

Religious Affiliation versus Religious Commitment: What Mattered Most in U.S. Presidential Elections, 2000-2012?

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of religion in the U.S. presidential elections of 2000-2012. On the one hand, the author uses a fragmentary approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections, within the framework of which religion is operationalized in terms of religious affiliation. On the other hand, the author uses a systemic approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections, within the framework of which religion is operationalized in terms of religious commitment. The author compares and contrasts the two approaches and concludes that it is impossible to say what has mattered most in the past four U.S. presidential elections – religious affiliation or religious commitment, since each of these parameters measures religion differently and each of the models developed on the basis of these measurements reveal distinct findings and contribute differently to the understanding of the role of religion in the U.S. presidential elections.

Keywords

Religious Affiliation, Religious Commitment, Presidential Elections, USA, Voting Behavior.

Introduction

American politics is increasingly divided along religious lines. Recent U.S. presidential elections have drawn attention to the role religion plays in shaping the American presidential vote. This paper assesses the impact of the faith factor on the four most recent U.S. presidential elections, the ones of 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. First, the paper provides the overview of the current academic debate on the issue of religion and politics in general and the role of religion in the U.S. presidential elections in particular. Second, the paper examines the voting behavior of distinct U.S. religious groups and shows how the denominational membership (religious affiliation) can serve as a source of political alignments of the U.S. electorate in the presidential elections. Third, the paper looks for the correspondence between the degree of religiosity of the U.S. population (religious commitment) and the vote choice in the presidential elections. Finally, the paper proves that it is impossible to figure out what matters most in the U.S. presidential elections, the religious affiliation or the religious commitment.

Literature Overview

Divisions that arise out of racial, ethnic, class, religious and gender differences represent the social bases of political behavior and have recently been central to the academic debate about the causes and consequences of political change in postindustrial capitalist democracies (Brint and Kelley 1993; Brooks and Manza 1997; Franklin et al. 1992; Inglehart 1990). Some political scientists suggest that class divisions play a crucial role in the evolution of party coalitions and political alignments (Evans 1998; Manza, Hout, and Brooks 1995). Others state that religion-based political cleavages, or differences in political preferences among various religious groups, are a more important factor for understanding and interpreting voting preferences (Dahl 1982; Jacobson and Wadsworth 2012; Lijphart 1979; Mann 1995; Noll and Harlow 2007; Rose 1974).

The USA is characterized by the high degree of influence of religion on different social and political life processes. There has always been a profound interest in the relationship between religion and politics in this country. In comparison to the citizens in other postindustrial capitalist democracies, Americans show higher levels of church membership and religious

services attendance, are more likely to believe in God and more frequently claim that religion is of considerable importance in their lives (Lipset 1996; Lopatto 1985; Tiryakian 1993; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011). Although the common European political pattern of a secular left coalition contesting for power against a conservative right coalition aligned with religious groups has made little headway in the USA, nevertheless, the political significance of ethno-religious cleavages has proven to be resilient in the U.S. domestic politics of recent decades. Since the majority of the U.S. religious groups have historically been stable in their party preferences for quite a long period of time, the role of religious cleavages in structuring voting behavior received significantly less attention than otherwise might have been expected. The emergence of politically active Christian Right groups and considerable turmoil among the established denominational families in 1970s gave momentum to the in-depth study of the relationship between religious group membership and political behavior in the USA (Fowler and Hertzke 1995; Leege and Kellstedt 1993).

The relationship between religion and politics in the USA has been examined from a variety of different angles.

First, a substantive amount of contemporary academic literature analyzes the reasons for which religion has long been rejected as a semantic field of Political Science and the ways how religion can be incorporated into the study of politics. The faith factor is claimed to be explored pretty well in the fields like political philosophy and public law. But at the same time there is much less interest in religion among political scientists on the whole. This tendency is the result of problems of measuring religion per se and failure to find right correspondence between religious ideas and behavioral dependent variables (Wald and Wilcox 2006). Besides, this tendency is due to the secularist reformist character of social sciences in general and the civic role of religion in the USA in particular. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that Congress will not endorse, or establish any religion. Likewise, the U.S. Constitution prohibits religious tests for public officials. Furthermore, the constitutional protection provided to the free exercise of religion has created social space for the public expression of religion. This combination of the government restricted from supporting any particular religion and the American citizens unfettered from exercising a wide array of religions has

given American religion its vitality (Campbell and Putnam 2011/2012). Although religion has inspired every major upheaval in the U.S. history, its role has been underestimated by the discipline of Political Science, which now tries to rediscover and recuperate the faith factor within its theoretical and methodological framework (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Wilcox, Wald and Jelen 2008).

