

Religious insiders: Mainline Protestants still dominate

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

Mainline Protestant denominations have steadily declined in membership for four decades in the U.S., so it was not surprising to learn recently that Protestants overall are losing, or have lost, their status as the nation's religious majority. Growing religious diversity has meant also that in national politics the Democrats could nominate a Jewish vice presidential candidate in 2000 and a Catholic presidential hopeful this year.

Does this cap the end of dominant influence at top government levels for members of the historic Protestant denominations?

Not quite, says a Purdue University sociologist. "It is premature to conclude that Protestant affiliation has lost its political potency in Washington," said James D. Davidson, the principal investigator of a statistical analysis completed with the help of two graduate students who tracked U.S. presidents and their key appointments from 1789 to 2003.

The research, submitted for publication, found that politicians and judges who belong to the oldest Protestant churches and other mainline traditions still wield considerable influence in the nation's capital.

"To this day, the religious insiders that emerged in the colonial period are more likely than other religious groups to become presidents, cabinet officers and justices on the Supreme Court," said Davidson. At the nation's founding, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Congregationalists were the religious insiders, members of what Davidson terms the Protestant Establishment. In later periods they were joined by Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ and others in perpetuating a Protestant hegemony, he said.

When appointing cabinet members and nominating Supreme Court justices, U.S. presidents in the last 70 years appeared to consider religious identity along with

race, gender and political ideology, according to the researchers. Since the 1930s, the Protestant establishment—Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Congregationalists—has been “overrepresented” in higher office, making up a third of the presidents, about 40 percent of the cabinet members and at least 36 percent of the Supreme Court justices—but only about 10 percent of the population.

The enduring Protestant presence is evident even beyond the scope of the study, which did not tally church ties of vice presidents or defeated presidential candidates. George W. Bush, a United Methodist, defeated Southern Baptist Al Gore for the presidency four years ago. Both running mates this year are Methodists—Dick Cheney and John Edwards.

Also, the first Bush in the White House was and is an Episcopalian. And when two other recent presidents held membership in one church but attended a different one, they associated with one of the historic Protestant denominations. Disciples of Christ member Ronald Reagan went to his wife’s (evangelical) Presbyterian congregation, and Southern Baptist Bill Clinton mostly attended his wife’s (liberal) Methodist church.

Davidson’s study, coauthored by Rachel Kraus of Purdue and Scott Morrissey of Maryland, may be most significant for pointing out the staying power of Episcopalians and Presbyterians as well as efforts in later years to do more than make token Catholic and Jewish appointments to the high court and cabinet posts.

In an interview, Davidson noted, “We are finding that when you have Protestant-establishment presidents like George Bush the father, they have a tendency to appoint other members of the Protestant establishment. Since the 1930s, almost half of the time these presidents appoint fellow members of the Protestant establishment to the cabinet—with the rest of the posts going to ‘other Protestants,’ Catholics or other faith members.” Surprisingly, in this period, he said, “‘other Protestant’ presidents have a tendency to appoint members of the establishment more than people from their own denominations or other religious groups.”

The distribution of cabinet members and Supreme Court seats by religion (or race, ethnicity and gender) has been recognized by political leaders and scholars alike as important for the sense of fair representation in the halls of power. “When people feel they are underrepresented they believe that laws and enforcement likely will be inequitable,” Davidson said.

Catholic appointments in the mid-20th century to cabinet and Supreme Court seats followed a “Catholic-replaces-Catholic” sequence for years. In the long presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt and in his last term, completed by Harry Truman, three male Catholics held the postmaster general job. Elected on his own, Truman appointed two Catholics in succession to the attorney general post. Dwight Eisenhower appointed two Catholics as secretary of labor, but Lyndon Johnson went back to the postmaster general office as a Catholic post, the last being Lawrence O’Brien (1965-1968).

Only two Catholics were among the nine Supreme Court justices in the first quarter of the 1900s. But once the remaining Catholic, Pierce Butler, died in 1939, presidents appointed one Catholic after another in 1940, 1949 and 1956, the last being William Brennan. Before Brennan retired in 1990, however, Catholics Anton Scalia and Anthony Kennedy had joined him on the bench in the late 1980s.

Among Jews on the Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis was the first, with a 23-year tenure that ended in 1939. Another Jewish justice, Benjamin Cardozo, served with him 1932-1938. Upon Brandeis’s retirement, one seat appeared to be reserved for a male Jewish justice—in succession Felix Frankfurter, Arthur Goldberg and Abe Fortas, who resigned in 1969. No other Jewish justice sat on the bench until Clinton appointed Ruth Bader Ginsberg in 1993 and Steven Breyer in 1994.

Meanwhile, the civil rights and women’s movements had changed the Washington scene. In historic nominations to the Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall became the first black justice in 1967 and Sandra Day O’Connor the first woman in 1981.

But significantly, Marshall and O’Connor both were Episcopalians. “Our findings suggest that when introducing change, presidents don’t believe they can introduce wholesale change,” Davidson said.

When Marshall retired in 1991, another African American, Clarence Thomas, was nominated by George H. W. Bush to fill the vacancy. At that time, Thomas was attending a conservative Episcopal congregation in Virginia, but Davidson said that Thomas may be more associated now with his Catholic roots.

If so, that means that the Supreme Court has a non-Protestant majority with three Catholics and two Jews. O’Connor and David Souter are Episcopalians, Chief Justice William Rehnquist is Lutheran and John Paul Stevens has an undetermined Protestant affiliation, according to the study.

“Our data show that the Religious Right or evangelical Protestants, who say they don’t have their fair share of power in the country, are right—they are underrepresented,” said Davidson. Cabinet appointments can provide short-term adjustments in representation, but the Supreme Court nominations are the more sensitive decisions by a president because the justices stay longer on the job.

Speculating from his data on what either party’s presidential candidate might do if O’Connor or Rehnquist leaves the court, Davidson said that both Bush and Kerry may be inclined to look for someone linked to the Protestant establishment or another Protestant such as a Methodist or Lutheran. Presidents look to assure Congress that a justice nominee is acceptable and keeps a certain balance of background on the court, he said.

“Democrats are frightened that Bush will appoint an evangelical Protestant to tilt the court quite far to the right,” said Davidson. “But my hunch is that Bush is more likely to nominate a member of the Protestant establishment—a conservative Episcopalian or a conservative Presbyterian rather than, say, a member of the Assemblies of God. In addition, it would almost certainly be a white male rather than a black or a woman. If it were a Hispanic, he would probably be a Protestant because there are already three Catholics on the court.”