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How Would Jesus Vote?

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I'm an Evangelical -- and a Liberal. Really.

By Amy Sullivan

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As an evangelical who worked in Democratic politics before entering journalism, I'm used to getting looks from liberals who are embarrassed for me when I use the E-word to describe myself. Confusion flickers across their faces as they instantly reassess my political leanings and intelligence. People who have known me for years start asking whether I watch [Fox News](#) and brace for spontaneous proselytizing.

And then there is the more dangerous sort of bias. A few months ago, while participating in an early-morning panel discussion in the heart of [Manhattan](#), I was startled fully awake when a man stood up to declare that Democrats who reached out to religious voters, especially evangelicals, were akin to those who collaborated with the Nazis. I put on a sweet smile of Christian charity and counted to 10.

Comments like that explain why so many of us liberals who also happen to be evangelicals have stayed in the closet for so long. It is hard to overcome decades of suspicion, much of it richly earned by leaders of the religious right who used faith in the cause of a political power grab and in the name of intolerance and fear. But the lingering misconceptions are also painful reminders of the price people like myself have paid for staying silent while others claimed a monopoly on faith. And the country has paid, too.

That thought seems to have been on Sen. [Barack Obama](#)'s mind last month, at the end of a presidential debate in [Myrtle Beach, S.C.](#) "There have been times," Obama said, "when our [Democratic Party](#) did not reach out as aggressively as we could to evangelicals because the assumption was, well, they don't agree with us on choice, or they don't agree with us on gay rights, and so we just shouldn't show up. . . . And that means that people have a very right-wing perspective in terms of what faith means and of defining our faith."

Amen. Democrats weren't just passive nonactors who stood by helplessly while the [GOP](#) claimed Christ for itself. Instead of pushing back against conservatives' insistence that Democrats aren't religious, the party beat a hasty retreat, ceding the high ground in the competition for religious Christian voters and discussions of morality. The religious divide in U.S. politics that emerged -- call it the God gap -- represented as much a failure by Democrats as it did an achievement by Republicans.

The first religious bloc that professional Democrats wrote off was the evangelicals, despite the fact that fully 40 percent of born-again Christians describe themselves as politically moderate. Then party officials started to steer clear of Catholic voters, spooked by their opposition to abortion. [Michael Dukakis](#)'s 1988 campaign was the first in Democratic history to turn down all invitations to appear at Catholic venues.

Thus isolated, the professionals who run Democratic campaigns fell into a self-reinforcing spiral of misconceptions about the faithful. As being religious became not just declassé but downright dangerous in Democratic circles, religious Democrats silenced themselves. No one wanted to be lumped in with the likes of [Jerry Falwell](#), who went on [Pat Robertson](#)'s show "The 700 Club" two days after 9/11 and accused the left of helping cause the attacks.

But now, after 30 years in the wilderness, the Democratic Party is being reborn. The "Come to Jesus" moment was [Sen. John F. Kerry](#)'s loss in 2004. Catholic Democrats, shocked at the idea that it might be impossible for one of them to ever again win the [White House](#), banded together to push back against their church and their party. Religious liberals, angered at being left out of the definition of "values

voters," finally rose from their slumber. Kerry himself called on his colleagues to get over their discomfort with matters of faith.

Most important, led by the two main contenders for the party's 2008 nomination, religious Democrats are publicly reclaiming their faith. I've gotten used to people coming out to me when I speak to Democratic audiences these days. "I'm religious, too," they'll whisper in my ear as they shake my hand quickly. Not long after the 2004 election, a congressional aide identified himself as an evangelical during a public Q&A. He told me afterward that it was the first time he'd "outed" himself in front of fellow Democrats. "How did it feel?" I asked. He paused. "A little scary," he said. "But good." Now he's one of a growing class of consultants who advise Democratic candidates about how to court religious voters.

The Democratic Party's decision to stop ignoring and start engaging the faithful is all the more striking when you consider that just three years ago, many Democrats blamed [President Bush](#)'s reelection on evangelical voters. They e-mailed one another a popular Internet graphic, a map showing the "United States of [Canada](#)" (encompassing all of Canada, along with Washington, [Oregon](#), [California](#), [New York](#) and [New England](#)) and "Jesusland," which filled up all the other states -- an image that perfectly captured many liberals' us-vs.-them state of mind.

But since then, changes within the evangelical community have given the Democrats a better shot. Between November 2004 and July 2007, the percentage of white evangelicals who identified themselves as Republican declined from roughly 50 percent to 40 percent.

That dramatic slump was driven by a stampede of younger evangelicals away from the GOP. Christian colleges have become even bigger centers of political activism than secular universities, protesting the [Iraq](#) war and demanding that campuses "go green." A recent [Time magazine](#) poll of voters ages 18 to 29 found that 35 percent of young Democrats and 35 percent of young independents identify themselves as born-again.

Most of these youthful evangelicals are still antiabortion, and many still oppose gay rights. But their priorities no longer stop with those two issues. And it is in large part because of changes in the Democratic approach to abortion that more moderate evangelicals are willing to give the party a chance.

Full-throated support of abortion rights has been sacrosanct to the Democrats for most of the 35 years since *Roe v. Wade*. In the 2004 campaign, all the Democratic primary candidates pledged their opposition to a ban on so-called partial-birth abortion at the annual NARAL Pro-Choice America dinner, a position then favored by only 20 percent of Americans. ("Keep your rosaries off my ovaries," went the liberal slogan.) That November, Bush won a third of the pro-abortion rights vote, while Kerry picked up only 24 percent of antiabortion voters.

That was it for Catholic Democrats. It was bad enough that they felt pressured to vote for abortion legislation that made them uncomfortable, then had to endure threats from angry church leaders. But if the result was a Democratic Party so marginalized that its inability to appeal to antiabortion voters cost one of their own the White House, what was the point?

So they set out to defuse the abortion issue themselves. In the fall of 2006, two Catholic Democrats in the [House of Representatives](#), the antiabortion Tim Ryan and the pro-abortion rights [Rosa DeLauro](#), introduced legislation to reduce abortion rates by preventing unwanted pregnancies and providing support to pregnant women and new parents. That same fall, an antiabortion Catholic Democrat, [Bill Ritter](#), won the [Colorado](#) governorship after convincing his party's activists and donors that a pro-life politician need not be actively anti-choice. In a few states, pro-choice Democratic candidates sat down with evangelical and Catholic leaders to talk about abortion. They didn't back down from defending women's right to choose, but they won with support levels from Catholics and evangelicals that were 10 to 15 points above the party's national average in the midterm elections.

Walking through [Dulles Airport](#) not long after losing the 2004 election, John Kerry was stopped by a supporter. The man shook Kerry's hand and told the senator that he was an evangelical. "I voted for you," he said, "and so did a lot of evangelicals. But you could have gotten more of us if you'd tried." Kerry was floored. Evangelical *Democrats*?

No wonder Kerry fared worse among evangelicals than any other Democratic nominee in modern history, losing the votes of nearly four out of five. To engage a constituency, a campaign needs to at least know it exists.

Even so, the Democratic nominee this fall will have advantages Kerry never did. [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) is a lifelong Methodist with years of experience teaching Sunday school in [Arkansas](#) who's married to the party's most prominent evangelical Democrat. Obama, a committed Christian, is more thoughtful and relaxed talking about religion than any other Democratic politician. Most important, they'll have the support of a party that is slowly starting to see that there are many faces of the faithful.

Amy Sullivan is nation editor at Time magazine and author of "The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God Gap."

thepartyfaithful@gmail.com

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