Has Godot Finally Arrived?

Religion and Realignment

By Lyman A. Kellstedt, John C. Green, James L. Guth and Corwin E. Smidt

Everett Ladd has noted that talk of party realignment is akin to "Waiting for Godot."[1] Does the stunning Republican victory in 1994 mean the wait is finally over? While GOP gains may prove ephemeral, exit poll data reveal that one kind of realignment is indeed underway: a religious one. Members of the nation's two largest religious groups, white Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics, show every sign of a fundamental reordering of political preferences. In 1994, Evangelicals entrenched themselves as the senior partner in the Republican coalition, while Catholics departed once again from their traditional Democratic moorings, after a brief visit home in 1992. Interestingly, the key GOP supporters in both groups were regular church attendees, the easiest to mobilize through such channels.

The Religious Vote in 1994

How did major American religious groups vote in 1994? Table 1 reports the GOP House vote for the three largest traditions among whites (Evangelical and Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic), for those who claim no religious identification (seculars), and several smaller groups of whites (such as Jews and Mormons).[2] For purposes of comparison, the voting of nonwhite ethnic groups is also included.[3]

The 1994 vote had significant religious underpinnings. The strongest Republican vote came from Mormons, with 78% backing House GOP candidates. Evangelicals were a close second at 75%. The size of the GOP House vote may not be a record for Mormons, a small group concentrated in the West, but is probably a historic high for the more numerous Evangelicals, who not only dominate the South, but are a major presence elsewhere.

In contrast, Mainline Protestants, long the backbone of the GOP, gave Republicans just over half their votes, only modestly more than Roman Catholics, once the strongest pillar of the Democratic ethno-religious establishment. Note that among both Evangelicals and Catholics, regular church attendees were more Republican, a tendency long evident among Mainline Protestants, but which, ironically, almost disappeared among them in 1994. The remaining religious and ethnic groups were much less Republican, ranging from 44% of seculars to only 10% among black Americans.

> *"The core groups of the New Deal coalition, namely white Evangelicals and white Catholics, have, to varying extents, deserted the Democratic Party."*

The second two columns in Table 1 summarize the religious composition of party electorates. Evangelicals provided almost three out of ten GOP voters; weekly attendees alone supplied more than one fifth. Mainline Protestants contributed slightly more than one quarter, Catholics, slightly less. Note that regularly attending Catholics actually outnumbered their Mainline counterparts among GOP voters. Taken together, all weekly church attendees constituted just over half the Republican electorate, highlighting both the salience of social issue conservatism and the great tensions it provokes among Republicans.

What about the Democrats? As one might expect, their coalition is more diverse. Mainline Protestants provided about a quarter of the total, while Catholics accounted for just over one-fifth, slightly more than did non whites. Seculars and Evangelicals each contributed slightly more than one-tenth, as did combined Jews, Hispanics, and whites of other religions. In contrast to the GOP, religiously observant whites provided less than a third of the Democratic coalition, helping to explain both the dominance of social issue liberalism and less attention towards religion within the party.

Historical Backdrop

The magnitude of change within religious traditions is more impressive when put into historical context. Surveys from the 1950s reveal Evangelicals and Catholics as fixtures of the Democratic House electorate, supplemented by small numbers of seculars and religious minorities, while Mainline Protestants were the core of the GOP. In the 1960s, Evangelicals moved away from the Democratic Party, first in presidential contests, then in down-ticket races, a process now well advanced but not yet complete.

Catholics drifted from their historic Democratic moorings as well, but the first defectors were often those with minimal religious attachments. By the late 1980s and 1990s, however, defectors were often the more religiously observant, especially among younger Catholics, replicating the Evangelical pattern. During the same period, Mainline Protestants were headed in the opposite direction. Many, but particularly the least religiously involved, were abandoning the GOP. Also, the steady growth in the number of secular voters since the 1950s provided an additional source of Democratic votes in House races.[4]

Anatomy of the 1994 Religious Vote

Thus, the 1994 vote had a significant religious component, reflecting a long term realignment of important groups. What factors help explain these findings?

A good place to begin is with issues. Exit poll respondents were asked: "Which two issues mattered most in deciding how you voted for US House?" Not surprisingly, responses differ significantly by religious group and church attendance. Regular church attendees among Evangelicals were much more likely to name family values (47%) or abortion (29%) as most important, while nonattenders cited crime (31%), family values (28%), plus taxes and economic issues (both 25%). Among Mainline Protestants, church attendees and non-attenders were quite similar with crime the top priority (36% mentions for both), economic concerns (25% and 32%, respectively), and taxes (24% and 29%). Catholics in both groups resembled their Mainline Protestant counterparts in priorities, with the exception that regular attendees were considerably more likely to name family values (22%) or abortion (17%) as important vote determinants. Secular put little emphasis on abortion or family values, stressing instead crime, economics and taxes as the most important issues, while giving education a higher rating than did voters in the major traditions. Mormon choices paralleled those of Evangelicals, while Jews and blacks responded like seculars.

