

The identifiably Protestant vote, normally Republican, gave Carter the election in 1976 and may do so again

Religion and Presidential Politics, 1980

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In this presumably secular age it may astound many people that religion is still one of the primary components of voting behavior. But how else can one explain facts such as these: German Catholic communities in North Dakota gave Kennedy over 90 per cent of their votes but gave Stevenson less than 25 per cent. A German Catholic precinct in Wisconsin gave Kennedy a comfortable 63 per cent but has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since. A German Lutheran precinct in Wisconsin went for Stevenson but gave Kennedy less than a fourth of its votes. Three Baptist precincts in Roosevelt County, New Mexico, gave Stevenson comfortable majorities but Kennedy less than a third.

And, in 1976, a dozen Baptist counties in the South gave Carter over 80 per cent of their votes, compared to less than 20 per cent for McGovern and Humphrey. Nor does it take much imagination to answer this question: Why was it that the nation's ninety-six heaviest Baptist counties gave a majority of their votes, in the elections from 1948 to 1976, to only two Democrats, Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter: Answer: both were Baptists.

Admittedly, there are many modifying factors, such as geography, income, education, sectionalism, and secular issues that interact with religious affiliation. It is admittedly difficult to sort out the religious from the nonreligious factors in a given person's voting decision. But it is beyond doubt that religious group voting does occur in each election. It is how these groups react to one another, and to the candidates and parties, that causes the degree of religious voting. That interaction also shapes the outcome, turning a close election into a landslide, or a certain victory into an upset.

Consider a few more notable examples from the past:

1. The closely contested Civil War elections of 1868 to 1892 were largely the result of Northern Protestant Republicanism versus Catholic support for the Democrats. The Protestant South, before it became the "Solid

Democratic South" in the Garfield-Hancock election of 1880, was too weak and embittered to exercise any substantial political power. Except for Baptists living in the Southern tier of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, the great Evangelical Protestant Establishment was thoroughly wedded to the GOP.

2. The realignment election of 1896 brought hundreds of thousands of Northern Catholic voters, especially those of German, Italian, and French Canadian descent, into the Republican party. Deserting William Jennings Bryan in droves, the Catholic vote swing offset a smaller Protestant defection to the most fundamentalist major party candidate in U.S. history. Though McKinley's foreign policy, perceived to be anti-Catholic, almost caused a reversal of this trend in the 1900 election, this pattern remained until the Al Smith revolution of 1928. (Incidentally, German Lutherans, who shared many cultural concerns with Catholics, also rejected Bryan and started voting Republican.) In 1920 an unexpectedly heavy Catholic vote for the GOP national ticket gave the Republicans their biggest landslide to that date.

3. The 1928 realignment made Democrats out of millions of Catholics. The bigotry and nativism of that at once horrible and colorful campaign drove large numbers of Catholics (and Jews) permanently away from the GOP. The French Catholic wards of Holyoke, Massachusetts, loyally Republican for decades, gave Smith over 90 per cent on election day. They have *never* voted for a Republican for president since, not for Eisenhower in 1956 or Nixon in 1972.

Many Northern Protestant rural and small-town voters, who loved Bryan and Wilson, rejected Smith with a vengeance. They began to perceive the Democratic party as an "alien" force. Sectarian strongholds such as Holmes County, Ohio, and York, Pennsylvania, which had been solidly Democratic, gave 20 per cent or less to Smith, and have generally been rejecting Democrats ever since.

4. Franklin Delano Roosevelt won a majority of Protestant votes only in the 1932 and 1936 elections, and then because of the severe economic dislocations and almost total Southern support. His high Catholic sup-

ALBERT J. MENENDEZ's latest book is *The Religious Factor in the 1980 Election*, soon to be published.

port began to trickle off with the defection of Al Smith conservatives in 1936, and a large, perhaps 30-40 per cent, vote for Wendell Willkie in 1940. Catholic defections to Willkie made the 1940 race tight in many Northern states. Only the increasingly more Democratic Jewish and black support saved FDR in several states. Northern Protestants were solidly Republican again.

5. The Catholic defectors came back to Truman in 1948, especially in German and Irish areas, providing the cushion needed by the president in several crucially close states. Defections among Southern Protestants to J. Strom Thurmond, and among Jews and blacks to Henry Wallace, proved irrelevant to the final outcome. In 1952 and 1956 the near-record Catholic votes for Eisenhower made the difference between two close races and two landslides for the genial general.

6. The 1960 race, not unexpectedly, found the most religion-specific voting since 1928. On balance John Kennedy lost more votes because of religion than he gained, but a growing and vigorous Catholic population provided the necessary votes in key strategic areas. Of course Jews and blacks were also important in the JFK victory. A Protestant backlash cost Kennedy a dozen or so states that an attractive Democrat should have carried.

