

UNDERGRADUATE ARTICLE

Loyalty and Morality: Religious Minorities in U.S. Electoral Politics

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Introduction: The Underrepresentation Issue

The United States historically has struggled to rectify various inequalities and injustices between privileged and underprivileged groups. Whether it is the ongoing battle for racial equality, the women's suffrage movement, or violence towards indigenous populations, the history of majority-minority relations in the United States has always been more complicated than can be attributed to vague Enlightenment principles of freedom and equality. While various inequalities still exist in the 21st century, many are now discussed openly in mass media and campaigns. In 2016, the possibility of electing the first female president was at the forefront of political messaging. There is an acute awareness of race and gender representation issues, and powerful interests groups have formed around these causes. Approximately 20% of the latest U.S. Congress is female and nonwhite (Levy 2017). While by no means resolved, these numbers suggest an increased awareness of inequality in representation.

Yet there remains one group vastly overrepresented, much like the white and male populations, though one that is not often singled out when discussing congressional power relations. The 115th Congress retains a 90.7% Christian majority, with around 56% of Congressmen and women identifying as Protestant (Sandstrom 2017). These figures have hardly budged since the mid-20th century, when in 1960 the Congressional makeup was reported as 94.9% Christian (Sandstrom 2017). These representation figures do not mirror the stark changes in demographics over the decades. Today, approximately 70% of the American public identifies as Christian. Some groups have few representatives because of their low population numbers; Muslims make up only 0.3% of Congress but are 1% of the population. Most strikingly, while 23% of Americans placed themselves in the "none" category—which includes atheists, agnostics, and those of "no religion"—there is only *one* member of Congress (approximately 0.19%) who identifies as "none" ("Religious Landscape Study" 2014). For a nation that prides itself on freedom of religion, where (technically) religious affiliation or lack thereof should not be a barrier to office, this is a glaring inconsistency.

These figures bring up the question of why certain religious groups are vastly over- or underrepresented. Electoral issues are usually studied through the lens of political climate, socioeconomic conditions, and interest group influences. For instance, parties

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usually nominate candidates supported by powerful interest groups, and therefore because there are few powerful interest groups supporting specifically nonreligious or Muslim candidates they end up as underrepresented. These analyses certainly have merit. However, we must also get at the root cause of why non-Christian, and more specifically non-Protestant, candidates continue to get elected at such low rates despite the changing demographics.

The answer is partially because few candidates ever admit they are lacking in faith. For example, Representative Barney Frank (D-MA) served as a Congressman for thirty-two years, and only after retiring admitted he had been an atheist all along. (By comparison, he felt comfortable coming out as gay in 1987.) Franks's fears were not unfounded. Extensive polling has indicated that a large percent of the U.S. population would not vote for a candidate who self-identified as Muslim or nonreligious. While over 95% of adults claimed to be comfortable voting for a well-qualified female or African American candidate, the figures drop precipitously to 58% voting for a well-qualified Muslim and a mere 54% for atheists (Jones 2012). To be clear, this does not mean there is no gender or race discrimination in elections, but rather that respondents are incredibly comfortable with publicly voicing their religious biases compared to other social categories.

Losing almost half the voting population's support over one personal identifier would be a devastating blow to any campaign, and theoretically would put any candidate willing to identify with a marginalized religious category on the defensive during an election. Some aspect of these religious affiliations must act as a signal to many voters that this candidate is not fit for office. Yet according to conventional wisdom, the United States is an inclusive home of religious freedom, where the polity is bound by a strong, non-denominational civil religion. Therefore, we must examine the reasons why non-Christian candidates must still confront a largely exclusive political system, and analyze techniques used to overcome this campaign roadblock.

