Citizens Not Zombies: Rethinking Assumptions about US Religious Voters

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JOHN A. REES, FEB 25 2016

Should citizens participating in democratic elections who come from the same religion all vote the same way? The question is worth exploring given the almost universal surprise expressed about diverse Christian voting behaviour in the US presidential primaries. Irreligious tycoon Donald Trump a favourite with the faithful? Pious pastor's son Ted Cruz a failure with evangelicals? Accordingly, an outbreak of analysis has enveloped the media space to better understand the voting intentions of the religious.

Perhaps a bigger surprise, however, is not that Christian voting patterns can swing, split and scatter, but that a powerful assumption still persists that religious democratic behaviour should be unthinkingly predictable. Taken to its extreme, such a view casts religious voters more like zombies – moving as a lifeless herd toward the pounding of ideological drums they have no power to resist – rather than everyday citizens exercising conscious democratic choices based on a range of factors, including their religious beliefs.

The root of this perception, I suggest, is the lingering 'otherness' of religion that occupies the minds of analysts and strategists. This belief about religious predictability – which is not without logic – holds that because religious citizens gather in communities that draw distinctions between themselves and wider society, and that these distinctions are shaped by a core set of ultimate beliefs, then the electoral behaviour (e.g. candidate preferences, social concerns, policy interests) of community members should be uniformly consistent.

The ultimate irony playing out in the US Republican primaries is that this largely secular assumption about religious behaviour has been adopted wholesale by the Cruz campaign, whose scripted renewal of a certain kind of 'values' arch-conservatism was intended to automatically appeal to evangelicals *en masse*. Instead, it has been the arch-pragmatism of Trump toward religion in advocacy for a mainstream (Christian) religious agenda that is proving more attractive to voters.

How do we make sense of this? The problem with the 'religious predictability' thesis is not logic so much as a lack of sustained evidence. Religious politics in the United States is very dynamic and more often than not highlights political diversity. A few passing examples from recent history and current reporting can be cited for support:

- Jimmy Carter attracted evangelical religious voters by identifying himself as 'born again', only to lose that same support base to the religiously moderate Ronald Reagan.
- The Moral Majority movement that aligned itself to Reagan was politically homogenous but religiously diverse (leaders were Jewish, Catholic and Protestant Fundamentalist but equally all Conservative).
- Evangelical voting patterns favour Republicans in contrast to those of black Protestant churches who have strongly supported Democrat candidates including Hillary Clinton. Yet in 'religious practices and beliefs' both traditions are very similar.
- 8-in-10 Mormons (a politically significant group in Utah, Nevada, Arizona and elsewhere) currently vote Republican, but this figure remains unchanged whether the candidate is a Mormon (Romney, 2012) or not (Bush, 2004) – and despite the most prominent Mormon politician being a Democrat (Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid).

- After 9/11 the Bush Administration decision to strike al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was supported by religious groups, who in turn, then strongly opposed the Iraq War.
- A suggested decline of the 'Religious Right' in the US is now countered by evidence of the rise of a 'Religious Left'.
- It is credibly suggested that US evangelicals can be classified into seven types each influenced by, and open to, different political agendas.

Let us recast the original question: given that members of the same religion *do not* always vote in the same way, what role does religion play in upholding democracy and common citizenship? Evidence from the US electoral process offer us two introductory answers: a) that varied religious voting patterns contribute to political diversity and thus present a model of pluralism; and b) although religious voters join particular faith communities they belong to a common citizenship, as reflected in religious voter priorities citing economic and social policies as much as (or even more than) the 'values' platforms of candidates.

How can scholars and analysts overcome the continued misreading of religious actors in the political sphere? John Keane once argued that when political theorists attempt to understand an idea like 'civil society', they need to first 'break with the bad monist habit' of needing to justify such a notion via a 'singular grounding principle'. In other words, the common ideal of a civil society – that space of voluntary association independent of government where religious influences have often been forged – flows from many philosophical springs rather than one common source.

The same can be said for understanding religiously-motivated choice in democratic politics. There is no singular song sheet from which all religious voters sing. Our 'monist habit' of homogenising religious political behaviour only leads to sloppy thinking disconnected from the evidence of how really existing religious citizens act. Thus, the 'religious predictability' thesis offers little by way of political insight and even less for political strategy. Just ask Ted Cruz.

About the author:

John A. Rees is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.