

Faith-based doubts: Do we need another initiative?

From the Editors in the [August 12, 2008](#) issue

Not many policy proposals from the 1990s can be trotted out a decade later in almost exactly the same form. But Barack Obama's plan to launch his own faith-based initiative closely echoes proposals endorsed years ago by Al Gore and George W. Bush. John Dilulio, one of the godfathers of the initiative and the first director of Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (Dilulio soon concluded the office was just for political show), said Obama's plan reminds him "of much that was best in both then-vice president Al Gore's and then-Texas governor George W. Bush's respective first speeches on the subject in 1999."

The faith-based initiative has always been fine in concept. Many social services in this country are already provided by faith-based and other nongovernmental groups, and it makes sense to encourage their activity and find ways for the government to partner with civic organizations that are doing creative work.

But the faith-based initiative has been more of a political talking point or political football than an actual program. The Bush administration never provided the expanded funding that it promised, and Bush's legislative proposal for the initiative became mired in a debate over whether religious groups that get government money can discriminate in hiring. Obama, rightly, would keep the rules as they have been: government money is for social service, not religious proselytizing. Groups that receive government funds must abide by government rules against discrimination when using those funds.

Despite years of talk about opening the door to faith-based groups, many of the assumptions made by backers of the idea remain unproven. Among the key questions that still need to be asked: Are faith-based groups really discriminated against when it comes to getting federal funds? Are there many faith-based groups that want federal funds but don't know how to apply for them? Are faith-based groups always skilled at providing services?

Amy Black, a political scientist at Wheaton College who has studied the initiative since its birth, explains that it is hard to track whether more religious groups have received funding under Bush, because gathering the data would require groups to indicate whether they are religious—a requirement which itself creates a risk of discrimination.

The best argument for the faith-based initiative has always been a practical one: Why not empower those local agencies that are most knowledgeable and motivated to serve the poor? But the government was funding faith-based agencies long before anyone coined the phrase *faith-based initiative*. After nearly a decade, the practical benefits of a government office bearing that label are yet to be demonstrated.