

## Our secularist Democratic party

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**A**NYONE who has followed American politics over the past decade cannot help but feel some concern about the supposed fundamentalist Christian threat to democratic civility, pluralism, and tolerance. At the very least, the attentive citizen would find it hard not to regard the cultural and political positions of fundamentalists as outside the mainstream, given the volume of media stories that have conveyed this point. At the same time, the media's obsession with politicized fundamentalism distracts public attention from the changing role of religion in political life today. In particular, the media overlooks the remarkable erosion of denominational boundaries that until a quarter century ago defined the religious dimension of partisan conflict, with Catholics, Jews, and southern evangelicals aligned with the Democratic party and nonsouthern white, mostly mainline Prot-

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estants forming the religious base of the Republicans. Also, the media mistakenly frames cultural conflict since the 1970s as entirely the result of fundamentalist revanchism. In so doing, the media ignores the growing influence of secularists in the Democratic party and obfuscates how their worldview is just as powerful a determinant of social attitudes and voting behavior as is a religiously traditionalist outlook.

### **Overlooking the big story**

Consider, for example, the *New York Times's* coverage of two high profile "religious issues" during the 2000 presidential campaign: the Bob Jones University controversy and the historic nomination of Joe Lieberman for the vice presidency. Between the South Carolina primary in February 2000 and the beginning of the Republican convention on July 31, the *Times* published over 125 articles, editorials, and op-eds discussing the Bob Jones scandal, which arose when candidate George W. Bush spoke at a fundamentalist college whose founder had expressed a strong antipathy to Catholics. The college had taught that Catholicism was a "cult" and, until shortly before, had prohibited interracial dating. In its coverage, the *New York Times* emphasized fundamentalist anti-Catholicism (and anti-Semitism), Religious Right intolerance, and efforts by Bush's opponents to alert Catholic voters about the Texas governor's cozy relationship with Christian fundamentalists. The clear implication of the *Times's* coverage was that Christian fundamentalists, particularly white southern fundamentalists, felt animus toward Catholics, and that the association of fundamentalists with the Bush campaign would set back recent Republican gains among white Catholic voters. The trouble with this narrative, which recalls pre-Kennedy-era denominational antagonisms, is that it is incorrect.

Survey data from the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES), carried out by the Center for Political Studies (CPS) at the University of Michigan, reveal that the stereotype of Christian fundamentalist antagonism toward Catholics is nothing more than a specter from the past. The ANES survey results also indicate that white Catholic voters continued their shift toward the GOP, despite the sort of associations conjured up

by the Bob Jones stories. Included in the ANES questionnaire are “feeling thermometers,” a standard quantitative measure used by social scientists to assess intergroup enmity and amity. Feeling thermometers ask respondents to rate social groups and political leaders on a scale ranging from 0 degrees (extremely cold) to 100 degrees (extremely warm). A thermometer rating below 35 degrees (the average score that whites express toward illegal aliens) is commonly considered to reflect antipathy; scores above 50 degrees indicate varying degrees of warmth. The thermometer results show that white fundamentalists have positive feelings toward Catholics. Their score of 62 degrees was identical to the average score that Jews gave to Catholics and significantly warmer than the mean rating given to Catholics by the religiously nonaffiliated or by secularists.

Answers to the voting questions included in the same ANES study point to another fact about Catholics and fundamentalists that was wholly at odds with the tenor of the Bob Jones news stories. In the South, whites from both religious groups favored Bush over Gore with more than three-quarters of their ballots, and both were significantly more supportive of the Republican ticket than were mainline Protestants from the region. Though, nationwide, Catholics were not as supportive of Bush as were Christian fundamentalists, the 2000 election was the first time ever that white Catholics, still regarded by some election analysts as a mainstay of the Democratic party, gave a larger share of their votes to a Republican party presidential candidate than did white mainline Protestants, the traditional denominational pillar of the GOP. (The religiously liberal Episcopalians backed Gore with two-thirds of their votes in the 2000 election and have voted against every Republican presidential ticket since 1992.) During the 2000 election cycle, the *Times* provided its readers with plenty of tidbits about Bob Jones III’s father’s archaic view of the Vatican (as well as the changing status of interracial dating on the Bob Jones campus), but offered not a scrap of information about this historically significant inversion of the denominational base of the two major parties.