Second, some academic literature examines the correspondence between religious orientation and political ideologies in the USA. Almost all studies concerned with this issue claim that whereas religious conservatism directly correlates with socio-political status quo orientation and conservative political party preferences, religious liberalism is significantly and positively related to socio-political change orientation and liberal political party preferences (Stellway 1973; Parenti 1967). This dichotomy between conservatism and liberalism, change and progress supports Max Weber's thesis (that he formulated in 1905) that religious ideas can serve as a most significant variable in accounting for the activities of men (Weber 1958). However, the evidence concerning the relationship between religious orientation and socio-political liberalism and conservatism is far from conclusive. Such state of affairs stems from certain methodological weaknesses in the measurement of both political and religious ideology. Many political scientists have used voting behavior or political party preferences as indicators of social and political liberalism and conservatism. This technique is convenient because such data are often accessible. Nevertheless, preferences for particular political parties expressed verbally or manifested in voting behavior are not always derived from strictly ideological considerations. In any given election ideological considerations may take a back seat to other considerations such as personal appeal, charisma or professional qualifications of the candidates (Lipset 1960). With regard to the measurement of religious ideology, usually one particular ideology is prescribed for the whole group. Rarely, both extremes of the religious ideological spectrum are taken into consideration. For instance, we hear quite a few about U.S. Jewish liberalism and too little about U.S. Jewish conservatism. For the correspondence between religious orientation and political ideologies to be appropriately assessed, both constructs must be measured as precise and comprehensive as possible (Stark, Foster, Glock and Quinley 1970).

Third, several studies raise the issue of religio-political activism in the USA. There are three main sources of religio-political activism. They are the differences between particular denominational traditions, differences within denominations, differences between all sorts of believers and non-believers (Wulthrow 1988). The reasons for the religio-political activism include a new political agenda setting, introduction of new methods of political organization and demographic change (Guth and Green 1990). The analysis of religiosity and participation among political activists reveals two important facts. Primarily, religious communities and commitments underlie basic alignments among political activists and through them the mass public. Alternatively, tight social networks that are formed through the intensive church activity facilitate rapid and intense political mobilization (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Campbell 2004).

Fourth, a vast variety of academic literature focuses on the impact of religion on the U.S. presidential elections. A great deal of political scientists have highlighted the political relevance of a specific religious group in the contemporary presidential election and contribution of this or that group to the base of Republican or Democratic supporters among the U.S. electorate (Campbell 2006; Schildkraut 2005; Weisberg 2012). Some researchers have analyzed the dynamics of the voting preferences across several religious groups and have provided evidence of limited changes in group-specific voting patterns coupled with much larger changes in religion-based partisanship and party coalitions (Brooks and Manza 1997; Brooks and Manza 2004). Other experts have focused on the influence of religion on the specific presidential election and have demonstrated how religious groups exhibit distinctive political priorities, attitudes toward the role of religion in the U.S. presidential election, stands on critical campaign issues and evaluations of a concrete presidential nominee's former political performance (Campbell et al. 2007; Green 2007; Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt and Green 2006).

This paper contributes to the recent resurgence of the academic interest in religion and politics and to advancing the understanding of the role religion plays in the U.S. presidential elections. It employs two significant innovations. First, the paper offers a fragmentary approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections by means of operationalizing religion in terms of religious affiliation. This approach focuses on the denominational

membership as a source of political alignments of the U.S. electorate in the presidential elections. The approach is defined as fragmentary, because it splits up the U.S. electorate into various religious groups. The voting behavior differs across all these religious groups. The motivation for voting and choosing this or that presidential nominee varies from group to group. Second, the paper offers a systemic approach to examining the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections by means of operationalizing religion in terms of religious commitment. This approach concentrates on the degree of religiosity (frequency of church attendance) of the overall U.S. population as a key determinant of Americans' voting behavior in the presidential elections. The approach is called systemic, since it does not split the U.S. electorate into various religious groups. Instead, it looks at how all the U.S. population characterized by this or that degree of religiosity votes in the presidential elections. The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast these two approaches and identify which one of them suits best for the analysis of the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections. The paper proves that both approaches are relevant for examining the role of religion in the U.S. presidential elections. Whereas the fragmentary approach traces the voting patterns of various religious groups and shows the dynamics of political preferences within and across these groups over time, the systemic approach seeks to analyze the voting trends of the overall U.S. electorate on the basis such parameter, as frequency of church attendance. Each of the two approaches treats religion individually and offers a unique assessment of the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections. Religious affiliation and religious commitment are the independent variables and voting behavior in the U.S. presidential elections of 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012 is the dependent variable within the framework of this research.

