

# keeping the faith

by deborah carr

Once upon a time people considered religion and politics taboo conversation topics. Private beliefs were exactly that—private.

But today even the most casual water cooler chit-chat about politics, especially discussions about would-be presidential candidates, often becomes a conversation about faith—how Mitt Romney's Mormon upbringing influences his political views, how Rudy Giuliani can be both a practicing Catholic and a twice-divorced supporter of abortion rights and gay rights, whether evangelicals are really the “base of the Republican party,” as Karl Rove has claimed.

After the 2004 election, political pundits credited the religious right (or “values voters”) with ushering George W. Bush into office. Adherents to the culture war thesis—that political conflict results from the conflicting values of traditionalists and progressives—view the intensifying conservatism of evangelical Christians over the past two decades as responsible for the election of other anti-stem cell research, anti-choice, anti-gay marriage candidates.

The subtle message underlying these debates is that people's religions and their politics are inextricably intertwined. But we ought to consider whether it's really that simple, whether religion really is a proxy for political views (or vice versa).

Ever since Emile Durkheim documented the relationship between religion and suicide in 1897 social scientists have investigated how religious beliefs and practices shape daily lives. But it isn't easy to document how religious groups vary in political beliefs or the denominational differences in the social and demographic characteristics—education, occupation, income, or family size—that may shape someone's politi-

cal views. It's even tougher to track these trends over time.

The United States' largest collector of data across long time periods, the U.S. Census Bureau, doesn't collect data on religion. A 1976 law prohibits the bureau from asking questions about religious affiliation. Consequently, the main ways social scientists document religious differences in Americans' attitudes and behavior is through sample surveys, even though these surveys rarely track trends over multiple time points and samples are often too small to document mean-

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ingful patterns among the smallest religious denominations.

The General Social Survey (GSS) has collected data on religious affiliation since its inception in 1972 and provides clues into how religious groups have become more similar (or divergent) over the past 35 years.

These data reveal the religious composition of the United States has changed relatively little since the early 1970s. Since 1972, conservative Protestants have accounted for roughly 20 percent to 30 percent of the U.S. population, mainline Protestants for 35 percent to 40 percent, Catholics for about one-quarter, and Jews for about 2 percent to 3 percent. The category that has fluctuated most is the proportion claiming to have “no religion,” with figures ranging from 5 percent to 15 percent annually. (The numbers reporting “other” religions are very small, and thus estimates are unstable).

The GSS and other sample surveys also show the major religious groups—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—have converged in many ways since the mid-

20<sup>th</sup> century. The fertility gap between mainline Protestants and Catholics has all but disappeared over the past five decades, although conservative Protestants have larger families than all other religious groups except Mormons.

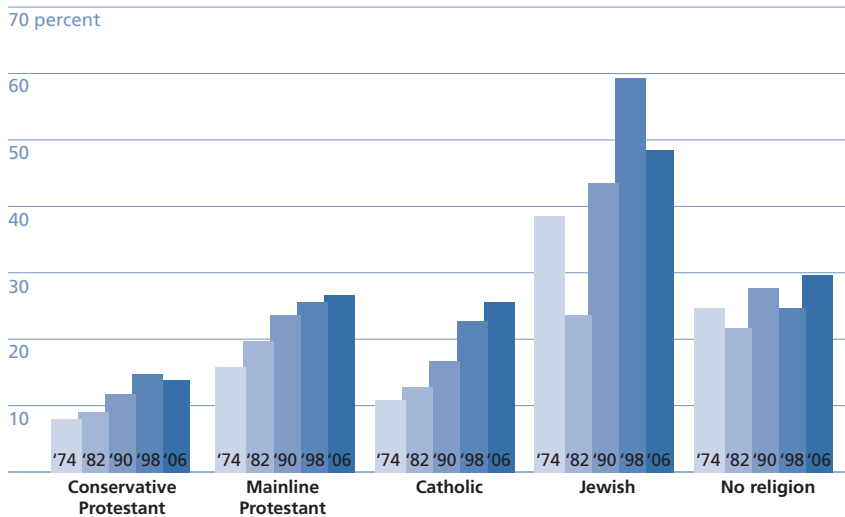
Perhaps the most striking difference across religious groups is educational attainment. The proportion of who has earned a college degree varies widely across denominations (top right). For the past three decades, Jews have had consistently higher rates of college graduation than all other religious groups, and

those who have “no religion” have consistently had the second highest rate. Catholics and mainline Protestants have converged. Conservative Protestants have had the lowest rates consistently since 1972, wavering at 10 percent to 15 percent in recent years.

