

THE DISAPPEARING GOD GAP?

*Religion in the 2008
Presidential Election*

CORWIN E. SMIDT

KEVIN R. DEN DULK

BRYAN T. FROEHLE

JAMES M. PENNING

STEPHEN V. MONSMA

DOUGLAS L. KOOPMAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

Contents

Introduction, 3

ONE

Religion and Presidential Campaigns
in Perspective, 18

TWO

Religion and the Political Landscape
in 2008, 42

THREE

Religion and the 2008 Presidential
Primaries, 72

FOUR

Religion and the Summer
Interlude, 107

FIVE

Religion and the Fall Campaign, 134

SIX

Religion and Election Day:
Voter Mobilization
in 2008, 164

SEVEN

Religion and Election Day:
Voting Patterns, 191

EIGHT

The God Gap Revisited, 221

Notes, 234

References, 248

Index, 272

Introduction

OVER THE PAST several decades, scholars have increasingly recognized that religion plays a vital role in American politics. The study of religion and politics has mushroomed from occasional analyses, largely ignored by the scholarly community, to a major subfield of study. This new scholarly attention has been especially focused on the role of religion in electoral politics. In the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election, for example, a number of different studies examined the relationship between attendance at worship services and vote choice (e.g., Campbell 2007; Rozell and Whitney 2007, chs. 2–5). Religiously observant voters were much more likely to vote for Republicans than Democrats. Thus, the “God Gap” was born, a label used to describe the tendency of those who are highly religious to vote Republican and those who are less so to vote Democratic. Or, as political commentator Michael Barone had earlier noted (Carnes 2004): “Americans increasingly vote as they pray, or don’t pray.”

By the 2008 presidential election, however, the political landscape appeared to have changed in some important ways. In the presidential primaries, Democratic candidates redoubled their efforts to appeal to religious voters; the Christian Right had become more fragmented, as longtime leaders such as Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy had passed from the scene; a new generation of evangelical voters appeared to be emerging, one apparently more environmentally sensitive and less reflexively Republican in their preferences; and, finally, the ongoing conflict in Iraq, rising oil prices, and a stagnant economy had largely pushed social issues off the table.

Historically, religious affiliation has been the most important factor in the relationship between religion and politics.¹ One’s religious group or

faith tradition served as the basis for party affiliation. Not surprisingly, different religious groups have predominated in party politics at different times, as religious groups have waxed and waned and the landscape has changed. But while the specifics have changed, religion has remained a constant force in American politics. Most crucially, highly religious people were found across various political divisions. In the early 1900s, for example, a Roman Catholic and a New England Protestant could have similarly high levels of religious devotion and participation but still have vastly different political attitudes and partisan preferences. In fact, it is precisely their equally intense levels of participation in different religious traditions that may explain their political differences.

Today, however, religion itself appears to be undergoing a transformation, and that transformation has implications for American electoral politics. While religious affiliation was a key political factor in the past, over the last few decades a new cleavage—one based on religious beliefs and values—has emerged. The divide is no longer between (for example) Baptists and Episcopalians, but between religious traditionalists on one side and secularists and modernists on the other. In this religious order of American politics, membership in particular religious traditions is less relevant (Kohut et al. 2000; Green 2007). Traditionalists across religious faiths and traditions (e.g., Catholic, evangelical, Jewish) side with each other politically, while nontraditionalists, regardless of their religious affiliation, find common cause on the other side of the political divide.

This book analyzes the role of religion in the 2008 presidential election in light of this apparent restructuring of religion. We provide context by assessing the role of religion in American political culture, as well as comparing the influences of religion in the nomination process and the general election in 2008. We examine not only how voters respond to candidates on the basis of their religious characteristics, but also how candidates may seek to appeal to religious voters, foster relationships with them, and work to turn them out to vote. Our goal is to ascertain more fully the ways in which changes in religion over time relate to presidential campaigns.

