# Faith talk losing appeal to voters

by Nicole Neroulias in the September 20, 2011 issue

Has America gotten more religious, or is religiousness just a vocal strain in American politics? The country has grown less religious since the 1970s, according to recent studies, but researchers say that frequent churchgoers are now much more likely to vote Republican or support the Tea Party.

As a result, faith-filled rhetoric and campaign stops make Americans seem more Christian than they really are, according to Mark Chaves, a Duke University professor of sociology and religion. The rise of megachurches also fuels the misperception that most Americans attend services weekly, whereas only one in four Americans actually do, he added.

"The Michele Bachmanns and Rick Perrys of the world are playing to a base that's much smaller than it was in the 1970s and 1980s," said Chaves, whose new book, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends,* analyzes data from the General Social Survey and the National Congregations Study.

Chaves said America is not only losing its religion but also has lost confidence in religious leaders and wants them to be less involved in politics. Researchers say the trends reflect myriad factors: disillusionment with clergy and political scandals, the country's increasing diversity and younger generations that tend to be more highly educated and socially liberal.

Chaves also interprets these trends as a "backlash" against the politicization of religion that began with Jerry Falwell and the rise of the religious right. The findings—along with new research by Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam and Notre Dame professor David E. Campbell, coauthors of *American Grace: How*

*Religion Divides and Unites Us*—paint a shifting portrait of American politics.

The Tea Party's sinking approval rating—currently at 20 percent, below that of Republicans, Democrats, atheists and Muslims—signals a growing discomfort with mingling faith and politics, including the kind of "overt religious language and imagery" recently used by Bachmann and Perry on the campaign trail, Putnam and Campbell recently wrote in the *New York Times.*

What's more, Putnam and Campbell say the Tea Party is much more religious than originally thought. "The Tea Party's generals may say their overriding concern is a smaller government," they concluded, "but not their rank and file, who are more concerned about putting God in government."

Some core American beliefs have remained stable over the past two generations, however, including belief in a higher power, in the afterlife and in a God who is personally concerned with human beings. "Compared to Europe, Canada and Australia, Americans are still very religious," Chaves conceded.

Chaves nonetheless cites a number of shifts in U.S. religious beliefs and practices that have been well documented by sociologists of religion:

- There is a declining (though still very high) belief in God or a higher power. In the 1950s, 99 percent of Americans said they believed in God; in 2008, about 93 percent did. Nearly 20 percent of Americans now say they have no religion, compared to just 3 percent in 1957.
- Only 25 percent attend religious services weekly, although up to 40 percent claim they do.
- Fewer Americans approve of their religious leaders getting involved in politics. In 1991, about 30 percent of Americans strongly agreed that religious leaders should avoid political involvement; by 2008, 44 percent felt that way.

- Belief that the Bible should be taken literally dropped from about 40 percent in the early 1970s to about 30 percent in 2008; Chaves said this trend corresponds with the rise in the number of those receiving a college education.
- From 1972 to 2008, the percentage of people with great confidence in religious leaders declined from 35 percent to less than 25 percent. A sharp dip around 2002 was probably due to the Catholic Church clergy abuse scandals, but the trend has been downward for decades.

Immigration, intermarriage and assimilation have diversified U.S. religious beliefs since the early 1970s. Chaves believes that Americans will grow more accepting of Muslims over the next generation. He cited Putnam and Campbell's "Aunt Susan Principle," the idea that people are less suspicious of a particular faith when someone they know is a member of it.

Putnam calls Chaves's book "an important contribution to clarifying the facts about religious change in America" but cautions against oversimplifying the data. "The story is a bit more complicated than simply a linear trend down," he said.

Whatever the interpretation, Chaves says one thing is clear: American religiosity is either stable or in slow decline—and he leans toward the latter view. "Either way," he concludes, "it's not going up." —RNS