

Will evangelicals respond to Obama's overtures? More voters are undecided: More voters are undecided

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Heather Rosema of Grand Rapids, Michigan, is precisely the kind of Christian voter that Senator Barack Obama covets.

Rosema, 41, chose George W. Bush in 2000, when she put greater emphasis on issues like abortion and gay marriage. This year, she intends to vote for Obama.

Rosema, a member of Roosevelt Park Community Christian Reformed Church, sees a true man of faith in the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee. "He talks about God very easily," said Rosema. "I think that I hear that from him. They seem to be a Christian family."

Mike Langerak, meanwhile, remains unimpressed.

"Obama has got a good line. He presents himself well. But his walk does not follow his talk," says Langerak, a 50-year-old roofing contractor from suburban Hudsonville who also attends a Christian Reformed church.

Langerak is most troubled by Obama's support of abortion rights, though he doesn't exactly sing the praises of Senator John McCain, who has struggled to woo evangelical voters who flocked to Bush in 2004.

But Langerak is pragmatic when it comes to the November 4 election. He wonders about other Christian voters who look askance at McCain's conservative credentials. "Some people said they would sit it out. . . . But if you do not vote for McCain, then you are in effect putting Obama in," Langerak said.

Evangelical voters like Rosema and Langerak are a crucial constituency in the 2008 elections. In 2004, 78 percent of white evangelicals broke for Bush, and white Protestants overall voted for Bush by a two-to-one margin. Few predict that kind of fervor for McCain, but it remains to be seen whether Obama can crack open the door to this GOP sanctuary.

One recent poll showed that McCain had a smaller lead among white evangelicals than Bush did over Democrat John Kerry in June of 2004. Yet Obama “has made few inroads into this key constituency,” said a report posted online July 17 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Sixty-one percent of white evangelicals favored McCain this June while 25 percent supported Obama. McCain’s 36-point advantage in this group is smaller than Bush’s 43-point lead in June 2004. White evangelicals are more undecided today than they were at this point in the last two presidential campaigns.

The religiously unaffiliated have made the biggest shift away from the GOP candidates since 2000—moving from 46 percent favoring Al Gore in June 2000 to 67 percent supporting Obama this June.

Obama is not ceding evangelical votes. He visited Ohio on July 1 to tout expanded funding for social service programs run by religious groups. He also has circulated a pamphlet that is striking for its stark religious appeal. Beneath a photo of Obama at a pulpit with a large cross in the background, it reads: “My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won’t be fulfilling God’s will unless I go out and do the Lord’s work.”

There is also political work to do, given polls showing that some Americans mistakenly believe that Obama is a Muslim. A cartoon cover on a recent *New Yorker* magazine that depicted Obama as Muslim and unpatriotic and his wife, Michelle, as a radical terrorist was intended to satirize a fear campaign by ultraconservative opponents of the Democratic candidate, but some supporters feel that the cartoon may be misused to perpetuate the slurs.

McCain has issues of his own with religious voters—especially the nagging concerns of the religious right that are dampening conservatives’ enthusiasm.

In his 2000 campaign for the GOP nomination, McCain faulted the “politics of division and slander” and called Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell “agents of intolerance.”

However, McCain made up with Falwell before the fundamentalist leader's death, and he also courted the favor of televangelist Robertson.

McCain finished last among nine Republicans in a straw poll last year at the Values Voter Summit for conservative activists in Washington. In May, he was forced to dump the endorsement of religious broadcasters John Hagee and Rod Parsley after some of their public statements demeaning either Jews or Muslims came to light.

Since then, the McCain campaign has stepped up efforts to assure evangelicals that he is their candidate.

But Calvin College political science specialist Doug Koopman said McCain may have trouble closing the deal, especially since younger evangelicals are gravitating toward issues like global warming, human trafficking and poverty. "He has never been their candidate," he said. "John McCain has never been a religious exhibitionist." What's more, Koopman noted, "he is independent and strong-willed and in some sense unpredictable on issues."

Koopman also said Obama is tapping a new generation of evangelical leaders while old-guard icons such as Robertson are being wooed by McCain's campaign. "They are running a 2000 campaign when it comes to 2008," he said.

Of course, a mosaic of other factors— including turnout by black, young and new voters—will shape the election's outcome. But Koopman believes that evangelicals could be pivotal. Religion "is a way into voters being comfortable with a candidate," he said.

If Obama can cut McCain's support among evangelical voters from 78 percent to 68 percent, the election may be his, Koopman said.

Some evangelicals hint at buyer's remorse after supporting Bush. "I was fed up with the Clintons and all of the personal drama. I was looking for somebody to stand up for his faith," said Sharon Smith, 40, whose husband, Reggie, is the pastor at Rosema's church.

Smith, however, grew disillusioned over some of Bush's policies, including the decision to invade Iraq. She concluded that Bush "misused his faith" to justify political decisions.

She intends to vote for Obama because of his stand on issues like social justice and health care. "I have come to a point where faith is a personal thing for each candidate," Smith said. "I am looking at their stand on policies and how they are going to affect the nation." -*Ted Roelofs, Religion News Service*