What impact did issue priorities have on the vote? Table 2 shows the Republican House vote for those making each issue a priority. Three important patterns stand out. First, regardless of issue focus, Evangelicals were the most Republican and seculars the least, with Mainline Protestants and Catholics falling in between. Second, with few exceptions, regular attendees were more Republican than their less observant counterparts, regardless of tradition or issue focus. Third, there are some strong partisan/issue patterns. Republicans gained from concern with family values and taxes in all religious groups and attendance levels. In contrast, they gained markedly less from voters' worries on education, health care, or crime. Abortion was clearly the most divisive issue. Over 90% of regularly attending Evangelicals choosing it voted Republican, but only 20% of seculars for whom the issue was salient opted for the GOP. Mainline Protestants and Catholics were also sharply divided by abortion. For both groups, weekly attendees choosing the issue voted Republican while the less observant voted Democratic. Finally, emphasis on the economy and jobs had mixed effects: nonregular at-

Table 1
Religious Groups, Voting and Partisanship in the 1994 Elections

		Party Coalitions (by 1994 Vote)		Party Identification		Party Coalitions (by Party ID)	
	GOP Vote	**Rep.**	**Dem.**	**Rep.**	**Dem.**	**Rep.**	**Dem.**
White Mormons	78%	4%	1%	56%	12%	5%	1%
White Evangelicals:	75	29	11	52	21	30	12
Regular Church Attenders	78	(22)	(7)	56	17	(24)	(7)
Not Regular Church Attenders	68	(7)	(4)	42	30	(7)	(5)
White Mainline Protestants:	56	27	24	38	31	27	21
Regular Church Attenders	56	(9)	(8)	40	28	(10)	(7)
Not Regular Church Attenders	55	(18)	(16)	36	31	(17)	(14)
White Catholics:	53	22	22	33	38	21	23
Regular Church Attenders	57	(13)	(12)	35	37	(13)	(13)
Not Regular Church Attenders	49	(9)	(10)	29	38	(8)	(10)
White Seculars	44	9	12	27	40	9	11
White Other Religions	39	2	4	20	33	2	3
Hispanics	35	2	3	29	60	2	4
White Jews	25	1	4	12	62	1	5
Blacks	10	2	17	6	77	2	19

Source: 1994 Mitofsky International exit poll.

Table 2
Percentage Voting Republican: House Elections 1994

[Whites by: religious traditions, church attendance, issue salience, and selected demographic characteristics.]

	Evangelicals		Mainline Prot.		Catholics		Seculars
	RegCh	NotReg	RegCh	NotReg	RegCh	NotReg	
Respondents listing the issue as key for them:							
Abortion	90%	83%	56%	24%	65%	38%	20%
Family Values	88	74	70	69	73	67	60
Taxes	85	83	69	61	71	66	77
Crime	72	72	55	60	52	52	48
Education	67	58	48	44	49	28	31
Economy/Jobs	60	70	54	55	54	47	45
Health Care	59	49	44	42	36	36	24
Respondent's Education:							
High School	66	59	51	52	46	46	52
Some College	82	70	59	60	57	49	51
College Grad	87	80	66	62	61	58	37
Post Grad	78	81	47	46	65	42	36
Respondent's Income:							
Less than $30K	73	59	45	53	44	42	40
$30K - $75K	79	74	60	58	60	49	43
Over $75K	87	93	60	55	66	62	49
Respondent's Gender:							
Male	78	74	61	61	64	52	47
Female	78	65	52	51	52	48	38
Group's 1994 GOP Vote	78	68	56	55	57	49	44

Note: RegCh = Regular Church Attendance, NotReg = Less than Regular Church Attendance. The n's are small for some groups of "post graduate" education and high [$75 Thousand +] income.
Source: 1994 Mitofsky International exit poll.

tendees among Evangelicals selecting this option were the most Republican, while seculars were the most Democratic.