Data

We employ the statistical data from the public opinion poll "How the Faithful Voted". The poll was carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2012 and contains information about the results of the presidential vote measured in terms of religious affiliation and religious attendance for the years 2000-2012. Since we operationalize religion in two ways (as religious affiliation and religious commitment) and use two different approaches to examine the religious factor in recent U.S. presidential elections (the fragmentary and the systemic ones respectively), we work with two distinct datasets taken from this public opinion poll. To

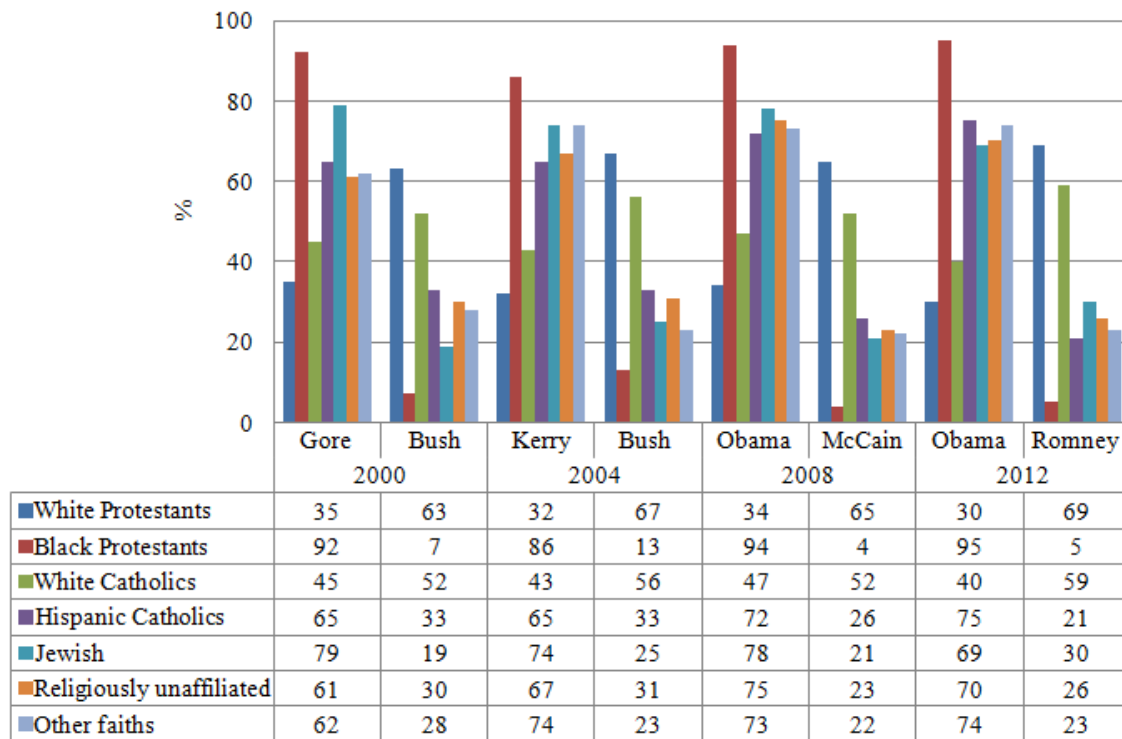
identify the trends in voter preferences among various U.S. religious groups in the presidential elections of 2000-2012, we work with the data that measure the presidential vote by religious affiliation. These data divide the U.S. electorate into seven groups - white Protestants, black Protestants, white Catholics, Hispanic Catholics, Jewish, religiously unaffiliated and others. We look at how the voting patterns have changed within and among the religious groups under consideration over past four presidential elections cycles. To determine the correspondence between the degree of religiosity of the overall U.S. electorate and the voting patterns in the presidential elections of 2000-2012, we use the data that measure the presidential vote by religious attendance. These data split up the U.S. electorate by frequency of church attendance into five distinctive groups – the ones that attend church more than weekly, the ones that attend church once a week, the ones that attend church few times a month, the ones that attend church few times a year and the ones that never attend church. We look at how each of these groups has voted in the past four presidential elections and analyze the relationship between the frequency of church attendance and vote choice. Finally, we compare and contrast the two datasets and explain the significance of each of them for understanding the role religion plays in shaping the American presidential vote.

Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation, 2000-2012

The fragmentary approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections operationalizes religion in terms of religious affiliation, traces the voting trends of the religious groups taken from the public opinion poll “How the Faithful Voted” conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012 and shows the dynamics of political preferences within and among these groups over time. The analysis of the presidential vote by religious affiliation for the years 2000-2012 has revealed three main findings.

First, as it can be seen in Figure 1, the voting patterns of different religious groups in the U.S. presidential elections have remained rather stable over time.

Figure 1. Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation, 2000-2012



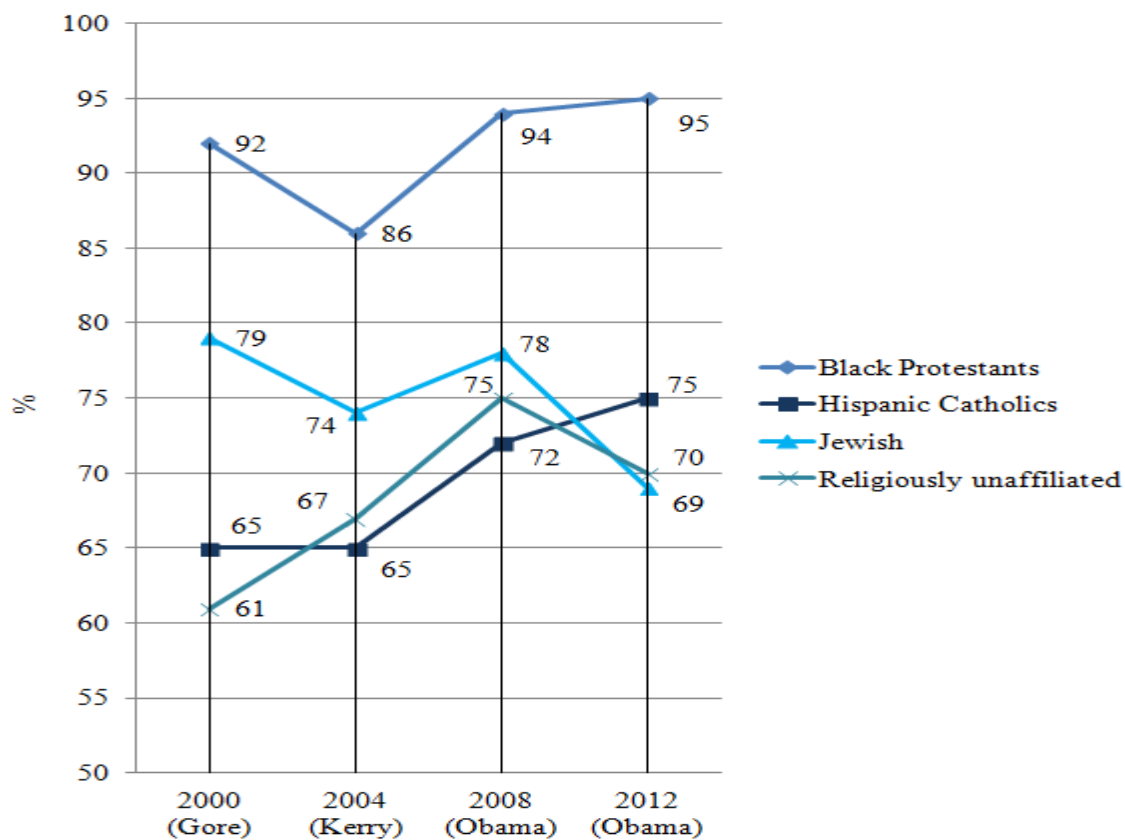
Source: Own figure drawn on the basis of the data taken from the public opinion poll “How the Faithful Voted”, Pew Research Center, 2012.

