reagan prepared to name his running mate, Falwell said: "If evangelicals are excited about the platform, which they are, and about both candidates, I'd say three or four million votes will be available to Mr. Reagan that have never been available to anybody." However, he added, should the GOP or Reagan not pay sufficient heed to the wishes of newly politicized religious conservatives, "They'll just sit on their hands as they've been doing for the last 30 or 40 years."¹⁷ This wasn't the Scopes trial redux; Falwell and his followers weren't interested in winning battles while losing wars. Politicians who wanted the support of this emerging constituency would need to provide something in return.

SIGNALS FOR THE INFORMATION AGE

The political engagement of Christian conservatives presented a significant opportunity for the political party that could capitalize on it. Polls in the late 1970s showed that 35–40% of Americans self-identified as "born again."¹⁸ Many of these citizens resided in the southeastern United States, and although this region's white evangelicals had been leaving the Democratic Party since the 1960s largely because of its support for civil rights, the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 suggested a potential opening for Democrats. At the same time, the Republican platform—which opposed abortion and emphasized a strong

national defense—was attractive to Falwell and many of his followers. The preacher’s rhetoric may have been overstated, but it held an important kernel of truth: historic political capital was up for grabs. Support among newly engaged fundamentalists and evangelicals could go far in building electoral majorities. The challenge was not a simple one, however. A single candidate might be able to appeal directly to these voters, but a political party seeking a coherent national identity faced a significant hurdle: any attempt to entice religious conservatives would have to avoid alienating moderate Americans, who were less likely to be comfortable with overt religiosity or heavy-handed moralizing. Carefully calibrated rhetoric, relationship skills, and policy goals were needed to walk this tightrope.

The Republican Party responded with the God strategy: a mixture of voice and agenda that has been primarily secularized, while—in the words of Doug Wead, who in 1988 headed George H. W. Bush’s campaign outreach to evangelicals—deliberately finding opportunities to “signal” sympathy for religious conservatives’ views. This approach has two compelling strengths. First, it goes far toward building and then maintaining an electoral base for a political party. Second, it provides a sizable space within which a party’s leaders can appeal to moderate voters. Ronald Reagan put this strategy in motion in 1980, and the GOP subsequently employed it to accrue political power rarely attained before.¹⁹ Republicans won the White House in five of the past seven presidential elections, captured the Congress in the 1990s, and then added to their majorities in both congressional chambers in 2002 and 2004, the first time this had happened for a sitting president since Franklin Roosevelt in 1936. Democrats stemmed this tide at least temporarily by taking back Congress in 2006—but only by also adopting the God strategy, as we will see. The implications of the GOP’s recent dominance of American politics are vast. To note just two examples, Congress and the White House worked so closely in the early 2000s that George W. Bush went five and a half years without vetoing a bill—the longest span for a president since Thomas Jefferson—and seven of the nine justices on today’s U.S. Supreme Court were appointed by Republican presidents.²⁰

The rise of religious politics was instrumental in these developments. Since the mid-1970s, Republicans have enticed religious conservatives with little challenge from Democrats, with only two significant exceptions: in the 1990s with Bill Clinton and in 2006, when several Democratic candidates infused their campaigns with faith. In general, though, the Democratic Party has been between a rock and a hard place with regard to religion, whereas Republicans have been more or less unfettered. At the heart of the God strategy have been four signals:

1. Acting as political priests by speaking the language of the faithful
2. Fusing God and country by linking America with divine will
3. Embracing important religious symbols, practices, and rituals
4. Engaging in morality politics by trumpeting bellwether issues

In combination, these signals have provided a compelling synthesis of faith and politics that appeals to many Americans—especially, but not only, Christian fundamentalists, conservative evangelicals, and conservative Catholics.

