

# The Religious Factor in American Politics

Historically, religious beliefs and organizations have played a large part in American social experience—and have been important elements in our politics. Today, the “religious factor” is again central politically, but in a form different from that of earlier eras. It’s also intensely controversial.

Two prominent political strategists, Geoff Garin on the Democratic side and Richard Wirthlin for the Republicans, begin our coverage with interviews in which they discuss their own findings on the role and impact of religious conservatives in current politics. Then, in the Public Opinion and Demographic Report which follows, we report 10 pages of poll findings on Americans’ religious commitments and the political implications of these commitments.

## “Voters Begin to Feel Uncomfortable When They Perceive Someone Wanting to Impose His Moral Views”

### Interview with Geoff Garin

**Public Perspective:** Religion has been such an important dimension of American society and politics from the beginning. How do you see the religious factor currently? What does the landscape look like now for those contending for political support?

**Geoff Garin:** To me the most important element is not the role which religion plays directly in the political dialog but rather the predictive nature of religion and religiosity in people’s voting behavior. I’ve been involved in situations where religious factors were nearly as good in terms of predicting voting as was political party identification.

**PP:** We will need to explore this further. But first, do you see some sort of trend—that is, movement in the direction of religious identities becoming more predictive politically than they used to be?

**GG:** I am not sure if there is such a trend—simply because I just don’t have the historical data. I do think that the kinds of issues which have been injected into recent political campaigns lend themselves more to bringing religious factors out in voting behavior. For example, the concentration on issues like abortion does that. We are in a period in American politics when there is a fairly widespread belief that a large part of America’s problems are moral in nature, or the result of an erosion of moral values. This tends to make religious influences more significant politically.

**Question:** ...which one of these statements comes closer to your point of view...The social and economic problems that face America are mainly the result of a decline in moral values....The social and economic problems that face America are mainly the result of financial pressures and strains on the family.

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| Problems result from decline in moral values                       | 44% |
| Problems result from financial pressures and strains on the family | 46% |
| Some of both/neither/not sure                                      | 10% |

**Source:** Survey by Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal, June 10-14, 1994.

**PP:** When you find these very strong associations between measures of religion or religiosity on the one hand, and electoral behavior on the other, what kinds of religion-related questions locate that? What’s

the cutting edge of the religious factor from a survey standpoint?

**GG:** We really look at it from a variety of positions. At the broadest level, one ques-

tion that we have been asking, in both our published polling and our political polling, is whether people think the most serious problems facing the country are economic or moral in origin. This divides the electorate into fairly even parts, and the division has a fair amount of predictive force. But then it is important to recognize that among those who say the problems are primarily moral in origin, not all are conservative in all their political viewpoints, or supportive of the philosophy that Pat Robertson brings to the political arena. So, on a second level, we look within that group of voters who put an emphasis on moral issues, and divide them into those who back a very conservative political agenda, and those who don’t necessarily feel comfortable with that agenda.

But to return to my main point here, the question of whether our major problems stem from moral decline is a very signifi-

cant one—very important to understanding what goes on in American political life these days. We are in a period when no candidate—Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative—can afford to ignore the value issues raised by these moral concerns.

**PP:** In your political polling, what additional questions do you ask with regard to people's religious ties and commitments?

**GG:** Let me give you an example. When I worked in the lieutenant governor's race in Virginia in 1993, the Democratic candidate's (Donald S. Beyer) opponent (Michael Farris) was a figure of what is called the "religious right." In that context, it was very important to understand who was who and what were the reaches and the limits of the appeal of the religious right.

The issue was not Farris's religious ties per se—nor is it in similar races today. The concerns that people have about candidates like Michael Farris involve their political views being *extreme*. This is a very important distinction. Some in the religious right have made an art form of accusing their opponents of religious intolerance, much as McCarthyites would accuse their opponents of being "pink." The issue for people like Michael Farris is not the depth of his religious beliefs, but the fact of his near total opposition to legal abortion and his support for taking money out of public schools and putting it into private and religious schools.

Voters respect people who have deeply held religious beliefs. They begin to feel uncomfortable, however, when they perceive someone wanting to use government to impose those beliefs on everybody else. That became a significant perception of Michael Farris. Voters become uncomfortable when anybody tends to be extreme—on virtually any issue. Someone like Michael Farris, who had a long career of service to Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and other figures in the religious right, encourages the perception that he would be extreme in pursuit of a particular agenda.

The reality of American politics remains that it is a battle for the middle

ground. What we see, more than anything else, is effort by people on the right to isolate liberals by portraying them as anti-religion, while liberals paint those on the religious right as intolerant and extreme. The voters, of course, are right in the middle.

**PP:** There was a spate of stories a little while ago about the so-called religious right and its ties to the Republican party. What's your assessment here? Was this matter being hyped excessively, or does it involve developments that are really important?

**GG:** Well, it is an important political factor in *organizational* terms more than in public

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opinion terms. People in the religious right have done a good job in a lot of respects—an admirable job—of organizing themselves and their supporters to be influential in the political process. In low-turnout elections and convention meetings where organization counts, this provides them with an enormous clout. For that reason the religious right has in fact become an important force in Republican politics in certain states.

