Religion and Voting Patterns in America*

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1. Introduction
This study examines and seeks to account for the role of religious affiliation in political behavior. I focus on a single country, namely the United States. I approach this topic from the social science discipline utilizing data from the 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. More specifically, I ask the following three questions:

- Whether and how do members of religious denominations differ in their voting in presidential elections?
- To what extent does religious affiliation per se is a determinant of voting patterns?
- How does religious identification shape political preferences?

2. Theoretical Background
The theoretical context within which this study was carried out is that political orientation in general, and voting patterns in particular, are guided by three main considerations. They are regarded as the "sociological", "psychological", and "rational-choice" perspectives. The sociological approach claims that people vote in accordance with their social class. Voters consider the party, or candidate, that can represent most appropriately the interests involved in their group affiliation. Accordingly, group identities influence attitudes and interests and these, in turn, determine how people vote. The psychological approach postulates that voters are expressive and not instrumental. Individuals’ political orientations are shaped in early stages of life and are influenced mainly by the family. Thus, party loyalty is stable over time. The rational-choice approach, like the sociological one, is instrumental but attributes importance to individual considerations. Drawing a parallel between political preferences and economic behavior, it argues that people vote in an attempt to maximize their personal social and economic gains. Individuals carry out a profit-and-loss analysis not only of the parties’ platforms but of how well they believe the parties are able to implement the individuals’ favored policies.

By and large, one may regard religious belonging as being anchored in the sociological approach. The nexus of religion and politics hinges on strong awareness among group members of their distinct identity relative to peers who belong to other religious denominations. Religious faith, as a construct of values and ethical codes, provides adherents with guidance of proper behavior within the secular domain, hence also political orientations. Major public policy issues that mediate between religious faith and political patterns include education, gender equality, family values, abortion, social justice, and homosexuality, to name only a few. Thus, an important distinction among religious affiliations is seen through the prism of families of denominations, e.g., Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and other main confessions.
Another important parsing that sheds light on political preferences is between those who consider religion important and those who do not. Strong religious commitment provides resources namely, faith, institutions, and social networks, that stimulate political involvement and sharpen social attitudes. People who have a religious worldview exhibit strong commitment and motivation; they believe that they are fulfilling a divine will. When their conviction is encouraged by a church, it will have a perceptible effect on individual political patterns. Among the various indicators of such a commitment, perhaps the most important one is participation in worship. This is because houses of worship, particularly in the United States, have a very powerful organizational structure of leadership, committees, and publications; as such, they can recruit members and use them very effectively to influence political affairs. Likewise, a house of worship integrates believers into social networks that promote trust, cooperation, and exchange of information among individuals that facilitate involvement in public life, including political matters. Hence, according to level of religiosity but also depending on the frequency of interaction in social structures, religious groups may have different levels of political cohesion, ranging from overweighting on one side of the political spectrum to a relatively smooth distribution across liberal, moderate, and conservative sectors.

3. The Sample
The data for this study were culled from the 2007 Religious Landscape Survey (hereafter: RLS), sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. RLS included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 35,556 adults living in households with telephones across the continental United States. The overwhelming majority of respondents (35,009) were reached through standard-list-assisted random-digit-dialed (RDD) telephone interviews.

The present analysis concerns itself with respondents who belong to ten major religious groups, or an agglomerate of several small religions, in the United States. These groups are: Evangelical Protestants (N=9,472), Mainline Protestants (N=7,470), Historically Black Protestants (abbreviated hereinafter as Black Protestants) (N=1,995), Catholics (N=8,054), Mormons (N=581), Other Christians (N=707), Jews (N=781), Muslims (N=116), affiliates of other faiths (1,159), and the unaffiliated (4,949). This focus elicited an overall sample of 35,284 respondents. The data were weighted for major demographic parameters including age, sex, education, race, region, nativity, and population density.

Voting behavior is measured through self-reported voting for Democratic (Kerry) or Republican (Bush) candidates, or to an independent candidate, in the 2004 presidential elections which was the last campaign preceding RLSP.

4. Descriptive Overview
In the 2004 elections, among all Americans, slightly more than a half voted for the Republican candidate, Bush; another 40% preferred Kerry; and about eight percent chose an independent candidate. Against this distribution, there are substantial variations in the political preferences by religious affiliation. Members in four religious groups namely, Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons, demonstrated a salient preference of more than half for the republican candidate. The remaining six groups which represent non-Christian minorities, small Christian denominations, Black Protestants, as well as the Unaffiliated, cast the majority of their ballots to the democratic candidate. Still, among each of these two large blocs – of those who voted for greater part for Bush or those who gave the
majority of their support to Kerry – there are significant internal differences. For example, among the former, 79% of the Mormons voted for Bush as compared to 52% of Catholics; among those who lean towards the democrats, 83% of Muslims voted for Kerry, 66% of Jews, and only 50% of adherents of Other Christian denominations.