In early August 2000, when Al Gore selected Joe Lieberman as his running mate, the *Times* and other major newspapers and magazines published a flurry of stories about fears ex-

pressed by Democrats (typified by then Democratic National Chairman Ed Rendell) that the Lieberman nomination might stir up latent anti-Semitism and lead to negative voting against the party's presidential candidate by retrograde southern evangelicals. As it turned out, these apprehensions were unwarranted. Lieberman's Jewish identity was a nonissue. ANES thermometer data offer strong empirical evidence about why Lieberman's religious affiliation didn't hurt Gore in the election, particularly among evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. The average rating white Christian fundamentalists gave to Jews was a warm 66 degrees, a finding consistent with ANES surveys reaching back over a decade. It was no different from the mean ratings that Catholics and mainline Protestants gave to Jews. Among respondents who could correctly identify both Lieberman's and Gore's religious affiliation, Christian fundamentalists felt significantly warmer toward Lieberman (56 degrees) than toward Gore, a Southern Baptist (42 degrees). Disapproval of Lieberman came not from Christian fundamentalists but from secularists, who complained that his public professions of faith and piety blurred the line between religion and politics, and from cultural conservatives who suspected that Lieberman's post-convention stances on issues like partial-birth abortion and school vouchers were more in tune with the secularist tilt of the Democratic party than with his pre-convention positions, thought to be anchored in his religious orthodoxy.

By focusing on supposed denominational conflicts that had in fact diminished, the *Times's* coverage of the 2000 election overlooked the more significant religious divide in the electorate—that between the religious and nonbelievers. And by concentrating on the threat of politicized evangelicism, the *Times* ignored secularists' increased importance to the Democratic coalition and agenda since the 1970s, and their pivotal role in fomenting the culture wars and spurring the religious realignment of the electorate.

### **The origins of the culture wars**

The "culture wars" is the controversial metaphor used to describe the restructuring of religious and cultural conflict in

the United States since the 1960s. The thesis is most closely associated with sociologist James Davison Hunter, whose 1991 book *The Culture Wars* posited that “the dominant impulse at the present time is toward the polarization of a religiously informed public culture into distinct moral and religious camps.” Hunter called these camps “orthodox” and “progressivist.” On the orthodox side are persons who locate moral authority in a transcendent source, such as God or the Bible. Orthodox morality, according to Hunter, adheres to an absolute standard of right and wrong and is based on universalistic principles. Progressivists, in contrast, embrace a humanistic ethic drawn from reason, science, and personal experience. Progressivist moral rules are “loose-bounded,” pluralistic, and relative to circumstance. This new cleavage cuts across the major American faith traditions and most denominations.

The two groups in the front lines of the culture wars are evangelical Christians, including fundamentalists, characterized by their high levels of religiosity and conservative attitudes on cultural issues, and secularists, who reject traditional religious values and tend to espouse liberal views on cultural and church-state issues. Much has been written in the popular media about the traditionalist side and its alignment with the Republican party since the 1980s. Although considerable attention has been devoted to religious and cultural conflict in American political life, few in the mainstream media have acknowledged the true origins of this conflict—namely, the increased prominence of secularists within the Democratic party, and the party’s resulting antagonism toward traditional values.

Secularists first appeared as a political force within a major party at the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Prior to then, neither party contained many secularists nor showed many signs of moral or cultural progressivism. Moreover, prior to the late 1960s, there was something of a tacit commitment among elites in both parties to the traditional Judeo-Christian teachings regarding authority, sexual mores, and the family. This consensus was shattered in 1972 when the Democratic party was captured by a faction whose cultural reform agenda was perceived by many (both inside and outside the convention) as antagonistic to traditional religious values. The politi-

cal scientist Geoffrey Layman has defined this block, the largest in the party, as “secularists,”—that is, self-identified agnostics, atheists, and persons who never or seldom attend religious services. Over a third of white delegates fit this description, a remarkable figure considering that, according to James Davison Hunter, only about 5 percent of the population in 1972 could be described as secularists.

Layman’s research was based on the 1972-92 Convention Delegate Survey (CDS), the most comprehensive study to date of the political attitudes and religious orientations of national party convention delegates. Analyses of the 1972 CDS dataset by Jeane Kirkpatrick, and more recently by Layman, show that degree of religious commitment was among the most important characteristics distinguishing supporters from opponents of the progressivist planks in the platform relating to women’s rights, abortion, alternative life styles, and the traditional family. Secularists strongly favored the progressivist positions; religiously traditional Democratic delegates opposed them. The differences over policies and candidates between traditionalist and secularist Democrats had less to do with disagreement over the future course of New Deal liberalism than with the divergent moral outlooks animating their competing worldviews.