7. In 1964 almost everyone liked Lyndon Baines Johnson, and only among Catholics and Deep South Baptists did Barry Goldwater register any gains. In 1968, though, Catholic and Southern Protestant disillusionment with the Democrats allowed Richard Nixon to squeak in the White House door. The disastrous campaign of George McGovern was instrumental in temporarily converting millions of Catholics and Jews to the GOP—more, in fact, than in any election since 1920.

8. The Jimmy Carter candidacy brought the religion issue back again. Protestant crossovers to the born-again Georgian neatly pirouetted ahead of wary Catholic and Jewish defections to Gerald Ford. In a dozen or more states, Carter's near-record Protestant vote (the highest percentage in thirty-six years, except for LBJ) saved him from a narrow defeat. Carter carried, for example, heavily Protestant Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio, which had rejected Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, but lost Catholic Connecticut, which had supported Kennedy and Humphrey.

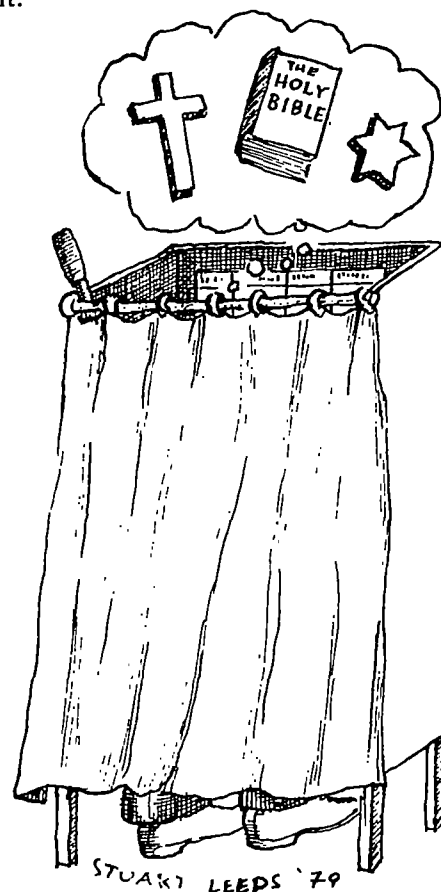
So what about 1980? Carter's White House style and religious identification have intensified, rather than mitigated, some of the religious themes that surfaced in the 1976 campaign. So, too, have his positions on certain Church-State issues. *The way America's religious groups vote in 1980 will very likely decide who sits in the Oval Office come January, 1981.*

Carter's narrow 1976 victory over Gerald Ford reveals some fascinating religious realignments. In a nutshell, both candidates were modestly successful in raiding the other's historic coalition. Carter ran considerably better among Protestants than is normal for Democrats, but less well among Catholics and Jews. Carter carried fifteen of the seventeen heaviest evangelical states, narrowly failing only in Oklahoma and Vir-

ginia. His extraordinary showing in southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, and in central and southern Pennsylvania, suggests that the Protestant vote was crucial to his election. Catholic defections were offset by Protestant gains in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Carter carried or almost carried several Ohio and Pennsylvania Protestant strongholds lost by Kennedy and Humphrey.

The Protestant vote proved to be crucial in 1976. Protestants of all stripes constitute the largest voting bloc. There is general agreement that Carter won a record (except for LBJ) 46 per cent of the Protestant vote, which represents a solid gain of 7 per cent over the 1952-72 Democratic norm. In rough figures Carter attracted 2,240,000 normally Republican Protestant votes, for a net gain of 4.5 million votes. He ran better among Protestants than winners Truman and Kennedy, and even topped FDR's 1944 and 1940 showings. He ran well ahead of Adlai Stevenson, Humphrey, and McGovern. This significant turnabout may well have been the decisive factor of the 1976 election.

Whether or not they identified themselves as "evangelical," Protestant voters in every geographic region gave Jimmy Carter a solid vote. From Iowa and Missouri to Maine and Vermont, Protestant voters liked Jimmy. The most amazing result came in Gerald Ford's home state of Michigan, where Carter ran well ahead of Kennedy and Humphrey in Protestant areas—even though he lost the state, while Kennedy and Humphrey carried it.



Carter's Protestant gains outdistanced small Catholic losses in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Missouri and enabled him to win all four states, while JFK had not taken Ohio and Kentucky. We are accustomed to

think only in terms of Catholic and Jewish voting, but an identifiable Protestant vote may also become a focus of future political maneuvering.

Among the evangelicals Carter won a solid 40 per cent, or 6.4 million of 16 million evangelical votes. By cutting Ford's majority to 3.2 million among evangelicals, Carter's 4.9 million majority among Catholics, Jews, nonevangelical Protestants, and the religiously nonaffiliated was enough to win the presidency. In 1968, on the other hand, Humphrey had a 6.7 million vote lead among all nonevangelicals but could not overcome Nixon's 7.2 million majority among evangelicals.

