

Between Pews & Polls

Have values voters lost their clout?

By W. James Antle III

HAS THE RELIGIOUS Right become irrelevant? Such a question would have been unthinkable only three years ago. According to political analysts across the ideological spectrum, the first big lesson of the 2004 election was that the parties were now aligned around values rather than economics. The second was that socially conservative “values voters” outnumbered their secular liberal counterparts, to the net benefit of Republican candidates. White evangelical Christians make up the GOP’s largest single voting bloc.

You wouldn’t be able to tell this by looking at the Republican presidential field. No candidate with a history of identifying with this bloc polls better than low single digits nationally. Ross Douthat of *The Atlantic Monthly*, observing that Iowa is somewhere “a semi-obscure social conservative ought to be able to make some noise,” pointed to a Mason-Dixon poll showing “Smike Brownbuckabee”—a composite of Sam Brownback and former Mike Huckabee—at 13 percent. But in the 2000 caucuses, Alan Keyes won 14 percent by himself.

Instead the field is led by Rudolph Giuliani, a twice-divorced supporter of legal abortion and same-sex civil unions. Mitt Romney, the top-tier candidate who has worked hardest at courting religious conservatives, was pro-choice until 2005. Fred Thompson is also expected to make a play for these voters, but detractors are already digging into what they say is his own pro-choice past.

Among the leading contenders, John McCain has been allied with social conservatives the longest. But he has never seemed especially comfortable with

them, famously blasting two Religious Right leaders as “agents of intolerance” during his 2000 campaign meltdown. They are equally offhand with him. And McCain’s record has its blemishes, with votes for taxpayer funded embryonic stem-cell research and against the federal marriage amendment.

How did religious conservatives end up without a logical candidate? It isn’t because their influence is on the wane otherwise. Even if organizations like the Christian Coalition have atrophied, white evangelicals cast the highest percentage of votes for Republican congressional candidates—72 percent—in 2006. Pollster Tony Fabrizio’s vast survey of Republicans shows moralists, a different but overlapping category of conservative voters, making up the same share of the GOP today as in 1997 (24 percent, the largest group), while the ranks of economic conservatives have shrunk by nearly two-thirds.

If social conservatives coalesced around a single candidate, their choice would stand an excellent chance of being the nominee. But it isn’t that simple. Religious conservative voters are much more diverse than their media image would suggest, and Christian Right leaders are far more pragmatic—and more solicitous of the GOP’s electoral interests. The movement doesn’t always support its own. According to one poll, only 6 percent of evangelicals support Huckabee, a Southern Baptist minister.

This is nothing new. Pat Robertson was the first Republican presidential candidate to come directly from the Religious Right. He did well in several states,

coming in second in the Iowa caucuses, and collected over 2 million votes before dropping out. But Robertson did so without the endorsement of Jerry Falwell and many other prominent Christian Right leaders, who were on board with the frontrunner, George H.W. Bush.

In his obituary for Falwell, conservative activist Howard Phillips recounted that the Moral Majority founder had decided to back Bush as early as 1981. “I protested, saying that Bush stood for a great many things with which both Jerry and I profoundly disagreed,” Phillips recalled. “Jerry replied that, by backing Vice President Bush early on, he would gain his confidence and have greater influence over his policies.”

After 1988, this was Robertson’s approach as well. He tacitly supported Bob Dole over the more socially conservative Pat Buchanan in 1996 and backed George W. Bush over Gary Bauer in 2000. When Robertson tapped Ralph Reed to run the Christian Coalition, their strategy was to guarantee the Christian Right a place at the table within the broader GOP coalition, working alongside other elements of the conservative movement.

Ever since its emergence as a self-conscious political movement, the Religious Right’s fortunes have been very closely tied to those of the Republican Party. Christian leaders like Falwell, Robertson, and Robert Grant worked in tandem with such movement conservatives as Phillips, Ed McAteer, Paul Weyrich, and Richard Viguerie. Before their efforts at organizing early groups like the Religious Roundtable and Moral

Majority, there hadn't been much of a values vote to speak of for decades.