The religious and cultural cleavages that roiled the Democrats in 1972 were nonexistent at the Republican convention, where mainline Protestants still dominated. The GOP platform that year merely reiterated cultural positions the party had endorsed in past platforms, for example, support for school prayer *and* the Equal Rights Amendment. The Republicans, by default more than by overt action, became the traditionalist party. “The partisan differences that emerged in 1972,” writes Layman in his book *The Great Divide*, “were not caused by any sudden increase in the religious and cultural traditionalism of the Republican activists but instead by the pervasive secularism and cultural liberalism of the Democratic supporters of George McGovern.”

### **Secularists vs. the faithful**

The 1972 Democratic convention set in motion a political dynamic that continues to the present. The ascendancy of secularists in the Democratic party had long-term consequences

for the relative attractiveness of each party for members of different religious groups. The Democratic party became more appealing to secularists and religious modernists and less attractive to traditionalists. The secularist putsch in the Democratic party had the opposite effect on its rival, which over time came to be seen as more hospitable to religious traditionalists and less appealing to more secular Republicans. What was at first an intraparty culture war among Democratic elites became by the 1980s an interparty culture war.

Interparty religious polarization was very apparent in the composition and attitudes of the delegates attending the 1992 Democratic and Republican conventions, events that launched what is now recognized as the first electoral culture war. According to CDS, 60 percent of first-time white delegates at the Democratic convention in New York City either claimed no attachment to religion or displayed the minimal attachment by attending worship services "a few times a year" or less. About 5 percent of first-time delegates at the Republican convention in Houston identified themselves as secularists, a figure that had not budged for 20 years. Between 1972 and 1992, the percentage of nominal mainline Protestants among first-time Republican delegates declined from over one-third to one-fifth, while the proportion of religiously committed evangelical and fundamentalist delegates in this group tripled to 18 percent. Two-thirds of white Republican delegates attended religious services at least once a month, while only two of five white Democratic delegates demonstrated that level of commitment to their faiths.

Increased religious polarization can also be seen in the way Democratic and Republican delegates view various core constituent groups of the opposing party. Democratic and Republican activists in the CDS surveys were significantly more negative toward groups associated with the newer religious and cultural divisions in the electorate than toward groups associated with older political cleavages based on class, race, ethnicity, party, or ideology. In 1992, the average thermometer score of Republican delegates toward union leaders, liberals, blacks, Hispanics, and Democrats, for example, was 17 degrees warmer than their mean score toward feminists, environmentalists, and prochoice groups (44 degrees versus 27 degrees, respectively).

Similarly, the mean thermometer score of Democratic delegates that year was 21 degrees warmer toward conservatives, the rich, big business, and Republicans than their average score toward prolife groups and Christian fundamentalists (34 degrees versus 13 degrees, respectively). Of the 18 groups tested by CDS, the most negatively rated group was Christian fundamentalists. Over half of Democratic delegates gave Christian fundamentalists the absolute minimum score they could, 0 degrees, and the average Democratic thermometer score toward this religious group was a very cold 11 degrees.

### **A house divided**

To discover the extent to which the new religious cleavage has expanded beyond party activists into the electorate, we classified ANES respondents according to their attitudes toward scriptural authority and their levels of religiosity. Persons who did not exhibit the minimum of religiosity (i.e., those who rejected scriptural authority, had no religious affiliation, never attended religious services or prayed, and indicated that religion provided no guidance in their day-to-day lives) were coded as secularists. Respondents who exhibited the highest levels of faith and commitment (i.e., those who prayed and attended religious services regularly, accepted the Bible as divinely inspired, and said that religion was important to their daily lives) were coded as traditionalists. Persons who fell between these poles were classified as religious moderates. In 2000, about two-thirds of respondents fell into this last category, with the remaining respondents divided about evenly between secularists and traditionalists. (Since the culture wars are largely a clash in values among whites, we confined our analysis to white respondents in the ANES surveys.)

