



No gain for Obama with churchgoers

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November 1, 2008 07:20 PM EST

Barack Obama has courted white weekly churchgoers as avidly as any Republican-leaning bloc of voters, though it now appears his efforts may fall flat on Election Day.

The Gallup Poll now shows Obama backed by 28 percent of white voters who attend church at least once a week — a group that makes up a roughly a third of all voters — which would be no improvement from the 29 percent of these voters who, according to exit polls, backed Democrats John Kerry and Al Gore in the previous two presidential election.

“There has been remarkably little change among whites in the religion gap,” said John Green, of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and a top specialist on the convergence of religion and politics.

No Democratic nominee in the modern day has made more of an effort to court religious voters than Obama. Jimmy Carter, a Southern evangelical, was the last Democrat to narrowly contest weekly church-going voters in a two-man race. But where Carter attempted to deemphasize his faith in the 1976 campaign, Obama has repeatedly returned to his faith to narrow the so-called God gap that has dogged Democrats for decades.

The party's primary saw repeated and unprecedented events emphasizing faith, such as the Compassion Forum a little more than a week before the Pennsylvania vote. In the general election, in no less unprecedented form, the first event attended by the two candidates was not a presidential debate but a forum on religion and cultural politics at an evangelical megachurch.

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It was at that mid-August event at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Orange County, Calif., that Obama said it was “above my pay grade” to define when a fetus gains human rights, while McCain quickly replied, “At the moment of conception.”

For social conservative leader Richard Land, Obama's response encapsulated why Democrats have failed to make inroads with highly religious white voters.

“It's abortion,” Land replied when the Gallup data was read to him.

“I think pro-choice people in this culture have absolutely no idea of the depth and intensity of the moral outrage of the people who are pro-life,” Land said. “They think that conservatives use it only as a wedge issue.”

"There is no other way to explain it than Obama's position on the issues, particularly the issue of life," said Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council.

Perkins and Land both said that the religious fissure is also deeper than any one issue, even abortion, and rooted in philosophical outlooks that still define the public's view of both parties.

"One party is traditional and another party is pretty post-modernist," Land said.

Democrats have made some gains in improving the public's perception of their openness to religious Americans. Some 38 percent of Americans believe the Democratic Party is "generally friendly toward religion," up from a low point of 26 percent in 2006, according to the annual August Pew Religion and Public Life Survey but still well below the 52 percent of Americans who view Republicans as "friendly."

Current polling indicates Obama has gained with voters who attend church occasionally and could possibly win the Catholics next week. Kerry, who would have been the second Catholic president, lost Catholics to Methodist George W. Bush by about a million votes, according to exit polls.

Democrats have lost weekly churchgoers of all races by double-digits in every two-man presidential election since 1980, and by increasingly wide margins. Michael Dukakis lost these voters by about 10 percentage points in 1988, while Kerry lagged by more than 20 points in 2004.

After Bush's successful reelection bid, in which the Republican won eight in 10 of those who voted on "moral values," Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid of Nevada said the party had been awakened by its extensive losses with religious voters. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi launched the Democratic Faith Working Group the following year, and Obama was among the Democrats who reached out to religious voters.

But Gallup's finding, based on more than 21,000 voter interviews in October, suggests that weekly churchgoers remain an elusive target for Democrats.

"It is surprising that there is not movement there," said Mara Vanderslice, the Kerry campaign's director of religious outreach who now is a Democratic consultant.

"I think a lot of the work Democrats overtook in these years was targeted at the moderate demographics," Vanderslice added.

Analysts have found that religion most clearly affects one's vote only among the most religious, and that religiosity trumps religion in terms of voter preferences, so that weekly church-going Catholics and Protestants tend to have similar voting tendencies.

White weekly churchgoers preferred Bush in 2004 by more than 40 percentage points, 71 percent to 29 percent. Recent Gallup data shows McCain slightly weaker among this group, with 65 percent backing him. The dip is part of a trend in which Republican support

among whites this year is down across the board.

But as Green and other experts on the cross-section of faith and politics note, it is voters who attend services most regularly that are most clearly tying their vote to faith and culture.

The Obama campaign declined to comment for this story.

For McCain's part, his support among highly religious white voters has not significantly changed since mid-August, prior to his selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate.

"There are three ways Democrats could approach these voters," said Green. "Show respect, and certainly Obama has done that. The second thing is to change policy, and certainly Obama has not done that. The other way is mobilization. And there is some evidence they tried to reach out to these groups."

But Green added, "What we could be seeing is that comfort and campaigning only go so far, and that ultimately it's substance that matters to these voters."