A complementary approach to assess inter-group variation is through the Duncan index of dissimilarity. Mainline Protestants were set as the reference group. In the U.S., at least until the middle of the twentieth century, most churches considered themselves affiliated with Mainline Protestantism. Members of these denominations held leadership positions and influenced American political, economic, and cultural life. Mainline Protestantism was the driving force in American life, identified heavily with the “WASP” social core group and representative of patterns that minority groups were expected to adopt. The group that most closely resembles the voting patterns of Mainline Protestants is that of Catholics (index of 5.2). At the other end, Muslims and Black Protestants have a high index of 46% and 42%, respectively. Overall, the religious groups are spread along rather different and unique voting behaviors.

Notably, a stronger similarity of votes between Bush, Kerry, and the independent candidates was revealed for Black Protestants, Other Christians, Muslims, Jews, Other Faiths, and the religiously Unaffiliated. What these groups have in common is their distance from the large Protestant and Catholic denominations and (in the case of Black Protestants) from the white racial majority. For some of these groups, e.g., Black Protestants and Other Christians, average social indicators (such as levels of educational achievement) appear to differ significantly from those observed among Jews. Therefore, their similarity in voting patterns cannot be attributed to structural characteristics; rather, it may stem from other characteristics including religious belonging.

5. Multivariate Analysis

Attention is now directed to the determinants of voting patterns. This analysis focuses only on respondents who voted for either of the candidates of the two large parties, i.e., Kerry and Bush. I ran three models: the first model introduced socio-demographic characteristics, the second model incorporated religious affiliation, and the third model added variables of religious identification. Given the binary nature of the dependent variable, I applied a logistic regression.

Most of the coefficients were statistically significant. They show that young age, women, the foreign-born, people who are not married or married to someone of another faith, increases the likelihood of voting for Kerry. By contrast, living outside the Northeast, away from city centers, and belonging to a high socioeconomic stratum, deters support for the candidate of the Democratic Party or, put it inversely, predicted preference for his Republican opponent.

When the socio-demographic characteristics are held constant, religious affiliation is a significant determinant of voting behavior. The coefficients for each of the religious groups was statistically significant at p<.001. Yet, members in religious groups differ one from the other in their political orientation. Relative to the reference group of Mainline Protestants, members of seven groups can be defined as identifying with a Democratic world view: in descending order of the magnitude of the coefficient, they include Black Protestants, Muslims, Other Faiths, Jews, the Unaffiliated, Other Christians, and Catholics; only two groups strongly identify with the Republicans – Evangelical Protestants, and Mormons. Judged by the size of the coefficients, the
likelihood of Black Protestant and Muslims to vote for Kerry was six times higher than among Mainline Protestants, three-to-four times higher among Other Faiths, Jews, and the Unaffiliated, whereas the differences with Catholics and Other Christians, although statistically significant and above the one level threshold, were relatively small. At the other end of the coefficients, of below 1, Mormons have the lowest level.

The third model incorporated religious identification. This includes the importance of religion in respondent's life (hence, attitude), and frequency of attendance in religious services (hence, behavior). Both variables exhibited negative relations with voting for Kerry. The magnitudes of the coefficients were quite similar: 0.803 and 0.879, respectively (at p<.01).

Finally, for each model I calculated its power to explain variation in voting patterns. The socio-demographic variables explained 8% of theses variations. After group belonging was added, the explanatory power increased to 21%. Further, the religious identification variables contributed another 2% raising the effectiveness of the pooled model to 23%.

6. Conclusions

Attempting to link between the theory and the empirical evidences, this study provides support to the "rational choice" perspective whereas education and income are independent determinants of voting patterns. The findings are also in accordance with the "sociological perspective" showing that group belonging is an important factor of political behavior. Further, the results confirm the assumption that religious identification, both attitude and behavior, are significantly associated with voting. The data in use did not allow the evaluation of the "psychological" perspective.

Indeed, the opinion of contemporary American elite holds that ethnicity ought not be a factor in American politics. Americans should vote on the basis of what is in America's interest or the entire community interest and not on the basis of narrow insular ethnic or religious interest. In reality, however, religious belonging plays an important role in American politics. Although engagement in group politics varies among different groups, nevertheless the results from Pew survey show that as far as religion is concerned, group belonging is a paramount factor of voting behavior in America of the early 21st century, thus eventually influencing many facets of the social, economic, and cultural every-day life of the inhabitants of this country.

*I wish to indicate the Pew Forum conducted a follow-up study "The 2014 Religious Landscape Survey". The dataset is expected to be released sometime in mid-2016. Once available for public-use, I plan to run similar analyses with the new data and compare the results from the 2007 RLS (regarding the presidential elections of 2004) and those from 2014 RLS (regarding the presidential elections of 2012). I suspect this will not be ready for PAA meeting.