Answers to ANES surveys covering the past three presidential elections highlight two important aspects about the secularist worldview. First, it is associated with a relativistic outlook. Two-thirds of secularists in each of the surveys agreed with the statement that "we should adjust our views of right and wrong to changing moral standards," a perspective on morality with which traditionalists overwhelmingly disagreed. And second, secularism is no less powerful a determinant of

attitudes on the contentious cultural issues than is religious traditionalism. In most instances, secularists consistently and lopsidedly embraced culturally progressivist positions. Traditionalists generally lined up on the opposite side, and religious moderates fell in between. Secularists were most distinct with respect to the coolness they displayed toward the traditional two-parent family, their greater tolerance of marital infidelity, and their intense support for the prochoice position on abortion. Seven of ten secularists opposed any law restricting a woman's right to abortion, while majorities of moderates and traditionalists favored some restrictions on abortion. For example, over three-quarters of moderates and traditionalists approved of parental-consent laws and the banning of partial-birth abortion.

Secularists also distinguished themselves from moderates and traditionalists by the antipathy they expressed toward Christian fundamentalists (38 degrees on the thermometer scale) and their belief that the involvement of religious groups in politics is divisive and harmful for society. Traditionalists, on the other hand, were out of sync with the rest of the public with regard to their restrictive attitudes toward legalized abortion—most either wanted to ban the procedure altogether or favored limiting it to narrow circumstances such as rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger. Moreover, while most traditionalists favored allowing gays to serve in the military, they were distinct from the rest in their strong opposition to gay adoption.

Studies based on ANES survey data also show that the cultural attitudes of the electorate have become more polarized since the 1980s. But contrary to conventional wisdom, this increased cleavage had less to do with traditionalists becoming more conservative than with secularists (and to a lesser extent, religious moderates) embracing the progressivist positions held by liberal elites.

These sharp differences in moral and religious perspectives help to explain why religiously polarized party evaluations and voting behavior shot up during this period. In its election surveys, ANES includes an open-ended question: "Is there anything in particular that you like or (dislike) about the Re-

publican or Democratic party?" Answers to these questions, which permit respondents to volunteer their own reasons for making judgments about a political party and its presidential candidates, show that cultural and religion-based evaluations have increased since the first Clinton election. Moreover, during this time span secularists and traditionalists have voiced mirror-opposite "likes" and "dislikes" about the parties' stances toward "religious people," the "Christian Right," "abortion," "gay rights," "school prayer," and other cultural concerns. In the 2000 ANES survey, for example, secularists were nearly four times more likely to volunteer religion-based dislikes about groups and positions associated with the Republican party than were traditionalists, who in turn were four times more likely to voice cultural or religious reasons for disliking the Democratic party.

Secularists and traditionalists not only view the parties differently, but have increasingly become important voting blocs in the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. One team of political scientists characterized the 1992 election alternatively as "the Year of the Evangelical" and the "Year of the Secular." The vote distribution of ANES respondents who indicated that they backed a major-party presidential candidate in the 1992 election supports this assertion. Secularists gave Clinton over three-quarters of their vote, while traditionalists favored President Bush over Clinton by a margin of two to one. This polarized voting pattern continued through the 2000 presidential election.

In terms of their size and party loyalty, secularists today are as important to the Democratic party as another key Democratic constituency, organized labor. In the 2000 election, for example, both secularists and union members comprised about 16 percent of the white electorate, and both backed Gore with two-thirds of their votes. The religious gap among white voters in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential elections was more important than other demographic and social cleavages in the electorate; it was much larger than the gender gap and more significant than any combination of differences in education, income, occupation, age, marital status, and regional groupings. The importance of evangelicals to the ascendancy of the Republican party since the 1980s has been pointed out ad nauseam by media elites. But if the GOP can be labeled

the party of religious conservatives, the Democrats, with equal validity, can be called the secularist party.

### **The anti-fundamentalist voter**

The increased religious polarization of the electorate has given rise to a new type of voter: the *anti-fundamentalist*. We discovered this when we examined one group of ANES respondents: those who rated Christian fundamentalists 35 degrees or below on ANES's scale. We wanted to find out whether elite hostility to Christian fundamentalists, clearly apparent in the convention delegate surveys, had filtered into broader segments of the public. In ANES's 2000 survey, about a quarter of white respondents met the anti-fundamentalist criterion, rating fundamentalists 35 degrees or below. For comparison purposes, only 1 percent felt this antagonistic toward Jews and about 2.5 percent expressed this degree of hostility toward blacks and Catholics. ANES results indicate that anti-fundamentalism appears disproportionately among secularists, the highly educated, particularly those living in big cities, and persons who strongly favor legalized abortion and gay rights, oppose prayer in schools, and who, ironically, "strongly agree" that one should be tolerant of persons whose moral standards are different from one's own.