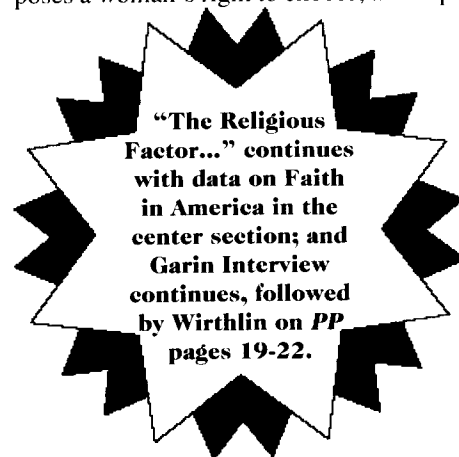
The consequence of this development for the Republicans is that at some point their agenda starts moving uncomfortably to the right in a way that takes the party out of the mainstream. The best example of that was the Republican national convention in 1992, which many women viewed as being badly out of step with the reality of American life and insensitive to the role of working women. When Pat Buchanan got up at the convention and declared a cultural war in America, it was terribly harmful to the party. The last thing that the American people want to do is fight a religious/cultural war. It's an agenda that appeals to some, but it is not the mainstream agenda—even for those who have deep concerns about the moral direction of the country.

**PP:** Let's look at the score card now in this big and complex matter. You've got a public with deep religious beliefs and big worries over values. You've got organizational and institutional efforts, and the question of how far those tilt toward an extreme commitment. Can you sort out this whole set of developments and say whether the religious factor is currently more helpful to the Republican party, to the Democratic party, or a wash generally?

**GG:** I think it is helpful to the Republican party in situations where organization is of paramount importance, and less helpful to the party when the actual agenda of these right-wing groups becomes the focus of the debate, as it did in the presidential election in 1992 or in the lieutenant gubernatorial race in Virginia in 1993.

**PP:** A prominent Democrat was quoted a couple of weeks back as saying that he was distressed by developments involving the religious right from the standpoint of the importance he attached to tolerance and the extent to which this group discouraged tolerance. But he said he was delighted at the way things are going from a political standpoint, because the Democrats were benefiting and the Republicans were losing ground. Others have made similar observations. Stepping back and looking at the matter analytically, what is your reaction? Is this really political dynamite for the Republican party?

**GG:** I think over the long term, it has the potential to be very destructive to the Republican party. If the price for the activism of these individuals is a platform that opposes a woman's right to choose, and sup-



port for private religious school vouchers and things of that sort, then the Republican party has real problems. Clearly this has exacerbated long-standing tensions in the Republican party. So the question is whether the Republican party can get the *benefit of the numbers without having to accede to the agenda*. If it starts to accede to an agenda which the voters believe to be *extreme and out of step with social realities*—particularly with regard to the role of women in our society—I think the Republicans stand to lose substantially.

**PP:** Turning to the Democrats, what's the line the Democrats need to walk? How would you describe that?

**GG:** The Democrats need to be very careful to keep the focus on the positions of the religious right, and not on religion per se. They cannot afford to concede the whole terrain of moral values to the Republicans. There are whole series of values that people think are very important and need to be strengthened. They tend to be values that relate to personal responsibility, accountability, and respect for authority. The Democrats and moderate Republicans very much need to be able to embrace these values and speak to them and not concede them to anybody on the extreme right.

The fact of the matter is that there is a middle ground on these questions. There

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are people who are very much concerned about moral issues and who, in fact, give primacy to moral issues over economic issues, but who don't like Pat Robertson and the extreme approach he represents. In order to succeed with those cross-pressured voters, Democrats need to be able to speak sincerely and convincingly to concerns about the state of the American family and respect for a core sense of right and wrong.

Leaving the choice on abortion up to the woman is a mainstream position in America. But there are pro-choice positions that voters may well find *extreme*—having to do with parental roles and things of that sort. It is important for Democrats to clearly understand there are lines that can't be crossed. Voters are looking for a sign one way or another that candidates, whether Democrat or Republican, have a basic respect for standards and values in our society.

**PP:** Matters of very deeply held beliefs are obviously always a challenge to politicians in democracies. You have said some things about the Republicans bearing on this whole question of voice, tone, approach and the pitfalls that are there potentially; and now how about the Democrats in this area? Is the problem of finding the right "voice," apart from particular substance, a real problem for the Democratic party as you look around the country, or relatively modest?

**GG:** President Clinton in his 1992 campaign did a very good job of speaking as a Democrat to value questions—even as there were questions about his private conduct. He has never been embarrassed to be seen as religiously oriented. Frankly, I think there were times in the past when Democrats didn't handle this well. But the problems of voice and authenticity are much less now than they were at another time.

**PP:** Finally, when we talk about the religious right, who are we talking about? How big a group is this?

**GG:** I mean something very specific when I talk about the religious right. There are Christian people in America who are conservative in their political orientation, who participate in politics as individuals and who vote Republican more often than not. But that's not at all what I have in mind when I describe the religious right. I think of the religious right much more in terms of an organized political movement that is trying to achieve a very specific political agenda—under the color of religion—but it is ultimately a political agenda. My guess is that from place to place its core appeal is somewhere between 15-30%—it really depends on the state. This core is spread over many different denominations.

**PP:** Reading from an interview that President Clinton gave at the end of June, he made this comment: "I think it's very important that the Democrats be careful...to make a clear distinction between tactics with which they do not agree and radical positions with which they do not agree, and the whole notion of evangelical Christians being involved in our politics. I think that evangelical Christians should be good citizens, should be involved in politics. They can be Republicans or Democrats, they can do whatever they want." My question is: Do the Democrats run a risk (clearly the President seems to sense it) when they use the radical right, the religious right and Christian right, rather synonymously with religious people?

**GG:** It is terminology that voters are not necessarily familiar with and it is important to make the distinction that the President was making. It is important for Democrats and others to be very clear about what it is they mean when they raise these issues, and not to lend any credence at all to the suggestion that somehow this represents intolerance for the involvement of religious people in the political process.

I am concerned about this matter, in part because people like Pat Robertson have made an art form out of accusing their opponents of being religiously intolerant, in a completely unfair and misleading way. Robertson's tactic is to try to move the issue from how extreme his positions are to the issue of religion as such—when that's not the issue at all. So Democrats need to be very careful about not helping Pat Robertson along with that task.

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