Of course, political leaders might use these words and engage in these behaviors for a variety of reasons, first and foremost because they are religious and believe in them. This is a reasonable possibility, so our position is not that the religious sentiments conveyed by political leaders are fabrications. Rather, we are agnostic about the authenticity of politicians' religious beliefs. It is impossible to know whether a politician truly shares or cares about the religious sentiments of the citizenry. One would need to be a mind reader to say with certainty. What we do know is what political leaders say and do—and both have far-reaching implications. Further, the words and actions of today's U.S. political leaders are commonly planned in advance, especially when they are religious in nature and particularly when they occur in the contexts that will be our focus. The position we adopt, then, is straightforward. Are these religious signals authentic? Perhaps. Are they strategic? Absolutely. Far from a contradiction, these are the realities of modern American politics.²¹

Together, these four signals define today's religious politics, with leaders of both major parties using them for advantage. Republicans, though, have been more successful in cultivating personas as faith-invoking leaders, nation-loving patriots, comrades-in-fellowship, and moral policymakers. Such messages are communicated behind the scenes, of course, but there is special significance in *public* signaling—which leads us to focus on public communications in the political arena. In the parlance of religious believers, public signals provide a “witness” for a particular set of values, and this witness accepts real political risk by choosing this path. Notably, the signals have to be perceived as congruent with one's personal life, a test Bill Clinton ultimately failed in the minds of many religious conservatives. At the same time, too much religiosity or overt morality can drive away moderate Americans. In the words of long-time GOP operative Doug Wead, speaking in 2004: “That is the great danger for a politician with the evangelical constituency. As a Republican, you can't win without them. But sometimes, you can lose with them, too, because of the backlash.” As a result, he said, politicians “have to be careful how and [in] what way you appeal to them.”²² Hence, we see a God strategy that walks a fine line between religious conservatives and the broader public.

If done well, this approach offers a payoff uniquely suited to today's information age. Consider that from the 1930s through the 1970s, a handful of radio and television networks dominated the political attention of Americans. This ended in 1980 with the creation of the Cable News Network, the nation's first 24-hour television news channel. Today, there are three such channels: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, and four if one adds CNN Headline News. In 1982, *USA Today* was launched as a national newspaper; today, *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* boast national readerships of more than 2 million each, and the *New York Times* is at nearly 1.1 million. And while newspaper circulation in general is declining, Americans have no shortage of daily papers from which to choose—nearly 1,500 at last count.²³ In the late 1980s, Rush Limbaugh took his radio program national, and he now is syndicated on more than 600 stations across the country and world, draws roughly 20 million listeners, and heads conservatives' dominance of the medium. The political Left responded by launching in 2004 Air America, a progressive talk radio network that has since struggled financially. In the early 1990s, the Internet entered the purview of the mass U.S. public, and by 2006 nearly one in three people were accessing online news at least three days a week. Further, online blogs and video sites such as YouTube are increasingly influencing the political process.²⁴ In short, today's media environment is a daunting new world.

It's an age for which religious signals are a perfect fit. Scholars have noted that one way in which U.S. citizens negotiate the extraordinary flow of information is by finding shortcuts in their decision making. This makes sense. There is no reasonable way for people to monitor, care about, or digest the endless array of issues, personalities, and competing agendas in today's political culture. As a result, individuals look for ways to simplify their intake and evaluation of information. One means of political decision making that has become increasingly commonplace is to rely upon cues—that is, credible people or information that can be confidently used to guide decisions.²⁵ Religious signals by political leaders provide exactly this: cues that Americans use to truncate their information exposure and consideration. Indeed, such signals are particularly potent because they connect with what are often core values and beliefs in people's lives. When such a connection is made, it shrinks the time and energy that people invest in politics because key concerns—perhaps *the* key concerns—have been addressed. Further, such cues tend to be concise, which allows them to be easily transmitted both through mainstream media, such as newspapers and television, and via the more narrowly targeted media of talk radio and online sites.²⁶

Religious signals, therefore, have the ability to trump many other traditionally relevant considerations, and the God strategy is an attempt to capitalize

on this dynamic. For politicians who practice this method, the ideal electoral outcome is one that was captured on a *CBS Evening News* broadcast in May 2004. As scholar Robert Ivie recounted it:

[CBS news correspondent Jim] Axelrod's election-year report came that night from Allentown, Pennsylvania, a so-called "swingtown" that anchorman Dan Rather billed as "a microcosm of America in most every way—including how it votes in presidential elections." [Allentown resident Jodi] Crawford's husband was a National Guardsman with a year left on his tour of duty in Iraq. A soldier in his platoon had just been killed in combat. Crawford was understandably worried and wished that the war could suddenly end so that her husband could return home safely. Yet her faith in the president was unshaken. She would vote for George W. Bush "because he's a Christian."