The results indicate that over the past decade persons who intensely dislike fundamentalist Christians have found a partisan home in the Democratic party. Clinton captured 80 percent of these voters in his victories over President Bush in 1992 and over Senator Robert Dole four years later; Gore picked up 70 percent of the anti-fundamentalist vote in the 2000 election. One has to reach back to pre-New Deal America, when political divisions between Catholics and Protestants encapsulated local ethno-cultural cleavages over prohibition, immigration, public education, and blue laws, to find a period when voting behavior was influenced by this degree of antipathy toward a religious group.

Yet it is not just their loyalty that makes anti-fundamentalists important to the Democratic coalition, but also the contribution they make to the total Democratic vote. According to ANES survey results, over a quarter of Clinton's white supporters in 1992 said that they intensely disliked Christian fun-

damentalists; in both 1996 and 2000, about a third of the total white Democratic presidential vote came from persons with these sentiments. During this era of religious polarization, Democratic presidential candidates have never captured a majority of the three-quarters of the white electorate who do not feel antipathy toward Christian fundamentalists. As a result, gaining solid support from anti-fundamentalist voters has become crucial to achieving victories at the national level. The upshot of these voting trends is that the Democrats today face electoral liabilities analogous but opposite to those of the Republicans. Just as Republicans need to win the evangelical-fundamentalist vote without scaring off religious moderates, so too must Democrats mobilize secularists and anti-fundamentalists without becoming too identified in public discourse as the party hostile to religion. Whether, and to what extent, people become aware of the increased influence of secularists in the Democratic party (or the importance of religious traditionalists to the GOP) depends, of course, on how the mainstream media chooses to present the new religious divide in the electorate to the public.

### Media spin

What would Americans have learned about the new religious divide, arguably the most important development in the American party system over the two past decades, had they gotten their information exclusively from two prominent newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*? What would readers have discovered, for example, about the importance of secularists to the Democratic party, or the bearing of religiosity on abortion attitudes?

To find out, we identified (using the Lexis-Nexis database) every domestic political news story, editorial, and op-ed piece published by these newspapers between 1990 and 2000 in which the keywords "secular," "unchurched," "nonreligious," or "nonbeliever" (henceforth referred to as secularists), and "Democrat" appeared. We also read every political news item in which the keywords "evangelical" or "fundamentalist Christian" and "Republican" turned up in the Lexis-Nexis database for the *Times* and the *Post*. These 11 years mark the height of the culture wars, from the controversial 1992 Republican Na-

tional Convention through the religiously polarized elections of the Clinton era and Bush vs. Gore.

Most Americans do not get their political information directly from either the *Post* or the *Times*; rather, they get it from television. But many media analysts, among them Michael Kelly and Edward Jay Epstein, have written about the influence of the *Times* and the *Post* in shaping the perspectives of other media. The importance of these two newspapers is aptly summarized by former CBS correspondent Bernard Goldberg: "Many TV journalists simply don't know what to think about certain issues until the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* tell them what to think. Those big, important newspapers set the agenda that network news people follow." At the very least, these papers' coverage of religion in politics can be considered bell-weepers of elite understandings of the religious divide in the electorate.

If the amount of coverage devoted to a topic can be viewed as a rough barometer of how a newspaper views its importance, then it appears that the importance of the religion gap paled when compared to other cultural or demographic cleavages in the electorate. Between 1990 and 2000, the *Times* and the *Post* published a total of 14 stories that pointed out that the Republican and Democratic parties were split along a traditionalist-secularist divide. Readers of the *Times* and *Post* were more than twice as likely to find news accounts about clashes between religious traditionalists and moderates within the Republican party than stories about religious divisions between Republicans and Democrats.

The minimization of the religious divide between the parties is also apparent when compared to the amount of press attention devoted to other "gaps" in the electorate. During this same time span, the *Times* and *Post* published 392 articles on the gender gap. In the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential elections, white women on average gave Democrats 9 percent more of their vote than did white men; the average gap separating secularists and religious traditionalists in these same elections was 42 percentage points.