The data also reveal some important interactions between religious tradition and demography in producing partisan choices. A staple of the New Deal Democratic coalition was support from working class voters. This classic alliance was undermined in 1994, at least among Evangelicals. As Table 2 shows, large majorities of lower income Evangelicals went Republican, especially among churchgoers, voting their beliefs, not their pocketbooks. Among both Mainliners and Catholics, those in the low-income and low-education groups also voted Republican in substantial numbers.[5]

Similar exceptions to the classic New Deal pattern work in the other direction, such as the relatively strong support given the GOP by the least educated secular voters and the Democratic preferences of voters with post graduate education among Mainline Protestants, nonobservant Catholics, and seculars. Perhaps this latter group constitutes a highly educated, politically liberal "New Class" of professionals which spans several religious traditions. Yet, the classic effect of education still holds among regularly attending Catholics, who become more Republican with every step up the educational and income ladders. In some cases, status and religion reinforce each other, as among high income Evangelicals, who were the most Republican of any demographic voting group in Table 2.

One more demographic factor in Table 2 is worth considering, gender. Many pundits noted the large gender gap in 1994, reporting a massive male "backlash" against the Democrats. Indeed, men gave the GOP more votes than women in almost every religious group except for two. Among churchgoing Evangelicals, males and females voted Republican at exactly the same rate, and among faithful Mormons the gender gap was actually reversed. Clearly, Republican gains involved strong support from conservative, religious women, not just disaffected men.[6]

Considering these results, it is not surprising that statistical controls for various demographics have no impact on religious voting patterns, confirming the findings of other analysts that religion was more powerful than economics in 1994.[7]

Long Term Effects?

Do these findings signal realignment? If realignment is conceived as a process involving changes in the partisan alignments of major groups, then Godot may well have arrived for white Evangelicals and Catholics.

We examined the impact of church attendance and age on the Republican House vote in 1994. GOP support was very high among churchgoing, younger Evangelicals (85%), so high in fact that its long term persistence seems assured. Older church attending Evangelicals were strongly GOP as well (67%), but less than their younger co-parishioners. And younger non-attending Evangelicals voted just as Republican (68%) as older church attendees, but much more so than older non-attenders (53%).

Among Mainline Protestants, age had little impact on voting, with young and old voting Republican in roughly equal measure. Among Catholics, however, age mattered a great deal, with younger Catholics more likely to vote Republican. Among regular attendees, 58% of those under the age of 40 voted for the GOP, while 52% of those over 60 did the same. Among nonobservant Catholics the difference is even greater, with 53% of those under 40 voting Republican, while only 35% of those over 60 did the same.

Finally, what about party self-identification? Table 1 presents data on this much-watched indicator (Independents are excluded for purposes of presentation.) Mormons (56%) and Evangelicals (52%) are by far the most Republican, while Mainliners (38%) and Catholics (33%) exhibit deep partisan divisions, with the Mainliners marginally more Republican and Catholics slightly more Democratic. These figures alone suggest a fundamental change in party coalitions. Seculars are two fifths Democratic, and the Democratic bias tends to increase for the remaining groups. Hispanics and Jews are more than three fifths Democratic and blacks nearly four fifths. Note that in the three largest traditions, church attendees are more Republican, although by varying margins.

The end result of these long term changes in the parties' core constituencies can be noted in the two right hand columns in Table 1. Among 1994 voters, Evangelicals were the largest Republican constituency, easily outnumbering Mainliners. Catholics constituted one fifth of the GOP identifiers and all the remaining groups combined for one fifth. Thus, Mainline Protestants are no longer the GOP's religious backbone. Catholics are still the largest Democratic religious constituency (23%), but barely edge out Mainline Protestants for top honors. Blacks are slightly less numerous, but when combined with other racial and ethnic minorities, account for more than one quarter of the Democratic total. The remaining one quarter is similarly diverse, with equal proportions of Evangelicals and seculars, plus Jews and other smaller groups.

Emerging Ethno-religious Coalitions

The importance of these changes can hardly be overstated. The core groups of the New Deal coalition, namely white Evangelicals and white Catholics, have, to varying extents, deserted the Democratic Party. Evangelicals are now at the center of the Republican coalition, and Catholics are up for grabs. Thus, after years of gradual disintegration, the New Deal religious coalition is now in shambles, and with it the Democratic lock on congressional and state government. Although the GOP has gained substantially from partisan shifts within religious traditions, it has suffered some losses as well. Mainline Protestants have left the GOP in large numbers, and like Catholics, are now an electoral swing group. Democrats also have gained or maintained support with less observant members of the major traditions, among the growing number of seculars, and various ethnic minorities.