A similar sentiment was offered in a June 2006 *New York Times* article that explored why Bush's public approval ratings remained high in Utah while bottoming out elsewhere. "When I watch him, I see a man with his heart in the right place," one Utah resident said. "I like George Bush because he is God fearing, and that's how a lot of people in this area feel." As a student at Brigham Young University told the *Times*, "I'm not sure of anything he's done, but I like that he's religious—that's really important."²⁷

These anecdotes illustrate the political power of the God strategy: to encourage members of the electorate to use their religious concerns as the decisive factor in voting decisions. When this is successfully accomplished, today's never-ending news cycle is rendered increasingly superfluous. Good or bad developments for the economy? Plans in Congress to address health care or immigration? A new trade agreement? Overseas developments with global implications? All recede in importance for citizens who have received a signal that they trust to guide their political decisions. In recognition of this dynamic, political campaigns work relentlessly to provide cues about core values that voters immediately grasp and about which they care deeply. For many Americans, these values are grounded in faith. The result is that elections increasingly have become what scholars call "moral referendums."²⁸ One is hard-pressed to imagine another cue with such ability to dominate the contemporary American political arena. In short, religious signals not only capitalize upon the emergence of religious conservatives as a political force, but also provide an ideal antidote for the information overload so common today. It's a potent combination.

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The patterns described above and to be examined in detail in subsequent chapters have coincided with, capitalized upon, and contributed to a series of transformations in U.S. politics. Since the nation's founding, the large majority of voters have been mainline Protestants—that is, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, American Baptists, Congregationalists, and members of the United Church of Christ—or, increasingly beginning in the nineteenth century, Catholics. In the late 1960s, though, Americans began a steady movement away from mainline Protestant churches, a development encouraged by the spirited “free market” of religion that characterizes the United States. Data collected each even year by the nonpartisan American National Election Studies (NES) show that the percentage of the U.S. adult population identifying as mainline Protestants declined from 44% in 1972 to 20% in 2004. These individuals migrated primarily to two places: evangelicalism, which grew from 17% to 22% of U.S. adults as it moved beyond its strength in the Southeast, and a “no affiliation” category made up of agnostics, atheists, and citizens uninterested in institutionalized religion, which grew from 4% to 16%. Catholics hovered around 25% of the population throughout. Together, these categories account for more than four-fifths of U.S. voters, and the trends align with a historic restructuring among American Protestants, which has been documented by scholars.²⁹ It is the confluence of faith and politics that is our primary interest, of course, and since the early 1970s the NES data show four patterns.

The first is the substantial movement among evangelical Protestants and Catholics toward a sense of identification with the Republican Party. The NES surveys allow us to track the religious and political orientations of U.S. citizens of voting age over time. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show that evangelicals and Catholics, once bitterly at odds in America, have increasingly found common cause with the Republican Party. Consider that in 1972, according to NES data, more than 50% of U.S. evangelicals identified with the Democratic Party, compared to roughly 35% with the Republican Party. A pro-Democratic tilt among these citizens ensued through the Jimmy Carter years, but then a tectonic shift toward the Republican Party took place following Ronald Reagan's election in 1980—moving the party allegiances of evangelical Protestants into a dead heat. They remained there well into the 1990s before another decided migration toward the GOP, and by 2004 fully 56% of evangelicals identified with Republicans, compared to 35% with Democrats.³⁰ The trend is striking: in three decades there was a complete reversal in the partisan identification of evangelical Protestants.