That the *Times* and the *Post* paid relatively little attention to the increased religious polarization of the electorate does not mean that these newspapers wholly ignored the religious

factor in political conflict. What they overlooked was the active role played by secularists. We compared the number of news stories appearing in the *Times* and the *Post* between 1990 and 2000 that identified evangelical or fundamentalist Christians as supporters of the Republican party with the number of stories that identified secularists as supporters of the Democratic party. We also compared the number of stories that identified fundamentalists and evangelicals as being pro-Republican and opposed to abortion with the number of stories that identified secularists as being prochoice and pro-Democrat.

The most striking finding to emerge from these comparisons is the paucity of news stories and commentaries that identify secularists or the secularist outlook with the Democratic party, particularly when contrasted to the large number of stories and editorials in both papers about the Republican party's relationship with evangelical and fundamentalist Christians (43 stories and 682 stories, respectively). During this period of increased party polarization along a secularist-traditionalist divide, readers were 16 times more likely to encounter a story about evangelical-fundamentalist clout in the GOP than to find one about secularist clout in the Democratic party. There were more stories published by the *Times* about the influence of evangelicals in the Republican party in 1992 alone (93 stories) than were published by both the *Times* and the *Post* throughout the entire decade about the importance of secularists to the Democratic party (43 stories).

We found a similar imbalance when we selected stories that associated a fundamentalist or secularist outlook with both a stance toward abortion and a party identification (283 stories versus 16 stories). The skewed coverage, most pronounced during election years, also extended to other issues and controversies—delegates at national party conventions, prayer at football games, partial-birth abortion, school vouchers, gay adoption, judicial or cabinet nominees, and special-purpose activist groups such as the Christian Coalition or People for the American Way. If a general worldview was mentioned in the story, the *Post* and the *Times* overwhelmingly emphasized Christian fundamentalism and missed the secularist side to the story. The impression conveyed by both newspapers is that traditional religious beliefs motivate people to oppose abortion,

back conservative Republican candidates, support conservative social movements, and adopt intolerant attitudes, but that a modernist or secularist outlook apparently has little or no connection to the reasons why someone supports abortion rights, opposes vouchers, joins culturally progressivist organizations, expresses antipathy toward evangelical Christians, and votes for liberal Democratic candidates.

Broadcast news coverage during the 1990s was no better. According to our analysis of network news programs selected from abstracts from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive, viewers were given a very lopsided picture of the increased religious polarization in the electorate. While someone who caught the TV news every night would have found out plenty about the political identities and policy preferences of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, that same viewer would have heard nothing about the increased importance of secularists in the Democratic party. We could not find a single story pointing to the tendency of secularists to vote for Democratic candidates or about their participation in culturally progressive activist groups and support for socially liberal policy positions. Most of the TV news stories about religion and partisan politics (with the exception of those about the black church) focused on the influence of evangelicals and the Religious Right in the Republican party, conflicts between fundamentalists and moderates inside the GOP, or the involvement of the Religious Right in policy disputes over abortion, gay rights, and education. Three-fifths of all television news stories mentioning evangelicals or Christian fundamentalists identified members of these religious groups as the Religious Right, half identified them as Republican, more than a third indicated their opposition to abortion, and over a quarter contained themes that implied that evangelical and fundamentalist Christians are intolerant.

Studies by public-opinion researchers have shown that the news media powerfully shapes the way the public views social groups. And thus it is not surprising that ANES survey results indicate that the more attention a person pays to the national political news media, and especially to television news, the more likely is that individual to believe that Christian fundamentalists are ideologically extreme and politically militant.

Those who read and watch national news media are also more likely to conflate evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists with Religious Right organizations and to make voting decisions and judgments about public-policy issues based on the antipathy they feel toward both these groups. For many people today, how they view evangelicals and fundamentalist Christians depends, in large measure, on how they view Pat Robertson or the Christian Coalition. This despite the research by sociologists Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout showing that 86 percent of fundamentalists oppose various aspects of the Religious Right's political agenda.

### **Explaining media silence**

The survey results reported in this essay show that the public has been politically divided over religion since the 1980s. Moreover, this new religious cleavage occurs more often between secularists and traditionalists than between denominations. But despite the reams of data documenting the alignment of secularists with the Democratic party and the countermovement of religious traditionalists into the Republican party, the media, particularly network news, has tended to emphasize only the latter phenomenon.