The evangelical vote for Carter represented many things: (1) a belief that evangelical principles offer sound answers to the acute problems of modern society; (2) a guarantee of personal integrity in the White House; and (3) a stamp of approval on the rising cultural aspirations of evangelicals, who have been scorned (or felt themselves to be scorned) in the national cultural milieu since the 1930's.

Winning a majority of Catholic votes has always been essential to Democratic strategists. In 1976 the Democrats were somewhat more successful among other segments of their usual coalition, but surely would have lost the election without at least a majority of the pivotal Catholic vote. CBS gave Carter 55 per cent of the Catholics, while NBC gave him 56 per cent and Gallup gave him 57 per cent. NBC showed Irish-Catholics 51 per cent for Carter and Italian-Catholics 57 per cent for him.

The relative decline in Catholic Democratic vote support in 1976 was probably due to a combination of many factors. Notable were doubts that a small-town Southerner could really understand the needs of urban dwellers and the traditional Catholic reserve about candidates who emphasize public morality. Many Catholics felt that Carter's approach to problem-solving placed too great an emphasis on subjective factors. Writing in the Jesuit magazine *America*, Professor James M. Powell said: "They [Catholics] can share Governor Carter's deep concern about the need for moral revival, but many stop short at his failure to develop programs and query his practicality. The reason for this is that Catholics are accustomed to living within a highly developed institution, and they expect approaches to reform to be cast in institutional and programmatic terms, while the evangelical Carter regards such approaches as secondary to his main thrust for moral reform, the restoration of goodness."

The Jewish community gave Jimmy Carter a substantial majority, but one that failed to match the Democratic norm. NBC gave Carter 75 per cent, CBS 68 per cent, and the University of Michigan Survey Research Center 67 per cent of the Jewish vote.

Carter's reiteration of long-time Democratic commitments to Israel and to social justice convinced an initially skeptical constituency that his Baptist upbringing would not prevent his understanding the Jewish community, its values and priorities. (Despite some initial misgivings, the religiously nonaffiliated also gave a majority, 59 per cent, to Mr. Carter.)

Carter's religious style and his positions on several Church-State issues will affect segments of the electorate in discernible ways. But first a word about how religion affects voting decisions in general. Of course individuals in each religious community will respond to religious stimuli in different ways. The more devout and knowledgeable believers are likely to allow their religious belief to influence their voting behavior more directly. Those who accept their tradition's guidance and insights will be more inclined to explicitly religious voting, whether consciously or unconsciously. When members of a religious group believe that their safety, status, or pride as a group is linked to a party or candidate, the religious factor looms large. Catholic support for Al Smith and John Kennedy tended to fall in this category. So too did the neurotic, paranoid anti-Catholic voting of certain other religious groups, who feared that America's putatively Protestant character would not survive a Smith or Kennedy as president.

When members of a religious group perceive their religious values as inextricably tied to a particular party or candidate, similar religious factors come to the fore. Most Jews, Catholics, and liberal Protestants have seen the Democratic party as the vehicle of social enlightenment and progress since New Deal days. Evangelical Protestants in the North have viewed the Republican party in the same light since the Civil War. These connections are gradually eroding.

Sometimes belief and status are mutually reinforcing, but at times they seem to work at cross-purposes. There is an identifiable correlation between religious and political liberalism and between religious and political conservatism, though this is not as pronounced as it used to be. The cause/effect relationship is not clear, but those who hold liberal theological views tend to vote for liberal Democratic candidates. The ultimate questions of the nature of man and the purpose of government are at the heart of this correlation.

On the other hand, data show that regular attendance at high-status Protestant churches reinforces political liberalism, but occasional or peripheral church involvement in high-status churches is somewhat more related to political conservatism. In lower-status, generally evangelical or fundamentalist, churches high attendance and involvement tend to reinforce political conservatism, while occasional attendance is associated with more liberal attitudes.

Another important factor is the religious character of a given community. There is no high correlation between religious bloc voting per se and the power of a given religious group in a given area *unless that group feels threatened*. For example, Catholics in South Boston, which is 95 per cent Catholic, are not necessarily more likely to vote in a bloc for a Catholic presidential candidate than, say, a small enclave of Catholic voters in rural Pennsylvania. They may be less likely, in fact, since they are used to exercising political power and may even be bored by voting for Catholics all the time. Where one is likely to encounter high religious voting is in closely divided counties where an intense rivalry exists between two or several religious groups. In the

historically German Catholic area of Nelson and Marion Counties, Kentucky (site of the early Bardstown settlement and Thomas Merton's Trappist Community at Gethsemani), Catholics voted 88 per cent for Kennedy. Baptists nearby gave him only 33 per cent. Baptist-Catholic clashes are commonplace in Kentucky, and an anxiety syndrome prevails in those counties where both groups are strong, or where one group is gaining on the other. In this part of Kentucky Baptists have gained on Catholics in the last two decades, making considerable inroads in this onetime Catholic stronghold.