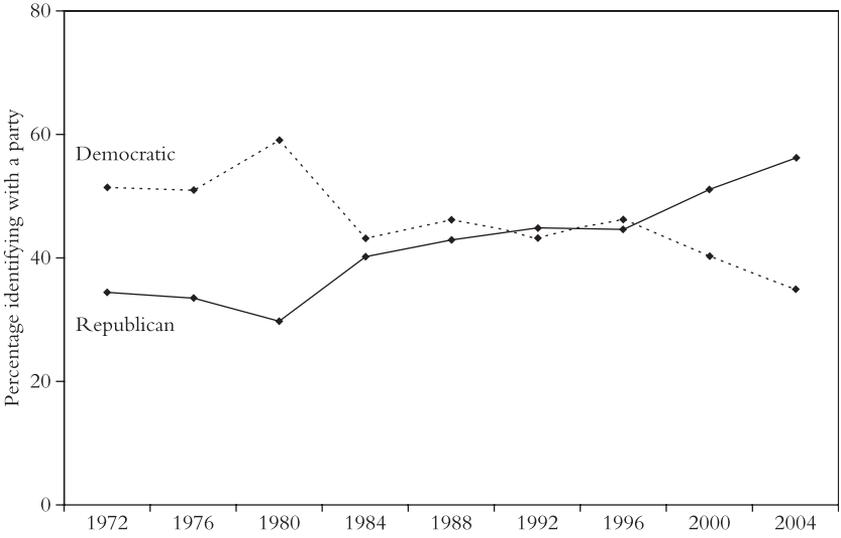


FIGURE 1.1. Political Party Identification among Evangelical Protestants

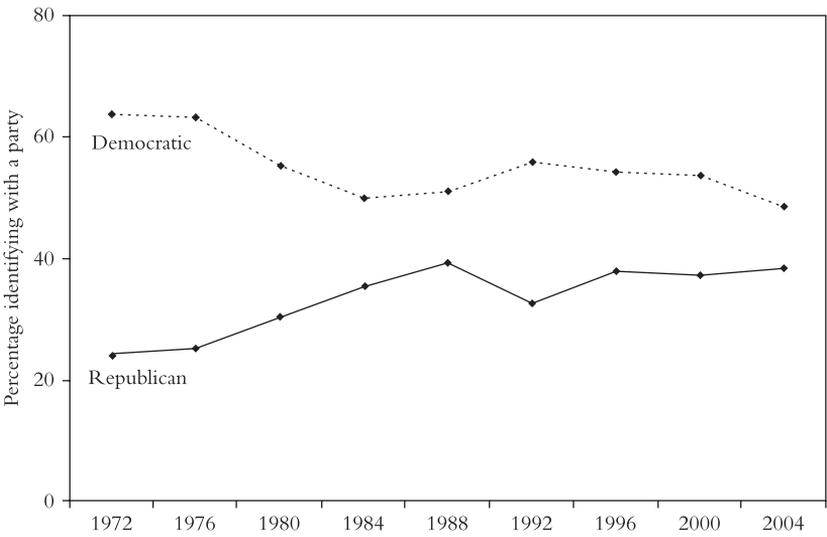


FIGURE 1.2. Political Party Identification among Catholics

THE GOD STRATEGY

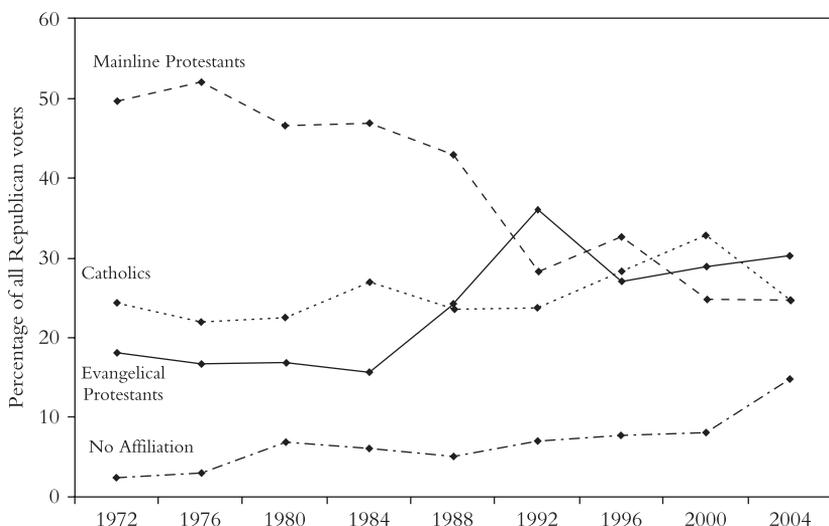


FIGURE 1.3. Religious Groups in Republican Party Voting Blocs

During the same time period, Protestants in mainline denominations leaned toward the Republican Party without dramatic change, but significant movement toward the GOP was also visible among Catholics. In 1972, Catholics were strongly Democratic: NES data show that in that year 64% identified with Democrats, 24% with Republicans. After 1976, however, the pro-Democratic Party preference began to decline steadily—such that it was cut in half by 1988, when 51% of Catholics identified with Democrats and 39% identified with the GOP. This trend slowed and reversed slightly in the 1990s during the Clinton presidency, but then resumed beginning in 2000. In 2004, for the first time, the number of U.S. Catholics identifying with the Democratic Party dipped below 50% while Republican identification was at 39%. These patterns suggest that the God strategy has resonated not only with evangelical Protestants, but with some Catholics as well. Indeed, Charles Colson, a former aide to Richard Nixon and director of the Prison Fellowship Ministries, declared in 2000 that evangelical and Catholic conservatives had forged an “ecumenism in the trenches” of cultural battles, so much so that they now “stand shoulder to shoulder as the most significant religious bloc in America.”³¹ When they have, they’ve increasingly stood with Republicans.

The growing identification with the Republican Party by evangelicals and Catholics has been accompanied by a rising centrality for each in the GOP’s voting bloc. This is particularly so for evangelicals. Figure 1.3, still using the NES data, tracks the religious identification among those who voted for a

