

Crowell 1

Garrett Crowell

Dr. Stephen Morris

PS 3001

26 April 2013

Religiosity and Party Stability in the United States

Background and Project Description

The conventional wisdom¹ about the religiosity of the electorate in the US comes from the perception that we are one of the most religious nations in the world. That perception is furthered by our political rhetoric which is often filled with ideas that have their homes in spiritual ideology – doing things or not doing things for religious reasons. Typically, the conventional wisdom also holds that Republicans, as the primary party of the evangelical movement, are more religious, and that the Democrats, torch-bearers of progressive non-traditionalism, are less likely to be bound up with a religious tradition, pretty much by any reasonable understanding of the terminology.

Further, people tend to think of Republicans as being older people who are lifelong conservatives or those who switched parties when they “grew up.” While there is a fair amount of age-based party switching, the conventional wisdom about it is exaggerated. (Rohrbaugh

1 The genesis of this project came about from a conversation over nachos at a local Mexican restaurant with my father-in-law. We were discussing the ramifications of Obama's then recent re-election in a way that only in-laws from different generations seem to be able to do. He and I are of oppositional political alignment and have very different ideas about religion, faith, and the church.

1975)

The aim of this study is to examine both ideas and show that religiosity, as measured by a series of survey questions, is spread evenly amongst Democrats and Republicans, and that there is not a lot of party switching based on religious ideology. Stability of the parties, measured by how much turnover there is amongst membership nationally will be examined. The answers to these questions about stability of membership and levels of overall party religiosity will be invaluable to anyone working for a campaign who makes decisions about a population based on this kind of demographic data, and for those coordinating or calculating any kind of long-term goals for either party.

The first piece of conventional wisdom here is the popular two-fold assertion that Republicans are more generally more likely to be committed and observant Christians and have a higher level of religiosity than Democrats.²

Conventional wisdom (Galbraith 1958) and American political news reporting both seem to generally support the trend of mostly white fundamentalist Republicans (Newport 2009) pushing more of their religious ideology into legislation, but at the same time will report to us that when party affiliated, African-Americans and Latinos – two growing populations with high levels of religiosity as compared to the White majority in this country – are Democrats more often than Republicans. How can both of these things be true? (Secret 1990, Antunes 1975, Pew 2008) If the above religious distribution regarding Blacks and Latinos is true, and one couples that fact with the demographic make-up of the Christian evangelical movement in the US (which

2 This assertion falls (in part) into line with Green, Rozell and Wilcox; evangelicals are indeed more likely to be Republicans, but the degree of religiosity (unless one considers evangelicals to be generally more religious by very nature) is not a strong determinant of party affiliation.

is largely white and Republican) (Newport 2009) then people with a high level of religiosity should be fairly evenly distributed between the two major US parties.

A related perception of religion in American politics is that individuals tend to abandon the more liberal wing of politics in favor of more conservatism as their religious commitment changes and/or intensifies. People often associate this with aging, but that would seem to be an oversimplification, since as the Krause study found, most people's religious commitment tends to deepen as they age due possibly to various factors, including psychological end-of-life issues, comfort in harder times, and an increased need for a stable, like-minded community of believers (often to remedy “empty nest” conditions) that can often be found in regular worship and religious interaction.³ Even this seems too easy an answer, since some folks are lifelong Democrats or Republicans, and some switch when one party or the other runs a charismatic candidate who inspires them, or when situational changes prompt them to do so. (Campbell 2011) Still other people consider themselves unaffiliated, especially if they live in open primary states where party membership is rendered less important than general ideological tendency. Regardless, the initial assertion raises questions that need definitive answers if we expect to fully understand factors that are essential to our lives as human beings and as civic Americans: does the stability, as defined by the “turnover rate” in party membership, in whole or in part, of a given party's membership rest on the religiosity of its declared members? How much is party stability affected by the religiosity of its individual members? Are major changes in party

3 The Krause study suggests rather than asserts that the many factors that I've listed here could be reasons for increased religiosity at the end of life. The purpose of said study was simply to measure the increase and provide a workable scale for future measuring, hence my use of it here. While the study did find a drift towards more conservatism at the end of life, it did not definitively assert any concrete reasons for it, choosing to suggest possibilities instead.

ideology – like the Democratic shift of the 1960s or the Moral Majority or Tea Party movements in the Republican camp, both of which have directly and visibly affected the stability of the GOP – directly connected to the stability of the parties themselves?⁴

The primary research questions are: Does one major American political party's adherents demonstrate more religiosity than the other? Do Republicans, for example, really demonstrate a higher level of religiosity? The study will look only at those who self identify as Democrats or Republicans, as other parties, such as the Tea Party or Progressives are *de facto* offshoots of these major parties, and the classification “Independent” does not contain much useful information about people (especially in terms of self-identification) since not only does it tend to be a response to what is seen as limited options in government, but it also often lumps disparate kinds of people in together, which is not useful for the question(s) this study endeavors to answer.

The study will also look at the stability (characterized by the changes in number in party affiliation over a set period) of the two major parties and take that stability and compare it against the number of people within the party who have a high level of religiosity.

