

Beyond the God gap: Lessons from Nehemiah

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The election of Barack Obama offers hope that religion will play a more constructive role in the public arena rather than the largely divisive role it has played in recent years. One sign of hope is that Obama was able to narrow the Democrats' so-called God gap. Whereas George Bush enjoyed a 29-point advantage over John Kerry among voters who attend church more than once a week, Obama reduced the Republican advantage to 12 points, according to data released by Faith in Public Life. And while Kerry lost the vote of those who attend religious services on a monthly basis by two points, Obama won that group by two points.

Obama's appeal to Catholic voters was also dramatic given the concerns expressed by American bishops about his stance on abortion. He received 55 percent of the Catholic vote, much of which reflected his overwhelming support among Hispanics.

Overall, evangelicals continued to support Republicans at close to their previous levels, but Obama doubled Kerry's level of support among evangelicals under the age of 45. And half the votes that flipped Indiana from red to blue came from evangelicals (see [Mark Silk's article](#) in this issue).

Beneath these numbers lies a deeper trend among evangelicals, according to Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals. He sees a chasm growing between mainstream evangelicals and the religious right. The religious right has viewed politics as a zero-sum game in which "somebody else has to lose for us to win." But mainstream evangelicals, Cizik contends, lean toward a "common good" approach and are willing to work with an Obama administration on issues like the environment and poverty and even on reducing the number of abortions. The Obama campaign's effort to build relationships with the evangelical community bodes well for cooperation in the future.

Religious communities can take heart from the fact that Obama seems to understand that many of the problems facing our country and world—including the economic ones—have a moral component. They can be heartened by his call for a greater commitment to service and his apparent willingness to listen to people with differing views.

The challenges before Obama are formidable. Roland Martin, CNN political commentator, likened Obama's task to that of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after Israel's Babylonian captivity. Once Nehemiah announced his plan to rebuild the wall, the people said to him, "Let us start building." And then the "people committed themselves to the common good" (Neh. 2:18).

Obama will make mistakes. He will disappoint us all at some point. He will need the churches' support in action and in prayer—prayer not only that he will choose good counselors, exercise wise judgment, learn from his mistakes and serve the common good, but prayer that he and his family will be personally safe and spiritually supported in their years in the White House.