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Religion and the 2012 American Presidential Election

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One of the most significant but overlooked factors in American electoral politics, especially among foreign observers, is the role played by religious issues. Since the 1980s, divisions in the electorate based on levels of religious observance have become increasingly prominent in determining partisanship and vote choice – so much so that, by 2008, the political gap between religious and secular Americans had come to dwarf more widely recognized divisions. According to data from the 2008 American National Election Studies, white Americans who seldom or never attend religious services (42% of all whites) gave Democrat Barack Obama 58% of their votes; by contrast, whites who attend religious services once a week or more (33% of all whites) voted 73% for Republican John McCain. This religious-based partisan disparity is larger than that between men and women, rich and poor, or union and non-union households. It is surpassed by the gap between white and black Americans (who are overwhelmingly Democratic), but religious observance has become far and away the strongest determinant of vote choice among whites.

The political salience of religion will undoubtedly hold strong in 2012, even if both candidates shy away from most discussions of “culture wars” issues. One of the great ironies of contemporary American politics is that, while most voters claim not to prioritize moral concerns, positions on these questions remain powerfully predictive of their ultimate political choices. The stark divisions on the basis of religious observance noted above occurred in an election dominated by economic issues in the wake of the financial crisis, where the candidates hardly mentioned anything other than the economy in the campaign’s closing weeks. Once again, in 2012, voters are telling pollsters that what they really care about is jobs and the economy. It is a virtual certainty, however, that come Election Day, positions on abortion and gay marriage will be at least as important in separating the Obama and Romney supporters as will stances on tax policy and the budget deficit. They have simply become a fundamental part of what makes people think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans.

Both candidates in the 2012 race bring to the table attributes that are likely to keep religion a salient issue in the campaign. Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican nominee, is the first Mormon major-party candidate in American history. Even though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the official name for Mormonism) is the largest religion actually born in the United States, and despite the fact that it is rapidly growing (there are now more Mormons in America than Jews – about 3% of the population), it remains somewhat unfamiliar and mysterious to many Americans. Indeed, recent surveys have shown that more than 20% of Americans say they would be uncomfortable with the idea of a Mormon president. When we look closely at who these people are, however, these reservations may be less of a problem for Romney than first meets the eye. A little over half of those expressing opposition to a Mormon president are people on the left, most of whom object to the faith’s conservative stances on questions like abortion and homosexuality and to what they perceive as patriarchal culture and norms within the Church. Almost all such people would vote for Barack

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Obama against any Republican nominee, so it's not as if Romney's Mormonism will cost him many realistically available votes on the left. Most of the remainder of the anti-Mormon contingent consists of conservative evangelical Protestants who have deep theological objections to LDS teaching and who regard the Church as a non-Christian cult. As much as these people dislike Mormonism, however, they despise Obama more, because of his disagreement with them on a wide range of issues. In the end, most of them will end up supporting Romney despite their reservations about his faith, simply because he is the only alternative to the hated Obama. In the end, therefore, Romney's Mormonism is unlikely to cost him enough votes to be a decisive factor in the race. Nonetheless, he will have to address the question of his faith forthrightly (much as John Kennedy had to address the issue of his Catholicism in 1960), and the American media and public will have to come to grips with the realistic prospect of electing a president outside the bounds of conventional Christianity. This in and of itself will ensure a lively discussion of religious issues throughout the fall campaign.

At the same time, President Obama's reelection bid is beset by religious struggles of its own. While Obama continues to enjoy overwhelming support in black churches and among America's small "Christian left," he has struggled mightily with faithful adherents of the nation's two largest religious traditions: Evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Obama, like most national Democratic politicians, never enjoyed much support from evangelicals – they have become quite a reliable Republican constituency over the last couple of decades. Their aversion to the president was reinforced recently by his embrace of same-sex marriage, which made it much less likely that they would stay home on Election Day because of reservations about Romney (who immediately affirmed his support for traditional marriage). Among Catholic voters, however, Obama had enjoyed more support. He actually won a majority of the overall Catholic vote in 2008, and actually fared better (though he still lost badly) among observant white Catholics than Catholic John Kerry had in 2004. Since his election, however, President Obama seems to have gone out of his way to pick fights with the Catholic Church, thereby alienating those faithful Catholics who might have been inclined to support him. In addition to the aforementioned endorsement of same-sex marriage, he has denied federal funds to Catholic adoption agencies (because they refuse to place children with same-sex couples) and women's shelters (because they refuse to provide abortion referrals). Most notably, his administration has issued a directive requiring all employers, including Catholic schools and hospitals, to provide to their employees insurance coverage that includes contraceptives and abortifacients, even though this violates Church teaching. In response, multiple Catholic dioceses and institutions have sued the U.S. government claiming an unconstitutional infringement of their religious liberties, and the suits are now pending in federal court. Clearly, faithful Catholics will have a hard time supporting Obama in 2012.

In sum, the 2012 American presidential election will be full of religious subtexts. Obviously, economic conditions will matter a lot, and voters will expect the candidates to talk primarily about their plans for job growth, fiscal discipline, and taxation. At the same time, however, moral values issues will continue to powerfully shape American vote choice, even if neither candidate especially wants to talk about them. The campaign will also provide answers to critical and fascinating questions about religion and politics in the United States. Will church attendance continue to trump social class as a predictor of vote choice? Will America elect its first president from outside the bounds of traditional Christianity? Has the nation become secular enough that a president can win reelection despite consciously alienating its two largest religious groups? We shall see.

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