Methodology & Research Design

4 A clarification: The purpose of the proposed study is NOT to determine whether “instability” as such is a positive or negative factor as it pertains to the major political parties in the US. While some would see stability as foundational, indicative of strength, steadfastness and the keystone of ideas that hold a party's membership together, others would argue that instability is simply the progression, natural development or evolution of a party from one kind of thing to another, and that may be so. It seems unlikely that Jackson, Lincoln, Taft or Eisenhower would be at home in the parties with which they are historically affiliated, and this study will not qualify whether instability and possible resultant change is a “good” or “bad” thing. Stability is, however, a crucial benchmark for anyone researching and predicting the voting patterns of the electorate in upcoming races, and so the data regarding stability would be broadly useful.

The independent variable, levels of religiosity among members of the party, will be established mainly through self-identification harvested from survey data. I propose to measure religiosity using the scale proposed by Neal Krause from the University of Michigan in 1993 combined partially with another scale, that of Rohrbaugh and Jessor from 1975. For the purposes of this study, the religiosity of a party's people (not to be confused with party people, who are generally more fun, again, according to conventional wisdom) will be measured using the following criteria:

1. Belief in and adherence to a Creator's rules, indicated by their primary source material; (Bible, Torah, Quran, etc.)
2. Church or temple attendance at specific intervals as dictated by tradition and culture;
3. Observance of ritual, institutional (worship) and informal (household prayer);
4. The degree to which religion influences an individuals' secular (or day-to-day) acts.

This data will be collected within the parties by surveyors on the ground using an emic approach to data collection, that is, allowing the survey participants (those who volunteer) to respond to questions with a pre-determined and limited set of answers. The surveys will be administered either using a truly random sampling method (grabbing people off the street), or by employing systematic sampling after the requisite number of surveys have been answered. That number shall be determined beforehand as a set (but currently negotiable) percentage of total number of people who have completed the survey. (Crowell 7)

In order to establish and operationalize party “instability” as a variable, we will need to define it. For the purposes of this study, “instability” will be defined as a high-turnover rate in

party affiliation, otherwise known as “party switching,” though I am also interested in measuring those who become disenfranchised, that is, those who simply leave their party and do not go to another party – they simply drop out of participation and self-identification, as well as the depth of commitment of those who remain.

This should be established the same way (and probably at the same time) as the religiosity data; volunteers answering a limited and pre-set selection of answers. These could include everything from voting for a candidate, to displaying a yard sign, working at headquarters, or donating funds.

Conclusion

Once this data is collected, it will be possible to determine the religiosity of party members (individually and collectively) by using the former index, and then measure the relative stability of the party affiliation over the same set period using the latter index. A person who scores high on the former index will be said to be highly religious, and when the majority of the sample within a party falls into that category, a party will be said to have a high amount of religiosity. When a state scores high on the latter index with high numbers of people either “party switching” reducing their levels of commitment or simply vanishing from their sphere of influence, it will be said to be highly unstable.

A number of people will have to be examined and studied in this way, and they should be as dissimilar as is possible to practically achieve one to another in terms of demographics in order to provide for a scientifically complete and useful sample. While religiosity is often the

dominant factor in decision making for voters, it would be naïve and highly unscientific to assume it is the *only* factor, and eliminating the effect of cross-cutting should be one of the aims of collecting data from disparate kinds of people.

In summation, the aim of this project would be to demonstrate a correlation between increased levels of religiosity within either the Republican or Democratic party in the United States and the resultant effects of that religiosity on stability. The aim of this is to replace the conventional wisdom point of view held by many citizens of the US with a data-driven and defensible foundation upon which to base assessments and projections in elections and policy-making.

References

Antunes, G. & C.M. Gaitz. 1975. "Ethnicity and Participation: A Study of Mexican-Americans, Blacks and Whites." *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 80: pp. 1192-1211. Print Journal.

Campbell, David, John C. Green and Geoffery C. Layman. 2011. "The Party Faithful: Partisan Images, Candidate Religion, and the Electoral Impact of Party Identification." *American Journal of Political Science*, Midwest Political Science Association Vol. 55 (No. 1): pp. 42-58. JSTOR. Accessed: 03-13-13 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25766253>

Crowell, Garrett C. 2012. "Should God Govern? Religiosity as a Destabilizing Force In International Relations" Research Design for Dr. Karen Petersen, Middle Tennessee State University (Honors) course, unpublished.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. 1958. *The Affluent Society*. Boston, New York: The Houghton Mifflin Company. Book.

Green, John C, Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox. 2001. "Social Movements and Party Politics: The Case of the Christian Right." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Vol. 40 (No. 3): pp. 413-426. JSTOR. Accessed: 03-09-13 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1388096>

Krause, Neal. 1993. *Measuring Religiosity in Later Life*. Washington, DC: Sage Publications. Article Reproduction.

Newport, Frank. 2009. *Republican Base Heavily White, Conservative, Religious*. Princeton, NJ: Gallup Polls. Accessed 04-09-13 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/118937/republican-base-heavily-white-conservative-religious.aspx>

Pew Hispanic Center. 2008. *2008 National Survey of Latinos: Hispanic Voter Attitudes*.

Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center. <http://www.pewhispanic.org>

Rohrbaugh, J & Jessor, R. 1975. *Religiosity in Youth: A Personal Control over Deviant Behavior*.

Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers. Book.

Secret, Philip E., James B. Johnson and Audrey W. Forrest. 1990. "The Impact of Religiosity on

Political Participation and Membership in Voluntary Associations Among Black and White

Americans." *Journal of Black Studies*, Midwest Political Science Association, Sage Publications

Vol. 21 (No. 1): pp. 87-102. JSTOR. Accessed: 03-11-13 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784356>