Finally, religion is still the silent issue in U.S. politics because its influence tends to be imperceptible. It affects the realm of the subconscious more than the conscious because most Americans, including religious Americans, tend to compartmentalize private belief and public decisions. And the prevailing secular gurus tell us that religion is only a private matter anyway.

President Carter has taken a determinedly separationist, as opposed to accommodationist, stance on Church-State issues during his presidency. The separationist position emphasizes a minimum of interaction between the institutions of religion and government, particularly at the financial line. He opposed the tax credit proposal of Senators Daniel P. Moynihan (D-N.Y.) and Robert Packwood (R-Ore.), calling it wasteful and probably unconstitutional and threatening to veto it. In doing so he may have alienated a segment of the Catholic electorate and perhaps a growing number of conservative Protestants as well. At the same time, he solidified his support with liberal Protestants and Jews and with the public education lobby. Interestingly, two of the most prominent Catholic Democrats, Senator Edward Kennedy and Representative Robert Drinan, supported the president vigorously on this issue.

In April, 1979, the president denounced Senator Jesse Helms's (R-N.C.) so-called Prayer Amendment, saying that "the government ought to stay out of the prayer business." Carter's position remarkably parallels that of President John F. Kennedy, who urged support for the U.S. Supreme Court's widely unpopular and widely misunderstood 1962 decision banning state-sponsored or prescribed prayers or religious devotions in public schools. No Church-State rulings have been more contentious than those banning mandatory prayer and Bible-reading in public schools. By and large, Republicans and conservatives in both parties favor some sort of measure to restore what they call "voluntary" prayer, though most religious leaders, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, oppose such moves as mischievous and unnecessary, maintaining that truly voluntary prayer has never been disallowed by Court edict. These twin issues may hurt Carter politically because proponents of aid to religious schools and religious exercises in public schools, even if they are not a majority of all voters, feel more strongly about these issues than do opponents. (Still, neither issue helped Gerald Ford or Ronald Reagan a great deal in 1976.)

The abortion issue is likely to affect more votes than any other social issue in the 1980's. Numerous surveys

now show that those who want to rescind, in one way or another, the 1973 Supreme Court legalization are gaining considerable political strength. Though antiabortionists may not outnumber proabortionists, they constitute a more coherent, disciplined, and fervent flock. Their views cannot be ignored. But it is not entirely certain which party or candidate will gain from their rising political clout. (It is possible that a conservative Republican nominee would be the likely recipient of explicitly antiabortion voting.) Mr. Carter is somewhat ambivalent on the issue, but his strong opposition to public financing of elective abortions has won him some admiration from these forces. Both Governor Jerry Brown and Senator Kennedy, despite what many perceive as their nominal Catholicism, seem more proabortion than Carter.

Among many evangelicals Carter remains a hero. They see him as a quiet man who walks with God. Confused and perplexed by numerous secular issues, many evangelicals prefer to trust a man of Carter's conviction and inner spirituality. Though politically sophisticated evangelicals may judge Carter solely on his secular achievements, many more evangelicals put character above specific achievements and may well stick with him, come what may. Veteran political observers note that Carter has generally received higher approval rates from white Protestants than from Catholics, Jews, or blacks. This is unheard of for a Democratic president. The one remaining bastion of Republicanism tends to like *this* Democrat, this Sunday school teacher from Plains, better than do traditionally Democratic voting groups. (This doesn't necessarily mean that WASPS will vote heavily for Carter over an acceptable Republican nominee, though.)

Jewish voters have been most disaffected by the Carter administration's Middle East policies and have given the president the lowest approval ratings during most of his term. Yet long-term success of his risky venture that resulted in the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty may yet produce a dramatic turnaround in this small but influential community. A majority of Jewish voters still prefer the Democratic party and are still moderate to liberal in political philosophy.

Though it is still early for bold predictions about 1980, I would hazard a guess that Mr. Carter will win reelection by a small margin, if he is renominated. The Democratic party primary and nominating process makes it likely that Carter will have a tougher time being renominated than reelected. Senator Edward Kennedy could win the nomination if he fought for it, but whether he could lead a bloodied, divided Democratic party to victory in November is problematical. Kennedy could certainly not hold the Protestant Republican crossovers that gave Carter the 1976 election, but he might win back the Catholic and Jewish defectors to Ford. Governor Brown, the Zen Jesuit flag-bearer for a balanced budget and other things not too clearly understood, has no permanent coalition with which to catapult himself to the Oval Office (or a furnished apartment nearby). None of the dozen GOP prospects seems strong enough at this point to defeat a president whose instincts seem squarely in the mainstream. **WV**