The 2008 Election in Perspective

The political context of the 2008 election was both markedly different from and similar to the one held four years earlier. First, it was the first time since 1952 that neither of the two major party nominees was a sitting president or vice president. In 2004, President George W. Bush was seeking reelection as the incumbent against his challenger, Senator John

Kerry. Given their office, sitting presidents seeking reelection have many weapons at their disposal, including access to free and extensive media coverage. As nonincumbents, neither McCain nor Obama had that kind of access in 2008.

Second, the combination of two characteristics of American politics—the two-party system and popular distrust of any concentration of power over time—affected the electoral context differently in 2008 than in 2004. After eight years of one-party control of the presidency, there were many more voters in 2008 who were inclined to believe that it is “time for a change” than what is typically found after four years of an administration.

Moreover, while the inclination toward periodic turnover in party power is common in American politics, the desire was amplified in 2008 by growing frustration with the war in Iraq, a third factor. Although the war was a matter of public debate during the 2004 presidential election, increasing numbers of Americans expressed discontent over the conflict in Iraq in the years following Bush’s reelection victory. The commitment of troops to Iraq was closely tied to the Bush administration, and President Bush ran for reelection in 2004 on the idea of staying the course in Iraq. However, the continued bombings that claimed innocent lives seemed a daily occurrence; casualties among American soldiers mounted; the Iraqi security forces did not appear to be able to assume command; and the government in Iraq did not appear to be stable. All these factors contributed to a growing dissatisfaction with existing American policy in Iraq.

Fourth, partly as a result of this discontent with policy in Iraq, an important shift in political power occurred following the 2006 congressional election. Democrats won control of Congress in 2006, giving the party majorities in both houses on Capitol Hill for the first time since 1994. This outcome suggested that the partisan tide in national politics may have turned toward the Democrats, and that the Democrats were well poised for victory in the 2008 presidential election.

In addition to changing attitudes about Iraq, certain other political issues were markedly different between the 2004 and 2008 elections. Issues related to the economy were much more important as the 2008 campaign unfolded. For example, while energy policy had been discussed intermittently over the past several decades, the rapid rise in oil prices during 2007 and 2008 meant that transportation costs jumped dramatically between the two elections—increasing the cost of the production and transportation of market goods, as well as leading to increased discontent over fuel prices. The economic standing of many families and important financial institutions were even more adversely affected by the declining housing market and increasing numbers of home foreclosures

that led to a crisis in financial markets and economic meltdown less than two months prior to the election. The focus of the campaign changed dramatically. Certainly, “hot-button” social issues (e.g., abortion and gay marriage) were still present, but their relative salience diminished substantially as economic issues moved front and center.

Another important factor was that the two major candidates in the race for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination were an African American (Barack Obama) and a woman (Hillary Clinton). While many women supported the Clinton campaign, the Obama campaign not only (eventually) solidified support among African Americans, it also attracted many young adults. Of course, none of these factors necessarily guaranteed a Democratic victory in the fall, but both campaigns mobilized new people into the political process. Indeed, participation in the Democratic primary process was at a record high—once again suggesting that the 2008 general election held great promise for the Democratic Party.

Finally, a key religious movement waned in influence in 2008. The leadership and organizational apparatus of the Christian Right, a political movement of religious conservatives long linked to support for the GOP, was clearly in disarray and decline. Many analysts still commented on the strength, if not the vitality, of the Christian Right in the 1996 or 2000 presidential elections, and clearly President Bush’s reelection contributed to ongoing discussion of the relative strength of the Christian Right as well. But the Christian Coalition, historically the most powerful of the grassroots organizations associated with the Christian Right, has largely disappeared from the political scene and its organizational strength is now virtually nonexistent. In addition, many of the old leaders of the Christian Right, such as Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy, passed away prior to the 2008 election, creating a kind of “leadership vacuum” within the Christian Right. Many of the remaining leaders are aging (e.g., Pat Robertson) and lack the same sway among conservative Christian voters as in the past.

On the other hand, each presidential election does not begin totally afresh. On the contrary, presidential elections are marked by a great deal of continuity, including the relative size of various voting blocs, the cultural expectations of presidential candidates, and the role of the two major parties in the election campaigns, as well as other factors.