Humiliated by the 1925 Scopes trial, disillusioned by Prohibition's failure, and heavily fundamentalist, conservative Protestants had low rates of political participation. Many did not vote; those who did were often Southern Democrats. Their leaders were more focused on evangelism than legislation or electioneering.

If religious conservatives were a sleeping giant in American politics, they were also very slow to awaken. Some were drawn to the anti-communist cause in the 1950s. The 1962 Supreme Court ruling that ended organized prayer in public schools and another decision circumscribing Bible reading were major catalysts. So was the 1960s counterculture, which provoked a socially conservative Silent Majority response. By 1972, the Democrats were being derided as the party of "acid, amnesty, and abortion," the last becoming a national issue when *Roe v. Wade* was handed down the next year.

Despite all that, evangelicals did not immediately reject the increasingly secular Democrats in favor of the GOP. When the outspokenly born-again Jimmy Carter was the Democratic nominee in 1976, many religious conservatives thought the McGovernites had been replaced with one of their own. Carter is believed to have won somewhere between 60 and 65 percent of the evangelical vote.

Yet Carter was a profound disappointment to many of these evangelicals, and his presidency helped drive them into the arms of the GOP. As president, he turned out to be more liberal than expected on abortion and other social issues. The IRS targeted the tax exemptions of insufficiently integrated Christian schools, with the administration's support, and Carter was seen as tilting toward the Palestinians rather than Israel in his Middle East policies.

Evangelicals soon turned away from the Baptist president and toward a divorced former actor. The founding fathers of the Christian Right courted Ronald Reagan, and Reagan returned the favor. Speaking at a gathering of evangelicals early in the campaign, Reagan, the first unabashedly pro-life GOP presidential nominee, wowed the crowd. "I know you can't endorse me," he said. "But I endorse you."

The 1980 Republican platform reflected the Religious Right's new influence. Gerald Ford's equivocating about *Roe* was replaced with a strong pro-life plank. The document also endorsed traditional family values and a constitutional amendment restoring school prayer. The endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment, which had appeared in every Republican platform since 1940 (and which the GOP had backed before the Democrats) was dropped.

In 1980, Reagan beat Carter among evangelical voters by 25 points. Reagan's margin swelled to 62 points in 1984. As Republican strategist Jeffrey Bell recently noted in *The Weekly Standard*, "Thus the swing in terms of partisan margin among theologically conservative white Protestants was a breathtaking 87 points."

The human-life amendment didn't pass, never winning more than 49 votes in a Republican-controlled Senate—18 votes short of two-thirds majority. Neither did the amendment promoting school prayer. But the issues remained powerful motivators of Republican turnout. And the Reagan administration did restrict public funding of abortion and nudge the judiciary to the right on issues of importance to religious conservatives.

Twelve years of Reagan-Bush judicial appointments weren't enough to overturn *Roe*, evangelicals learned in 1992. *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* was a disappointment that later paid political dividends, however. The decision expanded the number of permissible state abortion

restrictions while affirming *Roe*. This allowed pro-life legislators to win tangible victories in the areas where their position was popular while more controversial bans were still off the table. Partial-birth abortion bans, waiting periods, and parental-notification laws became some of the Religious Right's biggest policy successes.

That makes the movement's current dilemma all the more perplexing: their party may nominate Giuliani, whose social views are indistinguishable from Hillary Clinton's. And many religious conservatives seem mightily tempted to support him. Giuliani was well received at Regent University—"He did a great job," Pat Robertson enthused—and at Houston Baptist College. The dean of Regent's Robertson School of Government has endorsed him. No anybody-but-Rudy campaign is yet on the horizon.

If this is surprising, it shouldn't be. Giuliani guarantees Christian Right leaders a place at the table. And he might be the lesser of two evils—whatever else he would do, he probably wouldn't prosecute pro-life activists under racketeering laws as the last President Clinton did.

Not everyone agrees—Richard Land and James Dobson are Giuliani critics—but the opposition is muted, even though religious conservatives could probably stop Giuliani from being nominated and could certainly keep him from being elected. Evangelicals represented a third of Bush's supporters in 2004, a slice impossible to make up elsewhere even for a pol as popular as Rudy.

