**Religious Voters and the Trump Dilemma: The Changing Role of Religion (and the Religious) in the American Public Sphere**

In mid-January 2016 when Donald Trump, at the time one of several vying for the republican nomination, incorrectly referenced 2 Corinthians, inciting audible laughter (and corrections) from the large crowd of Evangelicals gathered at Liberty University, many believed that he was decidedly *not* the “evangelical’s candidate.” Indeed public opinion research, released by the Barna Group merely a month later, measured Trump’s support amongst Evangelicals at -38 (only to be rivaled by their dislike of Clinton at -60). Fast forward to September, just three months before the general elections and Trump seems to have performed a miracle in toe with turning water into wine—he has captured the Evangelical vote.

Despite the very real statistical probability that most Evangelicals will vote Trump, it would be a mistake to over simplify the voter trends and deem “nothing has changed” in American electoral politics. On the contrary, the Trump nomination, wavering Evangelical support throughout his campaign, and strong divergence from the voting patterns of the 2012 cycle, illustrates a notable change in the role of religion in American presidential politics, undoubtedly reflecting a wider shift in the American public sphere.

1. **The Trump Nomination**

Perhaps it is simply a waxing and waning of the expression of American civil religion, or perhaps the Trump nomination indicates a considerable change in the role of religion in the American public sphere.

Since the 1980s rise of the “Christian Right” with Ronald Regan and the ensuing marriage between Evangelical Christianity and Republicanism few republicans have been successful in gaining their party’s nomination without a significant promotion of their Christian faith, values, and political commitments. The 2016 nomination shockingly disrupts this pattern and begs the question of a potential “divorce” between Evangelicalism and the GOP.

Trump is markedly less “religious” than past candidates (both democratic and republican) and his nomination seems to affirm the recent poll data from the Pew Center which shows a decline in public opinion that “a president must have strong religious beliefs” (in 2000, 70% agreed and only 27% disagreed, whereas, in 2016 only 62% agreed and 35% disagreed). In much the same vein, fewer and fewer Americans believe that “Houses of worship are key in solving important social problems” (from 75% in March 2001, down to 58% in June 2016). Although there has been little decline in the “belief” variable amongst the most religious, it does seem that the role of religion in American public life, especially as it relates to presidential politics, may be in decline.

1. **Evangelicals Hold Out Against Trump**

As poll data from both Gallup and the Barna Group demonstrates, Evangelicals came late to the Trump campaign. Earlier in the race, religious conservatives undeniably favored Carson, Rubio, and Cruz, but as they slowly dropped out of the race the Evangelical voter was forced to make a decision: Republican or Democrat.

The entrenchment and gridlock of party loyalty cannot be overstated in a two-party system, especially concerning large electorates like Evangelicals or White Protestants. What is interesting with the Evangelical vote, however, is that until the 1980’s these “values voters” were unimpressed by either party, and disengaged until the massive social movements of the 1960s and 70s. All voters, the highly religious included, put the economy and terrorism as the highest priorities of the election. With the exception of Supreme Court nominees (the judicial body which is expected to decide large upcoming social issues like stem cell research, gender theory, and reproductive health), it would seem that religious voters have less interest in current electoral politics then, when first mobilized in the 1980s. Should we expect a demobilization of religious voters in the coming U.S. election cycles?

1. **Divergence from 2012 Voting Patterns**

Public opinion data from June 2016, gathered by the Pew Research Center, reveals that Evangelical support of the republican candidate has remained consistent. Evangelicals even support Trump *more* than they did Romney. What has changed, however, is their reasoning behind supporting the party as well as the wider trends among the ‘most religious’ voters.

A sizeable portion of the Evangelical electorate have adopted a “lesser of two evils” reasoning in 2016. Though this approach to politics is familiar to two-party systems, since their marriage to the GOP, Evangelicals have rarely needed such resorts because previous candidates have so seamlessly represented Evangelical values and political interests. The history of Evangelical political mobilization (which tells the story of an electorate largely dormant until the Moral Majority of the 1980s) suggests that this particular population may be less willing to “tolerate” a party whose candidates no longer represent their interests—they may leave electoral politics altogether.

Aside from the less than ideal circumstances of the Evangelical endorsement, 2016 reveals a 12-percentage point rise in dissatisfaction of candidates amongst Protestants. In 2012 only 41% responded that they were “not too/ not at all satisfied with candidates” whereas in 2016 53% expressed dissatisfaction. This rise is significant because it indicates that Protestants are becoming disenchanted with the candidates (and perhaps the party) that once captivated their vote.

In conclusion, though Trump has been able to win the Evangelical vote, there is considerable discontent with the Republican Party. Out of all the nominees for the Republican ticket, Trump was the one who resonated *least* with the highly religious. When there were republican alternatives to Trump, which seemed more closely aligned to conservative religious values, Evangelicals quickly gave their support. The present endorsement reveals a desire to vote against the opponent (Clinton) rather than to express support for Trump. The nomination of a considerably “less religious” candidate not only causes discontentment amongst the religious voters, but also underlines an ever increasing public opinion that a president may not need to be religious to effectively lead the country and that religion is less indispensable than in the past in solving America’s major social problems. Though religion continues to be significant in the American public sphere, the 2016 election cycle finds religions significance in just how insignificant it seems to have been.

**ROBIN PRESTHUS**

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