As Figure 1 shows, the voting preferences of each of the religious groups under consideration have changed only slightly within past four election cycles. The overwhelming majority of white Protestants and White Catholics voted for the Republican candidates. Most of black Protestants, Jews and representatives of other faiths voted for the Democratic candidates. The votes of Hispanic Catholics and the religiously unaffiliated were divided almost equally between Republicans and Democrats, with the latter having a small advantage over the former. The results of the presidential vote by religious affiliation for the years 2000-2012 have some vital political implications. The relatively stable preferences of the U.S. electorate divided into various religious groups emphasize the fact that the election and reelection of certain presidential nominees in the past four elections was guaranteed by the same religious groups. No group has drastically changed its voting preferences or switched the Republican (right) or Democratic (left) side of the political spectrum. The motivation for voting pro-Republican or

pro-Democratic has not been confined to a single factor (Wang 2013). Instead, there is a series of factors that stand behind the voting decisions. They range from issue voting, voting for the party, its political course and ideology to voting for a specific candidate and his pre-electoral platform.

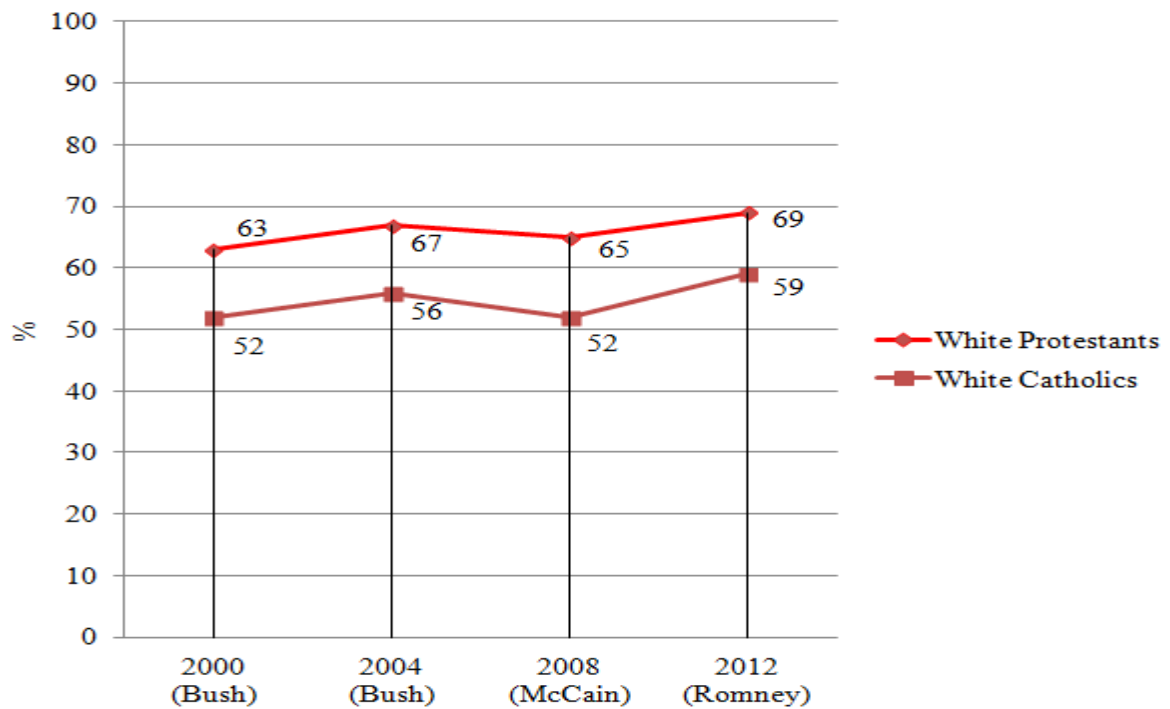
Second, although the voting patterns of different religious groups in the U.S. presidential elections have remained rather stable over time, still both pro-Republican and pro-Democratic religious groups have shown different degrees of support for Republican and Democratic presidential nominees over past four election cycles. As it can be observed in Figure 2 (a, b), within each political camp there can be found religious groups that are more or less pro-Republican or pro-Democratic than others.

Figure 2a. Vote Choice of Pro-Democratic Religious Groups, 2000-2012



Source: Own figure drawn on the basis of the data taken from the public opinion poll “How the Faithful Voted”, Pew Research Center, 2012.