Exercising this leverage would require religious conservatives to give up their preference for access over results, a difficult thing for a movement so thoroughly integrated into the party structure to do. But the Religious Right can only be as relevant as it wants to be. ■

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Breaking Bush's Resistance

A pending court case could expose the administration's torture regime.

By James Bovard

FROM THE FIRST DAYS after the Abu Ghraib photos hit the airwaves, the torture scandal has epitomized the worst of the Bush presidency. A timid media, a cowardly opposition party, and a refusal by most Americans to face the grisly facts has contained the damage since 2004. But the web of lies and lawlessness is rapidly unraveling. Leaks, foreign challenges, military officers revolting, and a pending Supreme Court case could set off a tidal wave of revulsion against the administration's barbaric policies.

When President Bush was pressed by NBC's Matt Lauer last September about the use of brutal interrogation methods, he replied, "Whatever we have done is legal. ... We had lawyers look at it and say, 'Mr. President, this is lawful.'" But Bush's legal lackeys also proclaim that the president's command is the highest law, and U.S. torture has been confirmed by FBI agents, former military interrogators, a DoD Inspector General report, and court cases around the globe.

Denial has been the Bush team's first line of defense. From early 2005 onward, Bush repeatedly declared that the U.S. does not use rendition—the transport of terror suspects to other countries where they are tortured. He told the *New York Times* in January 2005 that "torture is never acceptable, nor do we hand over people to countries that do torture." Doing so would be a federal crime.

But the evidence of CIA "torture taxis" secretly racing around the globe carrying gagged, sedated detainees to some of the most brutal regimes in the world proved too much for Bush to

deny. He revised his defense in April 2005: "We operate within the law and we send people to countries where they say they are not going to torture people." But then why would the U.S. go to the trouble of kidnapping people—Canadian Maher Arar, who was grabbed at JFK Airport and renditioned to Syria or Australian Mamduh Habib, seized in Pakistan and flown to Egypt, for instance—and turning them over to governments the U.S. has long denounced for using torture?

In June, the Council of Europe issued a report condemning the CIA's exploitation of NATO military agreements to run secret prisons in Romania and Poland where detainees were tortured. The report called for banning "the Bush administration mindset" that says "if it is illegal for us to use such a practice at home or on our own citizens, let us export or outsource it so we will not be held to account for it."

While Bush bears ultimate blame for the U.S. embrace of torture, Vice President Cheney's team often drove the policy. The *Washington Post* reported on June 25 that starting in January 2002, "Cheney turned his attention to the practical business of crushing a captive's will to resist. The vice president's office played a central role in shattering limits on coercion in U.S. custody." The *Post* noted, "Cheney and his allies ... pioneered a novel distinction between forbidden 'torture' and permitted use of 'cruel, inhuman or degrading' methods of questioning." The Geneva Conventions, which are binding under U.S. law, make no such distinction.

The key was a radical new understanding of torture spelled out in an Aug. 1, 2002 Justice Department memo that narrowed the definition to suffering "equivalent in intensity" to "organ failure ... or even death." Call it a license to almost kill.

Top military experts opposed the redefinition, but a few high-ranking civilian appointees at the Pentagon scorned the veterans. Cheney has been especially enthusiastic about simulated drowning of detainees known as waterboarding even though the U.S. government classified this as a war crime in 1947.

Though neoconservatives have always prided themselves on being more anti-Soviet than God, the U.S. government turned to an unlikely source for inspiration to fulfill Cheney's vision of shattering detainees' resistance. After 9/11, the Pentagon and CIA "reverse engineered" many Soviet interrogation techniques that the U.S. had long denounced as torture. Policymakers looked at the "Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape" training American aviators received to endure Soviet interrogation for leads on how the U.S. could break the will of Muslim detainees. A 1956 *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* article entitled, "Communist Interrogation" described how the Soviets used "isolation, anxiety, fatigue, lack of sleep, uncomfortable temperatures" on their targets. The Bush administration adapted the same techniques at Guantanamo and the secret prisons scattered throughout the world, the *New York Times* reported last month.