First, the relative size of major social groups in the electorate does not change markedly from one election to the next. This continuity matters because many of these social groups are linked to support for one or the other of the major political parties. For example, over the course of the past several decades, African Americans have been strong supporters of

the Democratic Party and its candidates. However, the proportion of African Americans within the total electorate changes only marginally over a four-year period. Thus, the proportion of African Americans in the electorate remained approximately the same in 2008 as it was in 2004.² The same is true with regard to the proportion of all other major social demographic groups in the electorate, including women, Roman Catholics, and the college educated.

Second, cultural values do not change significantly in a four-year period. For example, cultural expectations related to the role of the president in American politics and the kind of qualities a president should possess remain basically the same across the span of two presidential elections. Similarly, while there were some shifts in attitudes toward religion in politics from 2004 to 2008, cultural expectations related to the role of religion in politics are generally unlikely to shift significantly over a four-year period.

Third, while the nominees of the major parties may change, the major parties that compete in presidential elections remain the same (with a few historical exceptions). The Democratic and Republican parties have long dominated the American political system. Some activists may be attracted to a party because of a particular candidate, but most activists who work for and contribute money to each party do so at least partly because of the party's historic policy emphases. Thus, the activist core of each party makes it difficult for either party to shift substantially in its policy positions. Given this continuity, voters are also largely familiar with the general emphases, priorities, and inclinations of both parties. As a result, neither major party is likely to shift substantially in their policy emphases and goals from one election to the next.

Fourth, while candidates may change, the partisan identifications of voters are typically stable. Research suggests that partisan identifications tend to be formed relatively early in life and that, once formed, they become resistant to change. Consequently, the percentages of Democrats and Republicans in the electorate do not shift much over a short period of time. Moreover, many voters cast their ballots in line with their partisan identifications, and thus the percentage of votes that the candidate of either major party is likely to receive falls within a certain range given the distribution of these partisan identifications within the electorate. While these general patterns were somewhat upset in the 2008 election, the shifts in overall party identification and partisan voting were most pronounced among new voters. Older voters tended to hold their partisan loyalties.

Fifth, over time, various social, economic, and religious groups develop ties to each of the political parties. Again, it is not that every member of

these particular groups necessarily votes according to these ties, but a sufficient number do so that conventional wisdom tends to associate such groups with supporting that particular party. For example, members of labor unions and Jews are linked to the Democratic Party, while business leaders and evangelical Protestants are linked to the Republican Party.

These elements of continuity, among others, suggest that changes in the level of support for the two candidates between the 2004 and 2008 election were probably not as substantial as media portrayals of the 2008 election sometimes suggested. To be sure, the election was a landmark in many ways, as we will discuss. Yet the long view suggests that Obama's victory was not necessarily the result of some dramatic change in the electorate. The old political adage is that "elections are won at the margins." A candidate does not have to substantially change the proportion of votes won among members of some social group in order to dramatically affect the outcome of an election. A shift of even 4 percent among women voters, for example, could result in a two-percentage-point national shift in support for the two major candidates—moving a 51 to 49 percent result in favor of one party to a 51 to 49 percent result in favor of the opposing party. Thus, even with this substantial continuity from one election to the next, the results of elections can nevertheless change dramatically.

Perspectives on the Relationship of Religion to American Politics

What role, then, did religion play in both generating change and reinforcing continuity in the 2008 election? To answer that question, we need to address another question: in what ways does religion affect elections in general? We suggest there are at least two major ways religion may shape American electoral behavior.

The first approach focuses primarily on the mass public. Here religion is treated as an individual trait, and therefore as something that varies from individual to individual. Some members of the electorate are religiously affiliated, while others are not, and those who are religiously affiliated vary in terms of their specific religious faith traditions and denominations. Likewise, some members of the electorate hold particular religious belief strongly, while others may hold beliefs weakly or not at all. However, regardless of whether one analyzes religion in terms of specific religious beliefs or affiliations, this approach suggests that religion functions largely as an internal mechanism that may shape one's political thinking and decision making.

