

When God Votes...

by Clem Boyd



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Frank used to be a committed Democrat. From 1960 on, he voted for the Democratic candidate—Kennedy, LBJ, Humphrey, McGovern. He was heartened in 1976 by the ascendancy of Jimmy Carter, a southern Democrat who also claimed a born-again faith in Jesus Christ.

But Carter's presidency seemed to skew more liberal than Frank liked.

He also found that the party he once supported so unflinchingly was lining up on the other side of a burgeoning culture clash over abortion and the definition of traditional family. Though torn by his family's historical support of the

Democratic Party, he made a dramatic decision in 1980—he voted for Reagan. He's never looked back.

Frank and millions like him made a move in 1980 which is still creating political shock waves. Evangelical Protestants, particularly those in the South, had been stalwarts of the Democratic Party.

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With the Reagan election, their party allegiance began changing, a hemorrhage of formerly loyal voters from which the Democrats have never really recovered.

But how did all this happen and why? Evangelicals have always been a distinct subgroup in American society. But the 1976 and 1980 general elections showed political scientists that Evangelicals were more than just a single ingredient in the great American melting pot, but a ladle that could stir the soup.

"When you see changes, it attracts a lot of attention and Evangelicals have changed a good bit over the last couple of decades," noted John Green, a professor of political science at the University of Akron who's studied the role of religion on politics for the last two years.

"Things in politics are static, like the tendency of African-Americans to vote Democratic," he added. "But Evangelicals are more active in politics than they ever were previously; they've become a strong element of the Republican Party and are strong supporters of President Bush."

Through most of American history, Evangelicals have been a swing vote. According to Corwin Smidt, political science professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Evangelicals have divided pretty evenly between Democrats and Republicans over the years. Religion had less to do with this split than regional affiliation.

"Those in the North tended to be Republican whereas those in the South tended to be Democrat," Smidt explained. "There were more

southern Evangelicals than northern and, as a result, Evangelicals tended to be more Democratic. But in the early 80s that began to change and they moved in the Republican direction."

There are long-term and short-term factors involved in that change. "Over the last 40 years, Evangelicals have become more a part of the political class—middle class, urban, fairly well-educated," said Jim Guth, political science professor at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. "The more educated a group becomes, the more they get involved in politics. The more money a group makes, the same happens. It was inevitable they'd become more involved in the political process."

In the short-term, Evangelicals have been galvanized by an array of social-cultural issues—from the Supreme Court decision in 1963 to ban organized prayer in public schools to recent decisions about gay marriage. "Evangelicals decided, 'Government does affect the way we're able to practice our faith and the kind of society we'd like to see in America.' They are a well-educated, well-to-do constituency and politicians, starting with Reagan, have tried to activate them," Guth said.


And, for Evangelicals in general, the social issues tend to drive voting behavior more than economic policy. "Not everyone is moved the same distance or in the same direction, but all Evangelicals are moved this way where social issues are relatively more important than economic ones," Smidt said.

Peter Brandt offered a big "Amen!" on that point. "I think Evangelicals need to care dearly about the things God cares dearly about and that should be true of all areas of life," said Brandt, director of issues response at Focus on the Family. "We cannot be pro-life on Sunday and not care about the sanctity of the unborn the rest of the week. That attitude of caring about things that God cares deeply about must extend to how we think about the civic process and how we think politicians represent our values."

Certain social issues tend to animate Evangelicals more than others. Abortion and the pro-life agenda tends to be one. Family issues and a candidate's position on homosexual rights stand out, as well.

Brandt gave voice to those priorities. "The right of a pre-born to live

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“Religion should not be the exclusive possession of the Republican or Democratic Party, the right or left, but must be able to critique and challenge both. And clearly, in this election, Christians will be voting both ways, because of their faith.”

—*Sojourners editor-in-chief Jim Wallis, writing in Sojourn, the weekly e-mail newsletter of his Christian ministry.*

would seem to trump an issue of taxation or any other issue,” he said. “Helping the poor is a biblical value, but if we’re truly a country of compassion then our desire to uphold the rights of the most innocent is pre-eminent.

“That goes for marriage, too. God created the institution of marriage between one man and one woman. Our culture says we should vote on what’s a marriage or not, but God’s already spoken on this matter. Marriage is not an invention of government or an invention of the courts, but an invention of the Creator.”

But what about justice? Certainly the Bible portrays that as an important concern for believers. Our God is “a father to the fatherless” and “a defender of widows” (Psalms 68:5). Historically, the Democrats have positioned themselves as those who seek to lift up the downtrodden in society. Republicans on the other hand have been portrayed as the party where

the rich get richer. How does being an Evangelical deal with this apparent disconnection with core values?

“The end is agreed on among Evangelicals, that justice be accomplished, but the difference often is the means,” Smidt said. “Is government the way these things should be accomplished? Evangelicals have been less government-oriented, saying instead that the churches ought to be the first vehicle for addressing this issue. There are legitimate questions to be raised about the legitimacy of this approach, but Evangelicals are more attuned to thinking about social justice through the church.”

For some Evangelicals, there’s the whole “guilt by association” factor as well. For instance, according to Smidt, there may be the perception that liberals who advocate social justice for the poor frequently advocate equal rights for homosexuals.

While pollsters tend to focus on the “evangelical” factor in the upcoming election, political scientists like Guth have landed on a more telling dynamic in determining voting tendencies—faithfulness.

According to the Third National Study of Religion and Politics, produced by the University of Akron, 80 percent of those he classified as “evangelical traditionalists” cast their ballot for Bush in the 2000 presidential election, not a great shock to those who’ve been following recent voting trends. But also solidly supporting Bush were those who fit the “traditionalist” label within mainline Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church.

Guth describes Evangelical and mainline church “traditionalists” as those who adhere to the classic, Apostle’s Creed stance—the Bible is authoritative, it is the Word of God and Jesus is the only way to salvation.

Among Catholics the questions are different, focusing on matters like belief in the infallibility of the

Pope, whether the worshippers regularly pray the rosary and attend individual confession. Eighty-two percent of mainline Protestant traditionalists and 70 percent of traditionalist Catholics voted for Bush in 2000.

On the other end of the scale are those he would describe as modernists. They voted more for Gore in 2000 and tend to vote more Democratic overall.

In a survey earlier this year, Barna Research Group took the voting temperature of 1,618 voting-age adults. Within that survey they identified those having an “active” faith.

“These are people who go to church, pray and read the Bible regularly,” George Barna, director of the project, explained. “Of this group, 59 percent said they would vote for Bush and 26 percent for Kerry. Within this group, 46 percent identify themselves as Republican while 32 percent say they are Democrat.

“There’s more of an ideological connection between those folks and Bush,” Barna continued. “His way of looking at the world and dealing with issues, the language he uses to communicate, what’s important to him and the strategies he puts in place—that’s what they resonate with.”

For Barna, belief system is a better determinant in figuring out voting behavior. “It makes more sense to look at psychographics than demographics,” he said. “You don’t vote a certain way because you live in New Jersey, but because you live in New Jersey *and* you have a certain worldview.”

“Worldview is the way you make sense of the world and respond to it. The worldview of Evangelicals drives them to respond to candidates in a particular fashion, and that’s different from the response of Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and atheists to the same candidate.” □

Clem Boyd lives in Beavercreek, Ohio, with his wife and two children.