The imbalance in their coverage has been strikingly apparent on election nights, during the segments devoted to analyses of exit-poll results. Since the 1980 election, viewers have heard about the born-again Christian or Christian fundamentalist vote. Beginning in 1992, "Religious Right" became a category for election-night analysis, along with such staples as gender, income, race, region, and age. What viewers do not hear about is the secularist vote, which has gone two to one in the Democratic direction in the past three presidential elections. Why this silence about an identifiable segment of the public that has become key to Democratic electoral competitiveness?

One explanation involves the difficulties journalists might have in taking notice of an outlook that is so close to their own. Survey research indicates that professionals who work in news organizations, compared to the larger public, are more highly educated and cosmopolitan, much more likely to vote Democratic, appreciably more liberal ideologically and culturally, and less likely to be religious. In their study *The Media*

*Elite*, Robert Lichter and his associates found that one of the most distinctive characteristics of the media elite “is its secular outlook.” Half of the journalists they surveyed claimed no religion and more than eight of ten never or seldom attended religious services. Taking secularist views for granted, journalists may not see secularism as a distinct ideology or think secularists are definable as a political category.

Yet “soccer moms” is a rather loosely defined political or sociological construct—certainly more so than “secularist”—but this did not stop the *Times* and *Post* from publishing over 50 articles during the 2000 election season about the potential electoral impact of this group of voters. Anyway, as we have seen, survey results show that secularism *does* embody a distinct moral and sociological outlook and that it influences voting preferences. Moreover, just because an organized group does not publicly identify itself as “secularist” does not mean that it lacks a secularist worldview on contentious cultural issues. People for the American Way, for example, is most often characterized in press accounts as a civil-liberties and civil-rights group, rarely as a secularist organization. But a visit to the organization’s website shows that its cultural agenda is the mirror opposite of the Christian Coalition’s.

A second possibility has less to do with how journalists perceive secularists than with their view of traditionalists. According to the Williamsburg Charter poll of mass and elite opinion on church-state issues, a majority of television news directors and newspaper editors polled in the survey felt that evangelical and fundamentalist Christians had “too much power and influence” and a third thought both religious groups were a “threat to democracy.” In contrast, not one of the media elites sampled in this survey perceived secularists as threats, and only 4 percent thought nonbelievers and secularists had too much influence over public life. From such a perspective, political activism by religious conservatives no doubt appears to endanger the wall of separation between church and state, and therefore warrants intense scrutiny.

### **The party of irreligion?**

Over the past few decades, political conflict rooted in religious values has been framed as a clash between religious

conservatives and the rest of America. This paradigm has fit comfortably with the secular outlook of journalists and with a strain in American culture that historically has viewed moralistic religious movements with suspicion. To portray secularists as ideologically distinct and as aggressive political actors would be to shift the landscape dramatically. It might serve to legitimize the political involvement of religious traditionalists, and it might also have negative consequences for journalists' favored groups and causes.

Specifically, a public conversation about the overarching ideologies of each party could lead to connotations harmful to the Democrats. Just as the Republican party has labored under the charge of being "hijacked" by fundamentalists, so too could the Democrats in equal fairness be tagged as the party sympathetic to irreligionists, a group that historically has been viewed more negatively than moralistic evangelicals. As Tocqueville observed more than a century and a half ago, an unbeliever in America, particularly one in public life, would be wise to keep his unbelief silent, lest "everyone shuns him and he remains alone." Tocqueville wrote these comments when America was less secularized and a generalized Protestantism pervaded the public culture. Yet his admonitions are no less pertinent in contemporary America. In a national poll conducted in March 2002 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, more than half of the respondents expressed unfavorable feelings toward "nonbelievers," almost twice the number that felt unfavorably toward the "Christian conservative movement."

As the manifold displays of public piety in the aftermath of September 11 demonstrate, there is a reservoir of support for shared affirmations in the public square of America's historic relationship with God. Media elites are no doubt aware of American religiosity and implicitly understand the political ramifications of characterizing the Democrats as the partisan home of secularism. Perhaps it is for this reason more than any other that we do not hear in election-night analyses and post-mortems that Democratic candidates have shorn up their base among the unchurched, atheists, and agnostics, in addition to the ritualistic accounts and warnings about how well Republicans are doing with evangelicals or the Christian Right.