The second way that religion shapes electoral politics is through political activists and elites using religion to generate candidate support and shape voter turnout. As we discuss in more detail below, different kinds of actors can engage in such activities, and various means can be employed in the effort to activate or intensify the salience of religion for political purposes. But regardless of the particular actors or methods involved, this approach focuses on external efforts to activate and mobilize religious voters.

Religion as Voter-driven Linkage

Historically, there have been two competing theoretical explanations for how religion serves as an internal mechanism in electoral politics: the *ethnoreligious perspective* and the *theological restructuring perspective*. The former emphasizes religious group affiliations and draws more heavily on sociological perspectives; the latter emphasizes religious beliefs and values and draws more heavily from cognitive psychology. The ethnoreligious perspective adopts Emile Durkheim's (1915) focus on religion as a social phenomenon, emphasizing the political implications of an individual's affiliation with a religious group. The restructuring perspective traces its roots to Max Weber ([1930] 1992), who saw religion embodied in beliefs, which shaped political attitudes and behavior. More recently, something of a synthesis has emerged—a perspective that views religion as embodying belonging (or affiliation), beliefs, and behavior, with all three influencing political life.

Religious Belonging. Many pollsters, pundits, and politicians have relied implicitly on an ethnoreligious interpretation of American politics. As developed by historians, this theory identifies the key religious groups as the historic denominations born in Europe and later multiplying on America's shores. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and myriad other Protestants combined distinct religious worldviews with other cultural attributes, such as ethnicity, race, or region. They were soon joined by other traditions, including Catholics, Jews, Eastern Orthodox, and other “outside” or minority religious groups at the time. All these religious groups developed their own political cultures, often in conflict with neighboring groups. These cultures were fostered by religious leaders, houses of worship, and ethnic communities. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American party politics involved competing alliances of ethnoreligious groups (Kleppner 1970, 1979; Jensen 1971; Formisano 1983; Swierenga 1990).

For many historians, religion shaped American politics primarily through religious belonging, with partisan affiliations and voting behavior

reflecting “political expressions of shared values derived from the voter’s membership in, and commitment to, ethnic and religious groups” (Kleppner 1970, 35). Given a two-party system and high religious diversity, specific religious groups naturally sought like-minded allies to influence American politics, as each religious group, no matter how large, needed allies if it wished to impact electoral politics. In the nineteenth century, a coalition of “pietists” (primarily Whig and Republican) faced an alliance of “liturgicals” (primarily Democratic), later joined by southern white Protestants as a result of the Civil War (Kleppner 1970 and 1979; Jensen 1971). By the mid-twentieth century, these coalitions had reorganized, but ethnoreligious loyalties remained at their base. Mainline Protestants³ provided both leadership and faithful voters to the Republican Party, while Catholics, Jews, black Protestants, and other religious minorities—including out-groups such as southern evangelicals—constituted the bedrock of the Democratic Party. As a result, early social science research on voting in the 1940s found substantial partisan differences pitting most Protestants against Catholics, Jews, and southern evangelicals, even with the class-based politics of the New Deal supposedly dominant (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954).

Despite the historical value of the ethnoreligious model, some observers argue that it has lost relevance in contemporary politics. In particular, the underlying bases for ethnoreligious politics—the powerful social integration within religious traditions, the social isolation of those traditions, and the strong tensions among traditions (Kleppner 1979)—have largely vanished. Nevertheless, while some of the foundations of the ethnoreligious model may have dissipated, one’s religious group affiliation may still continue to be politically important today. First, the political behavior of certain close-knit religious groups like black Protestants, Latino Catholics, Jews, and Latter-day Saints suggests that the model may have some staying power. And second, even affiliation with a church in the historic evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Catholic traditions may still matter politically, in part because Americans tend to perceive membership as “elective” today, allowing believers to choose a congenial religious—and political—environment (Green and Guth 1993).