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New forms of ethno-religious politics are emerging, with the GOP drawing the more religiously observant voters, at least among whites, and the Democrats attracting the least observant in the major traditions, seculars, and various minority groups. While it is unclear exactly how these trends will play out, the Grand Old Party has at least one short run advantage: as recent elections demonstrate, grassroots religious institutions can mobilize the Republican religious constituencies. There is at present no comparable set of institutions mobilizing less-religious Democratic voters. This Republican advantage can be erased, however, if religious mobilization goes too far, driving dissident groups to the Democrats, the traditional "party of diversity." Thus, religious realignment poses serious challenges for both parties as 1996 approaches.

NEEDED: Better Measures of Religion

Despite the intensive public and private polling taking place during American elections, these important realigning trends have very nearly been missed. They are often discernible only by careful analysis and a bit of guesswork, largely because of the deficient religious measures in most national surveys.

For example, the key to accurate identification of adherents to various religious traditions is specific denominational affiliation. Surveys routinely fail on this count; recent exit polls, for example, typically ask voters to identify as "Protestant, Catholic, Other Christian, Jewish, Something Else, None." "Protestant" includes such diverse groups as to render it almost useless analytically. Likewise, exit poll categories such as "Other Christian" or "Something else" produce meaningless data. And attempting to identify Evangelicals by asking voters if they are "born again," "evangelical," or "fundamentalist" (or some combination of these) is a poor substitute for good denominational data. Each of these common items produces different and sometimes misleading results.

There are several better alternatives, even given the varying constraints of surveys. Simply asking respondents to write in their specific denomination on a paper and pencil questionnaire will produce more meaningful data than "Protestant, Catholic, Jew." An operational alternative for exit polls is to offer respondents a check list of major denominational families. For telephone interviews, probes for specific denomination similar to those now employed by the National Election Studies should become routine.

In fact, inclusion of a "Mormon" category in the 1994 Mitofsky International exit poll demonstrates the power of denominational specificity, revealing a religious group as strongly Republican as Jews are Democratic, and of roughly the same size. In previous years, faced with inappropriate response categories, Mormons scattered themselves among "Protestants," "Other Christians," or "Something Else" (with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims). Large denominational groups with distinctive histories, institutions and politics ought to be distinguished in any meaningful analysis of religious voting.

In addition, questions about religious observance should be routine, and include both high (e.g. frequent attendance) and low ends (no attendance) of the scales. Such questions separate the most committed members of religious groups from nominal affiliators.

In sum, modest improvements in religious measures will allow survey researchers to tap crucial aspects of what may be the political changes of a lifetime, and the long wait for Godot will not have been in vain.

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Endnotes:

[1] Everett Carll Ladd, "Like Waiting for Godot" in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *The End of Realignment* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), chapter 2.

[2] Exit poll data are difficult to categorize into religious traditions, although the 1994 Mitofsky International exit poll was an improvement over past efforts. Here, we classify as "Evangelical Protestants" respondents who checked the "Born Again/Evangelical Christian" box on the questionnaire and classified themselves as either "Protestant," "Other Christian," or "Something else." The label "Mainline Protestant" was assigned to non-born-again Protestants and Other Christians. Other religious categories included in the exit poll are Catholic, Jewish, Mormon and "Nothing in particular." The latter category serves as the basis of our "secular" group.

[3] The exit poll data make it difficult to ascertain the religious characteristics of non-whites, so we focus on blacks and Hispanics as unified groups.

[4] For documentation of these trends, see Lyman A. Kellstedt, "Evanglicals and Political Realignment," in Corwin W. Smidt, ed., *Contemporary Evangelical Political Involvement* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), pp. 99-117, and Corwin E. Smidt, "Evangelical Voting Patterns: 1976-1988," in Michael Cromartie, ed., *No Longer Exiles* (Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center,1993), pp. 85-117.

[5] The distribution of education and income levels varies significantly across religious traditions. Nonregular-attending Evangelicals have the lowest levels of education and income of all the groups in the table, even lower than African Americans. Church attending Evangelicals trail Mainliners and Catholics only slightly in these respects, but both trail Jews. Thus, nonattending Evangelicals and blacks share lower social status, but differ sharply in political dispositions. Similarly, Jews, Mainliners and Catholics share high status, but vote very differently. Clearly, religious differences among these groups are central to their politics.

[6] It should be noted that there is a higher ratio of women to men among the regular churchgoers than among less regular attenders in the Evangelical, Mainline, and Catholic religious traditions. The lowest percentage of women is among seculars, 43%.

[7] See, for example, the findings of Fred Steeper, cited in *The Washington Post*, National Weekly Edition, February 27-March 5, 1995, p. 23; and *Roll Call*, February 27, 1995, p. 8.

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