Figure 2b. Vote Choice of Pro-Republican Religious Groups, 2000-2012



Source: Own figure drawn on the basis of the data taken from the public opinion poll “How the Faithful Voted”, Pew Research Center, 2012.

Figure 2 (a, b) acknowledges the division of the U.S. religious groups in the presidential elections into the pro-Democratic and pro-Republican ones.

Figure 2a identifies four groups that in their majority have voted for the Democratic presidential nominees in the past four elections. These groups include Black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, Jews and the religiously unaffiliated. The degree of the pro-Democratic support across these four groups has been different. Thus, in sum, Black Protestants have demonstrated the highest degree of support of the Democratic presidential nominees, while Jews have been the second strongest, Hispanic Catholics the third strongest and the religiously unaffiliated the least strongest pro-Democratic religious groups. Black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics have become more Democratic over the past four election cycles. The rise of the pro-Democratic appeal among Black Protestants was due to the fact that in 2008 an Afro-American man (Barack Obama) was elected for presidency for the first time in the U.S.

history (Ali and Foner 2008). The rise of the pro-Democratic appeal among Hispanic Catholics was due to Barack Obama's pre-electoral promise to reform the Immigration System and allow some illegal immigrants (many of which are of the Hispanic Catholic origin) to apply for the legal status in the USA (Wilson 2008). At the same time, American Jews are the only pro-Democratic religious group that has reduced the support of the candidates from this party (if the beginning and the end of the time period under consideration are compared). There are two reasons why Jews have become less Democratic. On the one hand, Jews have eventually abandoned the immigrant logic and blind following of the Democratic party typical of all immigrants. On the other hand, the US-Israeli relations have always been important for the American Jews. The latest developments of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Barack Obama's personal treatment of the issue have shaken the American Jews' convictions in the rightness of the pro-Democratic voter choice in the presidential elections (Weisberg 2012). Low degree of the Democratic support among the American Jews in 2004 testifies the strong impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the voter preferences of this group and the intra-group solidarity with the War on terror declared by G.W. Bush in the aftermath (Dionne, Cuomo and Brooks 2004; Reichley 2002; Rozell and Whitney 2007). The degree of the pro-Democratic support among the religiously unaffiliated has substantially risen from 2000 to 2008, but somewhat reduced from 2008 to 2012. Such a trend can be explained by some general problems that the USA have recently experienced. These problems have been mainly of the economic character and have ranged from the world financial crisis of 2008-2012 to the constant rise of the U.S. national foreign debt, fluctuations in the rates of the U.S. inflation and unemployment (Chapp 2012). The voting results among the pro-Democratic religious groups have had the most significant value in 2008 and 2012, when the presidential nominee from the Democratic party has won the election.

Figure 2b detects two groups that in their majority have voted for the Republican presidential nominees in the past four elections. These groups include white Protestants and white Catholics. White Protestants have been more pro-Republican than white Catholics. In turn, both of these groups have shown positive upward pro-Republican voting trends over past four election cycles. White Catholics and white Protestants have supported Republicans because of their treatment of such issues as abortion and same-sex marriages (Dunn 2010;

Heyer, Genovese and Rozell 2008). White Catholics, white Protestants (especially white mainline Protestants) and Republicans are very conservative with respect to these issues and declare the inconsistency of such liberal values with the religious dogma. The voting results among the pro-Republican religious groups have had the most significant value in 2000 and 2004, when the presidential nominee from the Republican party has won the election. However, it is important to notice that the degree of support of the Republican candidate in 2012 has been the highest among both white Protestants and white Catholics over the past four election cycles. Although Mitt Romney has lost the election to Barack Obama, he received more votes from white Protestants and white Catholics than his predecessors from the Republican party did in 2000, 2004 and 2008. This paradox has some explanations (Pew Research Center 2012). On the one hand, Mitt Romney is Mormon by religion and Mormons are calculated in the U.S. voting statistics as white Protestants. So, the rise of the Republican support among the white Protestants in 2012 was due to the increased Mormon support of the Mormon presidential nominee. On the other hand, white Catholics were outraged of Barack Obama's in particular and Democrats' in general public support of same-sex marriages and too liberal stance on some other political issues.