Religious Beliefs. Although many analysts still focus on religious tradition, variously defined (Manza and Brooks 1999; Steensland et al. 2000; Layman 2001; Leege et al. 2002), some sociologists argue that ethnoreligious descriptions of religious life and its implications for politics have less utility today than in the past. As ascriptive affiliations⁴ break down and as geographic mobility has increased, Americans move more freely among



FIGURE 1.1. A county-level mapping of the 2008 presidential election. White sections are the counties that voted for McCain; gray sections are the counties that voted for Obama.

religious settings, ignoring the historic ties of doctrine, denomination, ethnicity, region, and even family (Ammerman 1997). As people re-sort themselves into congenial theological environments, religion has been “restructured” into two camps with opposing worldviews, fostered by competing religious institutions and leaders. As Robert Wuthnow (1988) and James Davison Hunter (1991) have argued, old religious traditions have been polarized by theological, social, and cultural conflicts into a “conservative,” “orthodox,” or “traditionalist” faction on one side, and a “liberal,” “progressive,” or “modernist” one on the other. For some theorists, the growing number of secular Americans is a natural extension of the “liberal” or “progressive” side—and may even be the product of struggles over restructuring (Hout and Fischer 2002). Wuthnow explored the split primarily within religious institutions, but Hunter’s apocalyptic title, *Culture Wars*, projected the divisions into the polity, as a threat to social stability. Much of the media attention to the 2004 presidential election reinforced this perspective, suggesting that the electorate is cleaved in two, as represented by ubiquitous electoral maps that starkly distinguish “red” from “blue” states. Despite Obama’s relatively strong victory, those cultural distinctions appeared to persist in the 2008 election, as suggested in the county-level map in figure 1.1.

Although scholarly reaction to the “culture wars” thesis has often focused on these purported political manifestations (Williams 1997;

Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Nivoli and Brady 2006), Wuthnow and Hunter's original formulations were rooted in theological changes that had led to the emergence of two competing, largely opposing, worldviews. The competing camps were characterized by alternative belief systems, different religious practices, and adherence to rival religious movements.⁵ Indeed, the identification of these competing forces probably constitutes the most valuable insight of the restructuring perspective. Although critics are rightly skeptical about extreme statements of the restructuring theory, evidence for a milder version is convincing, especially in older American religious institutions. The religious press reveals continual battles between traditionalists and modernists in almost every major Protestant body, as well as in the American Catholic Church. Although rooted in theology and practice, these struggles also produce opposing moral, social, economic, and political perspectives. To be sure, "culture war" theorists overstate the consequent polarization, both within religious institutions and the mass public; there are "centrists" in the religious wars, and "moderates" in the political wars. But the religious divisions they identify may well influence politics, if only because both religious and political elites are polarized, thus shaping the cues presented to the public (Guth et al. 1997; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005).

Conclusion. Over the past two decades, there has been growing evidence that a new religious order in American politics may be emerging. However, though these changes have diminished the effects of the old religious order, they have not fully eliminated them. Hence, both orders are currently operating. But the question is whether this coexistence will continue, or whether one such order will come to dominate and replace the other order. It is highly unlikely that one election can provide the complete answer to this question, but the 2008 election may well provide some clues related to the issue.

Religion as Elite-driven Linkage

Clergy may encourage the faithful to vote on Election Day; religious interest group activists may issue and distribute candidate scorecards; candidates for public office may appear before some religious groups but not others; political leaders may frame their messages to target certain religious groups. Clearly, political actors can engage in different kinds of activities to try to mobilize voters on Election Day, as well as to try to dissuade other voters from turning out (Leege et al. 2002).

Briefly, political elites may adopt four different means by which to use religion to mobilize voters. First, candidates may choose to appeal or not

to appeal to particular religious groups by *posturing* themselves in particular ways. Religious posturing simply refers to a candidate providing some modicum of attention to a religious group, some recognition of the particular concern(s) of such a group, or some identification with a group—without necessarily embracing the group or even its political positions. For example, posturing may mean a candidate chooses to appear with certain religious leaders but not with others.⁶ It may mean that a candidate goes on political pilgrimages (Domke and Coe 2008, 75–80) by visiting people or places that have an elevated significance for a religious group, and, in so doing, build appreciation within the targeted group with this display of solidarity.

