

Discerning the faith factor: Pollster John Green

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

Described by the Los Angeles Times as the “preeminent student of the relationship between religion and American politics,” John Green has conducted surveys on religion for every presidential election since 1992. A professor of political science at the University of Akron, he is author of The Faith Factor: How Religion Influences American Elections (Praeger).

As you’ve been tracking this presidential campaign, have there been any surprises?

The two interesting things about the 2008 election don’t sit very easily together. One is the very high level of religious discourse that we’ve had. The Democratic Party has been talking more about religion, trying to reach out to religious voters and trying to connect religious values to the positions of the party. A very good example of that is Barack Obama, but it is not limited to him. Of course, the Republicans are doing that as well, but they have been for a few election cycles.

On the other hand, so far we see remarkably little change from the pattern of faith-based voting we saw in 2004 and 2000. When it comes to the voting behavior of religious people, we look at both religious affiliation and religious commitment, typically measured by worship attendance. Over the last couple of elections, white evangelical Protestants have tended to vote heavily Republican. Among mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics there has been a division between the most regular attenders, who tended to vote Republican, and the less observant, who tended to vote Democratic.

Democrats also have a good deal of support among religious minorities such as black Protestants and Latino Catholics and the people who are religiously unaffiliated, some of whom are atheists and agnostics and some of whom are just not involved in organized religion.

So something of a balance has developed between the evangelicals and worship-attending white Christians who vote Republican and the Democratic coalition of less-observant Christians, minority Christians, non-Christians and the unaffiliated. One of the reasons the 2000 and 2004 elections were so close is because America's diverse religious communities divided up sides.

There has been a little bit of change going right along the axis of politics. Obama is doing very well among African-American Protestants, a group that was always very Democratic but right now is particularly enthused. He is doing very well with the unaffiliated, also a group that was largely Democratic already. Obama has also improved his support among Roman Catholics, even among the more conservative Catholics who still on balance favor the Republicans—just not by the same margin as they did before. Evangelical Protestants are still strongly Republican, but not quite as strongly as in 2004.

Are the issues for the so-called values voter the same as they have been?

Americans of all backgrounds are much more concerned about the economy than they were in 2004 or 2000. That doesn't mean that the people who care about abortion or same-sex marriage have gone away.

Religious progressives of many backgrounds have tried to reconceptualize values to include the environment and social justice and peace. They are unwilling to concede the idea that morality is only about sexual matters. It is unclear at this point how successful that effort has been. We won't know until the ballots are cast, but religious people who have these concerns have been more vocal and active in the campaigns.

Is there any evidence that we are moving beyond the culture wars?

My view on the culture wars is that they are very important but tend to be overstated. The culture wars are important to a minority of people in both political parties who are very active, involved in party organizations, and adamant about their point of view. Most of the rest of the population isn't as heavily engaged in these disputes but is influenced by the activities of those who care.

I don't think the cultural issues are the most important things in our politics, but I don't think they are going away. Maybe because people's priorities are more focused on the economy this year, activists who care about abortion have redoubled

their efforts to get the attention of the campaigns and the voters.

What about battleground states? In trying to attract religious voters, the issue isn't only if Obama will peel off evangelicals, but if he will do so in key states.

It usually does come down to a small number of states, and these states have some important things in common. First, they are very diverse—and much of that diversity is religious diversity. In Ohio, you have every kind of Roman Catholic you can imagine, you have evangelicals, a growing Muslim population, an active Jewish community, many mainline Protestant churches, lots of nonbelievers. You name it, Ohio has it.

Can Obama do a little bit better with evangelicals? Can he win the Catholic vote? Can McCain hold on to evangelicals? Can he win the Catholic vote, which George Bush won in 2004 by a small margin? That's where the real battle is: among these religious groups in key battleground states. These days religious diversity is a very good marker of political competition.

How should your average voter evaluate polls?

If a poll is conducted correctly, it is at best a snapshot of public opinion at the moment at which the poll is taken. That can be very valuable. But it can also change very quickly. Polls often don't do a good job of forecasting elections. They are short-term phenomena.

One of the interesting things about polling is that people react to polls. Polls can change polls.

We don't hear much in the media about mainline religious voters. What can you tell us about them?

One of my pet peeves about the way that religion is covered in the press is that there tends to be so much focus on evangelicals to the exclusion of all the other religious groups. Evangelicals are very important, but there are other groups that are also important.

Depending on how you measure them, mainline voters make up between a sixth and a fifth of all American voters. Because they tend to have high levels of education and income, they vote at very high rates. They are often ignored by pollsters

because they are hard to measure in a quick poll in which you are calling 600 people to find out what they are up to politically. The other thing about mainline voters is that they are pretty divided. Many of them are Democrats and many of them are Republicans. In 2004 President Bush had a little bit of an edge among them.