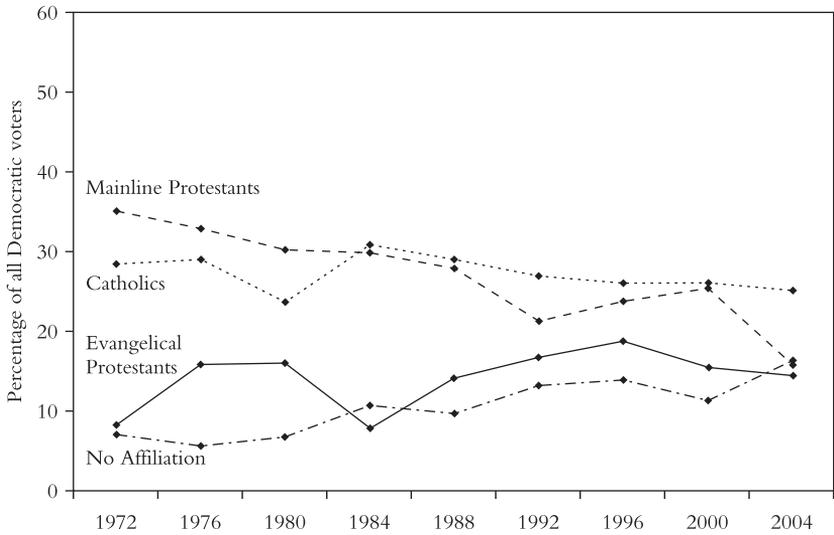


FIGURE 1.4. Religious Groups in Democratic Party Voting Blocs

Republican candidate in presidential elections 1972–2004. The four largest religious categories are shown. At the beginning of this time period, mainline Protestants accounted for fully half of all GOP voters, an electoral presence more than twice that of Catholics and roughly three times that of evangelical Protestants. Three decades later, these three groups were essentially equivalent in size in the GOP coalition, with evangelicals slightly ahead in 2004. Further, evangelicals can be distinguished in their ardor for Republicans. According to Scott Keeter, director of survey research for the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, white evangelical Protestants living in the South increasingly identified with the GOP in the 1990s, but since 2000 and especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, evangelicals in other regions began to join the fold. The result, Keeter noted in 2006, is that “white evangelicals are approaching the same degree of political solidarity with the GOP that African-American voters accord the Democratic Party.”³² In other words, they have become the party’s base.

Analysis of similar data for the Democratic Party over the same time period offers further insight. Figures 1.3 and 1.4 show the rising prominence of “no affiliation” voters for both parties and the dilemma faced by Democrats. This category of noninstitutionally religious citizens, agnostics, and atheists rose from 3% of GOP voters in 1972 to 15% in 2004, and from 7% to 16% of Democratic voters during the same period. These individuals are clearly larger on the electoral map these days.³³ At the same time, the data show the differing

dynamics of religious politics for the two parties. These differences emerge when one compares within each party the relative importance of evangelical Protestants—the group most supportive of a convergence of faith and politics—to the unaffiliated bloc, the group that one might presume is most opposed to this approach. Among Republican voters in 2004, 30% were evangelicals and 15% were unaffiliated, for a ratio of 2:1. These numbers make it a no-brainer for the GOP to engage in religious politics. In contrast, among Democratic voters in 2004, 14% were evangelicals and 16% were unaffiliated. As a comparison, consider that in 1976, when Jimmy Carter was elected, evangelicals were 16% of the Democratic voting bloc and the unaffiliated were 6%—a ratio even more favorably disposed toward religious politics than Republicans enjoy now. In today’s U.S. politics, therefore, it is far more difficult for the Democratic Party to successfully implement the God strategy.

That does not mean that some Democrats have not successfully done so. And indeed, the data suggest that the march toward the Republican Party by evangelical Protestants and to a lesser extent by Catholics in recent decades has not been inexorable. When the Democratic Party nominated Carter, evangelicals’ presence in the party’s voting bloc doubled. These voters departed just as precipitously, though, when Democrats turned in 1984 to northern liberal Walter Mondale. Eight years later, in 1992, Protestants of all stripes were divided in their opinions of George H. W. Bush. In this context, Bush faced a Republican primary challenge from conservative firebrand Pat Buchanan—who won 37% of the GOP vote in the year’s first primary, in New Hampshire—and the Democrats nominated Bill Clinton and Al Gore, a pair of Southern Baptists. The combination of dismay over GOP leadership and the Democrats’ own religious politics propelled evangelicals to their greatest levels of importance in the Democratic fold in 1992 and 1996. These starts and stops in evangelical Protestants’ support for Democratic Party candidates point to how today’s confluence of faith and politics might have been much different had either party made different choices along the way—or if they do so now.

Taken together, these transformations in the American electorate underscore the sizable opportunities and real challenges faced by politicians in recent decades who have attempted to negotiate the landscape of religious politics. Some leaders have had more success than others. But all who employed the God strategy and all who experienced it have been part of these shifts and developments. Just as politicians carefully calibrate their rhetoric and actions, so too do voters commonly have agendas. Many citizens—especially but not only those who are distinctly religious—desire leaders who can guide the nation in matters political *and* spiritual. Indeed, a large majority of Americans sees the two domains as inextricably linked: in both 2000 and 2004, 70% of

registered U.S. voters told Pew researchers that it was important “that a president have strong religious beliefs.”³⁴ Such an outlook means that when political leaders employ religious signals, an accumulation of political capital is not the only outcome. Such signals by America’s highest national political leaders also validate or invalidate particular religious perspectives, invigorate or stall social movements, and demarcate for citizens the appropriate relationship between faith and nation. The outcomes, in short, are both political and religious. Let us turn, then, to see the God strategy in action.