Third, in spite of the fact that all the U.S. religious groups are divided into the pro-Democratic and pro-Republican ones, nevertheless, within each religious group there can be found certain sub-groups that vote in another way than the majority of the whole group does. In other words, as it is shown in Figures 1 and 2 (a, b), no religious group is 100% pro-Republican or pro-Democratic. Therefore, U.S. religious groups have not been homogeneous in their voting preferences in the presidential elections of 2000-2012. There has been no intra-group consensus on the single pro-Republican or pro-Democratic voting preference. On the contrary, all the groups under consideration have been heterogeneous in their vote choice. At the same time, the degree of heterogeneity in each group has been different. Some groups have been more polarized, other have been more centrist. As it can be concluded from Figure 1, black Protestants were the most polarized group and Hispanic Catholics were the most centrist group in the recent four presidential elections. Other groups have not been either drastically split up or significantly consolidated. The division of voting preferences within the religious groups can be of vital importance for the presidential nominees and decisive for the

voting results in case of potential swing vote. The more centrist the group is, the more swing voters it has and the easier it is to manipulate the vote choice within this group (Mayer 2007; Moghaddam and Elich 2009). According to Figure 1, Hispanic Catholics are the only religious group that can be defined as centrist and thus potentially it can include many swing voters. Other religious groups are less likely to be exposed to pre-electoral manipulations and do not have a substantial number of swing voters, since within these groups there can be seen a clear pro-Republican or pro-Democratic majority and a clear opposite minority.

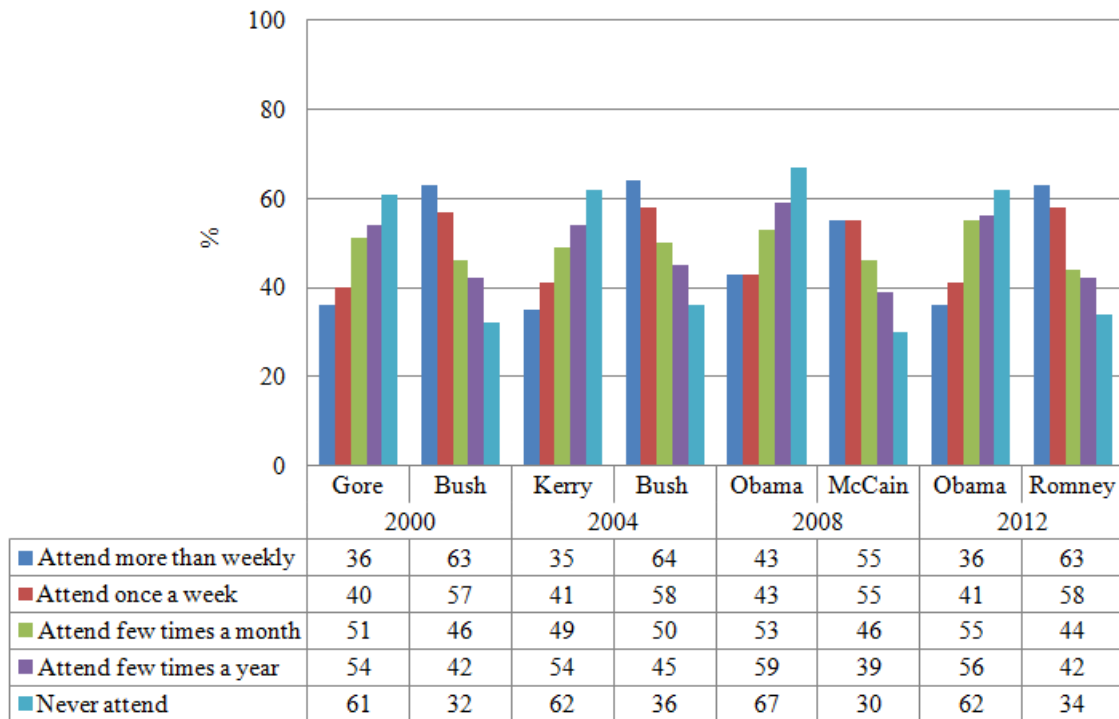
All in all, the analysis of the presidential vote by religious affiliation for the years 2000-2012 has revealed three main findings. First, the voting patterns of different religious groups have remained rather stable over time. Second, the U.S. religious groups have been divided into the pro-Democratic and pro-Republican ones. Third, no U.S. religious group, either pro-Democratic or pro-Republican one, has been homogeneous in its voting preferences.

