

Can Independents Refresh Our Debates Over Faith and Politics?

After years of scrutinizing the relationship between faith and politics for Republicans and Democrats, I recently realized I had overlooked political independents. Many of my colleagues in academia and journalism have, too.

One reason may be financial: Parties and their special interest groups are flush with cash to mobilize their side and demonize the other. Media organizations must feed their readers' demand for news and analysis about party politics. I have written dozens of columns about Republicans and Democrats. This is my first about independents.

Most experts agree that people who claim to be independents actually behave like partisans. But if people like saying they are independent, we should pay attention to the reasons why. Today, about 40 percent of Americans identify as independent, more than those who identify as Democrat (about a third) or Republican (about a quarter).

When faith factors into the mix, we run into generalizations about devout Republicans and secular Democrats. While true in the aggregate, these oft-repeated caricatures obscure a greater truth we observe in data and in front of our faces: The religious landscape is politically varied.

The fundamental question is one of causality. For decades, scholars and practitioners agreed that religion was the causal factor that, like sex, race or income, shaped political attitudes and behaviors. New research upends that assumption. Based on a wave of new studies, University of Pennsylvania professor Michele M. Margolis has convincingly shown that partisanship affects religiosity. This aligns with research

suggesting that partisanship is a foundational social identity, driving rather than flowing from values and attitudes.

What does all this mean for religion? For one thing, we should look at how people bring their social and religious beliefs in line with their party instead of assuming their faith shapes their politics. This goes a long way toward explaining, for example, white evangelicals' overwhelming support for President Trump despite his obvious deficiencies.

Instead of assuming that Christianity is their primary loyalty, perhaps we should see evangelicals as Republicans first who toss religious values aside to accommodate their unconditional Trump support. Likewise, we should consider that ideology trumps theology when explaining progressives' enthusiasm for the sexual revolution.

The rise of independents has implications for both religion and politics. Political parties craft focused appeals to specific religious groups because it is inexpensive and can be very effective. But without a party organization, independent candidates have no models or structures for faith outreach. Their difficulty is compounded by the fact that many of them are socially tolerant fiscal conservatives; religious values tend not to motivate their policies and religious rhetoric won't win them over.

Last weekend in Denver, independent leaders and activists convened to assess their movement. I attended the meeting and noticed the absence of God talk. In one sense, it was a refreshing change because so much religious rhetoric in campaigns is empty pandering, discrediting both religion and politics.

But independent candidates likely will not succeed in a religious nation without understanding and accepting the values Americans bring to the political arena. And since the

parties' faith outreach has become so tired and predictable, an opportunity exists for independents to lead us in new, healthy debates and discourse.

In Kansas, Republicans rejected their sensible incumbent governor in favor of the famously anti-immigrant Kris Kobach, who led a voter fraud commission at Trump's behest after the president outrageously claimed 3 million illegal votes were cast in 2016 (the commission found nine).

Kansas conservatives likely won't vote for the Democrat, but independent candidate Greg Orman should ask Kansas' many white Christians whether they want an anti-immigrant governor whose candidacy hinges on his ardent enthusiasm for Trump, a race-baiter who built his political career on the racist delegitimization of a black president.

U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Democrat, faces another tough election in Missouri. The state's Democratic Party recently struck down platform language that would have welcomed pro-life Democrats into the fold. And the Republican National Committee stepped in and funneled money to the Trump-anointed pick (Josh Hawley) before Missouri Republicans had a chance to pick their candidate.

In this contest, independent candidate Craig O'Dear can appeal to voters caught in between ugly, unrepresentative party politics.

Maryland, home to large numbers of African-Americans and Catholics whose values do not fully align with either party, has an independent alternative in U.S. Senate candidate Neal Simon. The pro-choice, pro-Israel businessman emphasizes cooperation and compromise, and he stands out in a race dominated by the lackluster incumbent Democrat and an unelectable and mostly unknown Republican.

The growing number of independents running credible campaigns for state and federal office can craft creative, refreshing

and effective appeals to voters, regardless of their party or religion. At its best, religious faith resists the lures of partisanship and political power. If more voters and candidates rise up to break the two-party duopoly, a new kind of politics can give more meaningful expression to Americans' values.{eo}

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