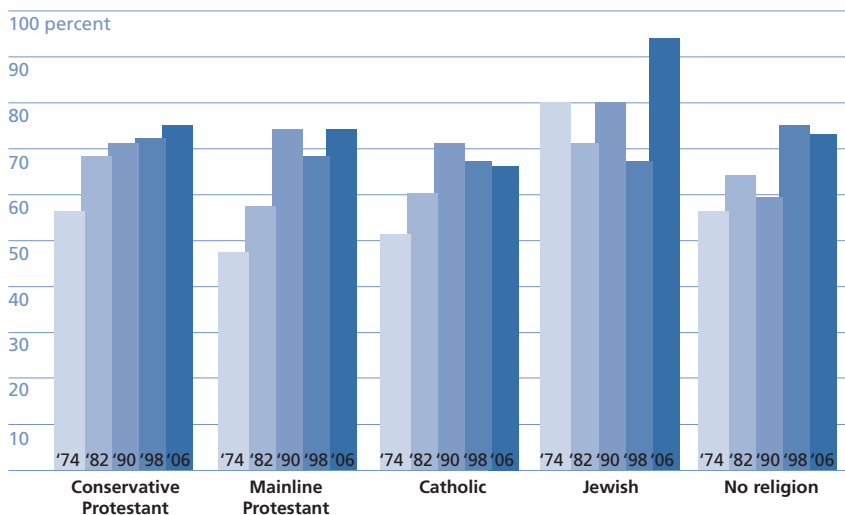
Documenting religious differences in educational attainment is considered a critical step in understanding religious differences in political views, given the well-documented finding that higher education is a powerful predictor of adhering to a liberal political ideology. However, an examination of political views in the GSS doesn't show the stark religious differences culture war adherents would expect to find.

For example, the GSS asks respondents whether they believe the government is spending too much, too little, or about the right amount of money on a variety of social problems, such as “improving the nation's education system,” “welfare,” and “halting the rising crime rate.” As the figures at right show, religious differences aren't as clear-cut as one might expect. Although Jewish and

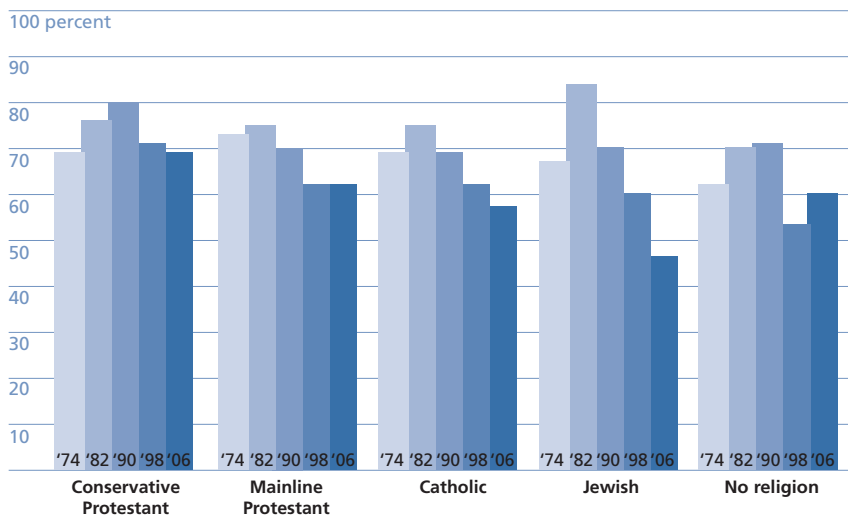
## Percent of U.S. with a college degree



## Percent of U.S. who feel "too little" spent on education



## Percent of U.S. who feel "too little" spent on crime



Source for all three figures: General Social Survey, 1972–2006

unaffiliated people are the most likely to say too little is spent on improving the nation's educational system, no systematic differences emerge among Catholics, conservative Protestants, and liberal Protestants. A similar pattern (or non-pattern, more precisely) emerged when examining attitudes toward welfare spending.

Pronounced differences have emerged only in the past decade in attitudes toward halting rising crime rates. Conservative Protestants are most likely to want more money channeled toward fighting crime, followed by mainline Protestants and Catholics. Jews and those with no religion are the least likely to demand funding for crime-fighting programs.

The GSS data are broadly consistent with the findings of a new report issued by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. *The Faith Factor* reports evangelical Protestants are a heterogeneous group not of one mind when it comes to political issues. About 45 percent identify as "traditionalists" (or the core of the "religious right"), yet the same proportion say they are "centrists" while 10 percent report they are "modernists." What's more, evangelical Protestants between ages 18 and 29 are far less likely than their elders to identify as Republican and are far more likely to say they disapprove of President Bush's job performance.

As presidential candidates ramp up their campaigns in the coming months, they may find it's riskier than ever before to assume that knowing a voter's faith means knowing what that voter will do on Election Day.

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