

Mainliners are swing voters, scholars say: A shift toward the political center

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Although mainline Protestants have traditionally voted Republican and their declining numbers have supposedly reduced their impact on elections, a political scientist who has studied church influence in politics says that mainliners will be important “swing voters” in the 2004 national elections.

Laura R. Olson, who teaches at Clemson University and is author of *Christian Clergy in American Politics*, says she detects a shift by mainline Protestants toward the political center. “More importantly, there is a reaction against the Evangelical-Republican Alliance,” she wrote in a supplement to *Religion in the News*, a three-times-a-year journal published at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

Mainliners are “no longer reliably Republican, and they’re not a bunch of Democrats, either,” Olson said.

While studies show that the mainliners who attend church the most are quite Republican and pro-military, Olson said that mainliners in general are well-educated, place great weight on citizenship and have grappled with abortion rights, gay rights, environmental protection and racial issues. Clergy who add their voices to left-wing coalitions may help sway independents, Olson indicated.