Second, political candidates and public figures may engage in religious *signaling* (Domke and Coe 2008). This may involve the use of symbols that are more familiar to certain kinds of voters than others, or it may be some more direct form of communication. Regardless, the intent is to signal its intended audience that the person shares or reflects certain values with them. For example, Bill Clinton’s campaign in the 1992 presidential election was based on a “new covenant” with the American people. The word “covenant” is a term imbued with rich religious meaning, something that religious voters would easily recognize. Similarly, through most of President George W. Bush’s years in office, evangelical Michael Gerson served as his speechwriter, and he was well acquainted with religious language that resonated with his religious base of voters. For example, in Bush’s 2003 State of the Union Address, the president evoked an easily recognized and quite famous line from an old gospel hymn when, speaking of America’s deepest problems, President Bush said, “The need is great. Yet there’s power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.”⁷ And candidate Obama frequently referenced an “awesome God,” a phrase contained in a song frequently sung within contemporary Christian services. In each of these examples, a candidate or president provides a recognition of or identification with a group—without conveying any specific policy positions or necessarily embracing that particular group.

A third way political elites may seek to activate voters is by *framing* their political messages in particular ways that may appeal to religious voters. Though related to religious signaling, framing is an analytically distinct endeavor. Here the candidate chooses to discuss issues through the particular analytical lenses that reflect the viewpoint of the particular group(s) from which one is seeking support. For example, the issue of gay marriage might be viewed as a moral issue or an issue of equality under the law, and candidates are free to choose whichever lens or framework they

wish to address the issue. In so doing, political candidates (as well as elected officials) work hard to provide cues to voters about themselves that relate to the core values of which they as members of particular groups care deeply. For many Americans, these core values are grounded in faith, with elections thereby becoming “moral referendums” (Domke, Shaw, and Wackman 1998).

Finally, in addition to these other efforts, political elites may engage in direct efforts at *mobilizing* religious voters to go to the polls. For example, Barack Obama worked with ministers of African-American congregations to engage in a massive voter registration drive because he believed the black church and its members could be decisive in a tight presidential race. So, too, McCain, who has had an uneasy relationship with evangelicals, nevertheless sought to replicate the success of George W. Bush in getting out the white evangelical vote.

Moreover, in addition to candidates seeking to mobilize religious voters, many religious interest groups choose to engage in the political process by distributing information to voters as a means of influencing voting decisions and policy (e.g., Wilcox and Sigelman 2001; Guth et al. 2007).⁸ Quite a range of moral or religious interest groups have been active in recent elections, covering the breadth of the liberal-conservative political continuum. As we discuss in chapter 6, many new such groups were formed between the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, particularly on the more liberal end of the political spectrum.

Participation in congregational life also fosters the building of personal communication networks that are associated with political participation, and during recent presidential elections there has been a great deal of political discussion among members of religious congregations (Guth et al. 1998, 2002, 2007). Personal contacts are one of the most important and effective means of eliciting participation, and campaign organizations and political parties routinely use face-to-face and telephone contacts to persuade and mobilize voters (e.g., Eldersveld 1956; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994; Gerber and Green 2000a, 2000b, 2001; McClurg 2004). Moreover, those who are most likely to be contacted are those already somewhat predisposed to participate and to vote for their party’s candidates (namely, those who are registered to vote and are socially connected to their communities). The net result is that Democrats mainly contact Democratic-oriented groups, while Republicans focus on Republican-oriented groups (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Gershtenson 2003; Wielhouwer 2003; Panagopolous and Wielhouwer 2008). Thus, the Bush campaign and allied groups made the mobilization of evangelical Protestants a high priority in 2004 (Monson

and Oliphant 2007), while Democrats undertook similar efforts among black Protestants. After all, houses of worship provide a natural venue for organizing people for many purposes, including politics. It is clear that churches continue to be, at least for some traditions, particularly important venues through which political contacts are made and participation encouraged (see also Brewer, Kersh, and Petersen 2003).