Presidential Vote by Religious Commitment, 2000-2012

The systemic approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections operationalizes religion in terms of religious commitment, traces the voting trends of the overall U.S. electorate with respect to the frequency of church attendance and determines the correspondence between the degree of religiosity of the U.S. electorate and the voting preferences in the presidential elections of 2000-2012.

Figure 3 indicates the vote choice measured in terms of the U.S. electorate's religious commitment for the past four presidential elections cycles.

Figure 3. Presidential Vote by Religious Commitment, 2000-2012



Source: Own figure drawn on the basis of the data taken from the public opinion poll “How the Faithful Voted”, Pew Research Center, 2012.

Figure 3 identifies an articulate correspondence between the degree of religiosity and the choice of voting preferences. The representation of the presidential vote by religious commitment as shown in Figure 3 reveals two crucial findings. On the one hand, those Americans who attend religious services most often exhibit the strongest support for the Republican presidential nominees. On the other hand, those who say they never attend religious services are among the strongest Democratic supporters in the presidential elections. In other words, the more religiously committed the person is, the more likely this person will vote for the Republican candidate in the U.S. presidential elections. And vice versa: the more religiously apathetic the person is, the more likely this person will vote for the Democratic candidate in the U.S. presidential elections. This conclusion has some vital political implications. Basically, on the basis of the existing relationship between the degree of religiosity and the pro-Republican or pro-Democratic vote choice presidential candidates can decide for themselves whether they should or should not address the religious factor while

campaigning. Since frequent church-goers mainly vote pro-Republican, it is reasonable for the Republican nominees to work closely with churches and other religious organizations to attract the religiously committed voters on their side. For those that only seldom or never attend religious services mainly vote pro-Democratic, it is reasonable for the Democratic nominees to concentrate on secular issues and do not touch upon the faith factor at all to attract the religiously apathetic voters on their side.

Religious Affiliation vs. Religious Commitment: What Matters Most?

All in all, it is impossible to say what has mattered most in the past four U.S. presidential elections – religious affiliation or religious commitment. Each of these parameters measures religion differently. Consequently, each of the models developed on the basis of these measurements reveal distinct findings and contribute differently to the understanding of the role of religion in the U.S. presidential elections. Whereas the fragmentary approach, where religion is operationalized as religious affiliation, traces the voting patterns of various U.S. religious groups and shows the dynamics of voting preferences within and across these groups over time, the systemic approach, where religion is operationalized as religious commitment, seeks to analyze the voting trends of the overall U.S. electorate on the basis such parameter, as frequency of church attendance. Each of the two approaches treats religion individually and offers its own original assessment of the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections.

Conclusion

The paper has contributed to the recent resurgence of the academic interest in religion and politics and to advancing the understanding of the role religion plays in the U.S. presidential elections. On the basis of the statistical data taken from the public opinion poll “How the Faithful Voted” conducted by Pew Research Center in 2012 we have analyzed the faith factor in the four recent presidential elections, the ones of 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. On the one hand, we have used a fragmentary approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections. Within the framework of this approach we have operationalized religion in terms of religious affiliation and have demonstrated how denominational membership can be a source of political alignments of the U.S. electorate in the presidential elections. The analysis of the presidential vote by religious affiliation for the years 2000-2012 has revealed

three main findings. First, the voting patterns of different religious groups have remained rather stable over time. Second, the U.S. religious groups have been divided into the pro-Democratic and pro-Republican ones. Third, no U.S. religious group, either pro-Democratic or pro-Republican one, has been homogeneous in its voting preferences. On the other hand, we have used a systemic approach to studying the religious factor in the U.S. presidential elections. Within the framework of this approach we have operationalized religion in terms of religious commitment and have identified the correspondence between the degree of religiosity and the voting preferences. We have proven that those Americans who attend religious services most often exhibit the strongest support for the Republican presidential nominees and those who say they never attend religious services are among the strongest Democratic supporters in the U.S. presidential elections. Finally, we have come to the conclusion that both religious affiliation and religious commitment equally matter in the U.S. presidential elections. Both approaches to studying the faith factor in the U.S. presidential elections are relevant. Whereas the fragmentary approach traces the voting patterns of various religious groups and shows the dynamics of voting preferences within and across these groups over time, the systemic approach seeks to analyze the voting trends of the overall U.S. electorate on the basis such parameter, as frequency of church attendance. Each of the two approaches treats religion individually and offers a unique assessment of the role of religion in the contemporary U.S. presidential elections.

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