

---

## A WORD FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

Religion has always been critical in American politics. From the Republic's very origins, the United States was a dynamic religious society, with a proliferation of Protestant denominations, soon augmented by Catholic arrivals from Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, and later by Jews, Eastern Orthodox and other religious groups. The U.S. also had a way of spawning new religious traditions, such as the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists, each with its own political tendencies. And long after secularization had eroded religion's political effects in much of Europe, American religion still mattered for politics: ethnocultural historians amply demonstrated that US political parties had distinctive ethnoreligious constituencies — and catered to those constituencies in the choice of candidates, political style, and public policy.

But American religion is changing and so is its relationship to partisan politics. Three major trends have presented parties and candidates with a new religious environment. First, American faith itself has become ever more diverse, with a growing number of ethnoreligious "minorities." As late as the 1960s the great bulk of the electorate was drawn from among white Evangelical and Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants and Catholics of European descent; that is no longer the case. Mainline Protestants have dwindled in number, as have European-origin Catholics. Even white Evangelicals, long resistant to numerical decline, have become a smaller part of the electorate. At the same time, Latino and Asian Catholics and Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and other religious groups have grown in number, complicating electoral strategies for both parties.

A second trend has been the growing internal division within the older American religious traditions, with new religious differences producing novel political divisions. Sociologists of religion such as Robert Wuthnow and James Davison Hunter have argued that by 1990 most white Protestant churches were split between "traditionalists" and "progressives" (or similar terms), based on religious worldviews. The former held both orthodox religious and conservative political views, while the later combined "liberal" perspectives on both. And for three decades, the religious press has chronicled the splits, schisms and internal battles within major Protestant denominations. By this century, similar divides had opened among white Catholics, perhaps reaching an apogee with the contemporary battles between theological factions in the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. In all three traditions (and among American Jews), the traditionalists increasingly populated the GOP, while the progressives moved toward the Democrats. As a result, these "restructuring" divisions overlaid the old ethnoreligious ones.

Finally, although the U.S. had long resisted the forces of secularization that had laid waste to the religious landscape of Western Europe, by the turn of the

---

21<sup>st</sup> century more and more Americans were reporting that they no longer identified with any religious tradition, a tendency that was especially strong among the young. Some observers explained this trend as a reaction to the marriage of Christian conservatives with the Republican party and its adoption of anti-gay, pro-life and other socially “intolerant” traditionalist postures. Others saw the development stemming from larger social developments, such as geographic mobility, higher education, and alternative social opportunities. Whatever the case, a burgeoning contingent of “Nones” represented a new constituency in politics—a challenge for Republicans and an opportunity for the Democrats.

In this issue, the authors address all these developments with a focus on critical aspects of American religious politics. In the first essay, Lyman Kellstedt and I provide a broad historical overview of religious voting in the US since the advent of scientific polling in the 1930s. We show that American political parties have always had distinctive religious constituencies, but that the nature of their electoral coalitions has changed dramatically. Old ethnoreligious divisions between Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Catholics and Black Protestants largely defined religious voting until the 1970s, when the impact of religious restructuring began to be felt, as traditionalists began moving toward the Republicans and progressives toward the Democrats. More recently, growing numbers of secular voters and new religious minorities have bolstered the Democratic ranks. Whatever the respective contributions of ethnoreligious affiliation and theological perspective, we find that religious variables are much more powerful than socioeconomic factors in predicting the presidential vote. And these religious factors are increasingly “baked in” to America’s polarized party alignments.

Catholics have been a crucial political constituency for much of American history, usually on the Democratic side. Although the ethnic makeup of American Catholicism has changed dramatically in the past several decades, Catholics still constitute roughly a quarter of the electorate. And given the “Catholic” candidacy of Joe Biden, the response of American Catholics in 2020 is especially intriguing. Corwin Smidt provides a richly detailed look at the role of American Catholics in the 2020 nominating and election campaign, focusing on the diversity of “Catholic” responses. Although any conclusive assessment is limited somewhat by differences among data sources, Smidt finds that a slight majority of Catholics voted for Donald Trump, ending a string of elections in which Catholics sided with the winner. Catholic voters were divided along racial and ethnic lines, with whites voting for Trump and Latinos, Blacks and other Catholics favoring Biden, although Trump did somewhat better among Latinos than he did in 2016. Finally, the “God gap” between the devout and their less observant brethren grew in 2020, suggesting that religious restructuring continues apace among American Catholics. In any event, Catholic voters will remain an important target of future presidential candidates.

Like Catholics, religiously unaffiliated voters now constitute at least a quarter

---

(and perhaps more) of the electorate. Hunter Driggers and Ryan Burge provide important insights on this most rapidly growing “religious” category in the US, the “Nones.” They document the increasing numerical clout of this group and assess their political behavior in 2016 and 2020. They suggest that President Biden’s victory in 2020 owed a good bit to his strong performance among these voters (probably abetted by increased turnout and some shifting of previous third-party voters). Conversely, although Donald Trump did not do particularly well among these voters in 2016, he lost even more ground in 2020. The authors also confirm another trend: religiously unaffiliated voters are not all the same: atheists are the most liberal and Democratic, with agnostics a little more toward the middle, and the “nothing in particulars” still more centrist. Thus, while “Nones” as a group lean strongly Democratic, there are important differences within the category. Given their numbers, both parties will have to develop strategies to maximize gains (Democrats) or minimize losses (Republicans) among these voters.

Finally, Kedron Bardwell provides a look at the perspectives of religious leaders, in the context of the often-critical Iowa caucuses, the first real stop on the Republican and Democratic nominating process. In 2020, Iowa clergy in the Evangelical, Mainline and Catholic traditions exhibited distinctive orientations toward the parties, presidential candidates, and political issues. He discovers that Democratic clergy, who dominated among Mainline Protestants, were especially active, at least compared to earlier contests, perhaps as a result of their strong antipathy toward President Trump. Evangelical clergy, on the other hand, remained solidly Republican in identification and were prepared to vote again for Trump, although seemingly with some real reservations about his character and performance. Finally, Catholic priests largely reflected the Church’s internal ideological divisions, with about half moving each way on partisanship and some issues. In a fascinating assessment, Bardwell notes that the much-controverted ideas of “Christian nationalism” found solid support among Evangelical and Catholic pastors, but were soundly rejected by Mainline clergy. In conclusion, Bardwell suggests that American clergy both reflect and contribute to the growing partisan polarization among religious groups—a theme implicit in all these articles.

**James L. Guth<sup>1</sup>**

---

1 James L. Guth (Ph.D., Harvard University) is William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Political Science at Furman University. His work on religion and politics has appeared in leading scholarly journals and edited volumes, and he is the author or coeditor of several books, including *The Oxford Handbook of religion and American Politics* (2017) and *Religion and the Culture Wars* (1996). Contact E-mail: jim.guth@furman.edu