Religion and the 2008 Presidential Election

It is sometimes said that two things one should not discuss with guests across a dinner table are religion and politics. This adage partly reflects the fact that many people take both matters very seriously and, as a result, to raise either topic can invite conflict. Still, religion is far more important to most Americans than politics: nearly a majority of Americans say that religion is the most important thing in their life, but almost no one makes the same claim about politics.

This book analyzes the role of religion in the 2008 presidential election and the extent to which it was an important factor shaping the outcome of the election campaign. It differs from previous examinations in that, rather than focusing simply on how religion shapes voting choices on Election Day, it examines the role of religion throughout the whole course of the campaign—revealing the many ways in which religion comes into play during the election campaign. Any contention that religion played only a minor role in shaping the outcome of the 2008 election adopts far too narrow a view of presidential elections. For example, religion played a role in shaping the selection of the nominees of both political parties. Clearly Romney’s Mormon faith and the relationship of Obama to his controversial pastor were matters of public discussion and contention. In addition, for the first time in decades, Democrats made a concerted effort to reach religious voters, including evangelical Protestants. The early Democratic “religious forums” and the fact that each major Democratic candidate had a “religious outreach” staffer as part of his or her campaign organization made religion a part of the Democratic story from the beginning of the election campaign. Democratic candidates were much more prone during the 2008 campaign to talk about their religious faith and how it shaped their approach to public policy. Thus, any assessment of the role of religion in the 2008 election must take a broader view of the election than simply the voting of religious groups on Election Day—it must examine both primary and general elections in terms of how campaign teams targeted their religious messages and structured their organizations

to reach out to different religious groups. Only when the vote totals on Election Day are understood within the context of the total campaign effort can one properly interpret the role of religion in election results.

This volume also provides a historical and cultural context for understanding the role that religion plays in presidential election campaigns, and it provides comparative analyses with the 2004 presidential election in order to assess the extent to which religion shaped election outcomes similarly or differently across the two elections. As we noted earlier, elections are conventionally said to be won at the “margins.” In other words, small changes in voting patterns from one election to the next can alter the election outcome significantly. When alterations in power occur, attention is typically paid to the “new” and what has changed across the two elections, and certainly changes in religious voting patterns may have helped to account for such a change in power. However, the flip side of the fact that elections are won at the margins is that, even with significant changes in electoral outcome, there is likely to be far more continuity than change in voting patterns across the two elections. After all, even though the outcome of the 2008 election was substantially different than that of the 2004 election, Obama won only 5 percent more votes in 2008 than Kerry did in 2004. Consequently, the basic patterns of how religion undergirded the voting results in 2004 likely continued to be largely present in 2008, with only marginal changes having occurred across the two elections that contributed to the substantial change in results. Thus, an analysis of religion in the 2008 election provides an important vantage point from which to assess both the change and the continuity evident across the two elections.

Finally, one could argue that the 2008 presidential election provided “the perfect storm” in which to test the extent to which religion might undergird American election results. After all, prior to the banking crisis that captured public attention in late September, polling suggested it would be a very close election contest, with McCain actually enjoying a slight postconvention edge. Yet if religion is still a major factor in structuring voting decisions in an election that is centered on economic issues (e.g., the fallout of a major economic crisis, the loss of jobs, the demand for universal health care—not to mention an unpopular war) rather than social issues, then such a result would suggest the central importance of religion in shaping American election outcomes.

This study, particularly the analysis of voting on Election Day, will be based largely (though not exclusively) on the Henry Institute National Survey on Religion and Public Life. This study is a national survey of 3,002 Americans conducted April 8–May 10, 2008, followed by those

persons being re-interviewed following the presidential election (November 5–25, 2008).⁹ However, our analysis of the role of religion in the 2008 election, and in American presidential elections more generally, will not be confined to this sole source of data. Our analysis will draw upon other sources of information as well as a variety of other surveys conducted both prior to, and during, 2008 in order to support our contentions. These surveys typically contain a multiplicity of religious measures that enable the analyst not only to assess with great precision the religious characteristics of the respondents but also to assess the particular features of religious life that contribute most strongly to the religious divide politically.