While American political culture is nominally inclusive, in fact the political system is steeped in Protestant assumptions and institutions, creating hostile conditions for religious minorities (Corbin 2010: 1551). American civil religion, which is based on Protestant presuppositions about the functions of belief, equates belief in God with both capacity for moral judgment and love for community and country. While the specific minorities targeted have shifted over the decades, there exists a common assumption that a member of a religious minority may be subversive and lack the moral judgment and patriotism required to be a functioning member of government. Instead of treating each person's faith (or lack thereof) on its own terms, elements of the American voting public have considered the variety of non-majority religions as functionally equivalent. By examining past campaigns, we see that members of religious minorities are frequently questioned about their faith in relation to their loyalty and morality. In response, candidates often explain how their beliefs inform their personal moral judgment and patriotism in order to show skeptical voters that their faith fits comfortably within a familiar, and historically privileged, Protestant model.

Protestant Assumptions and Civil Religion

The United States has long been a multicultural nation full of many varying ethnic and religious traditions. While some ethnicities and religions have been dominant politically, minority traditions are nonetheless increasingly prevalent. Therefore, to

describe the country in terms of a unified political culture with shared values is a challenging task. Yet sociologist Robert Bellah attempted to do just that in his seminal piece “Civil Religion in America.” Bellah essentially argues that civil religion is the fundamental “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” American share (1967: 4). These beliefs are nominally “Unitarian” in nature, not evoking a particular God but rather an inclusive national ethos of patriotism and community (7). Holidays like Thanksgiving and Veterans Day, rituals like singing the national anthem, even placing “In God We Trust” on the national currency are part of the civil religion. When higher powers are referenced, it is more in relation to a vague, deist, national spirit rather than the Christian God of the Bible. Bellah’s version of civil religion is therefore inclusive and open to all who share American political culture and civic values.

Unfortunately for Bellah’s theories, although virtually all candidates who run for office extoll these pillars of political culture, Congress remains overwhelmingly Christian. Since Bellah’s work was published, numerous scholars have problematized his assumptions about civil religion. In fact, national political culture is not inclusive and Unitarian but rather based on Protestant institutions and assumptions about belief. In response to Bellah, Glenn Moots notes that American civil religion is inextricably tied into a sense of “America’s exceptional status,” wherein Americans are “the Chosen people” following in the vein of the ancient Hebrews (2010: 85). This brand of American exceptionalism comes specifically from centuries-old Reformed Protestant origins, not a vague patriotic spirit that rose organically. The “covenantal political theology” created in early America tied together belief in God with patriotism, and also “emphasized community... and an understanding of liberty as both vertical (to God), and horizontal (to others)” (90-91). Put another way, “civil religion” grew to emphasize a particularly Protestant understanding of how belief in God informs civic values and patriotism.

By understanding these origins, we see that political culture is not as inclusive as it first appears. Caroline Corbin backs up Moots’s assessment, pointing out that “ceremonial deism,” as in non-denominational invocations of God, develops a highly exclusive political culture. She argues that American political institutions are steeped in Protestant traditions, traditions that inextricably “link belief in God with loyalty to the country” (2010: 1582). Religiosity and political participation are intertwined, creating the bias that certain religious affiliations render a candidate unfit for office. Those whose “moral and ethical beliefs” do not conform to the acceptable broadly Christian norms are marginalized and can face a distrustful voter base (2010: 1583). Essentially, while American civil religion is nominally inclusive, its largely Protestant structures and assumptions transform it into a barrier to entry for religious minorities.

Why then does a candidate positioning herself as a religious outsider, despite having often arrived at similar civic values as the religious majority, still face bias? This question gets at the roots of traditional Protestant assumptions about the functions of belief. In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad addresses an underlying cause of why this mistrust remains. For Asad, a secular state is neither essentially irreligious nor religious. Rather, a nominally secular nation that grows out of religious roots will often carry over certain values and assumptions through that theological lens, as theology and secularism can never fully be divorced. For a liberal state, “political myth ... provides the foundation for its political values and a coherent framework for public and private morality” (2003: 56). In America this political myth is again tied to Protestant visions of exceptionalism, with a tendency to “define itself as good, in opposition to evil” (7). As a result, political values and

morality have developed in conformity with Protestant structures. Strong expectations of patriotism and morality are the result, both tied to a candidate's religiosity.

Furthermore, the Protestant majority historically has viewed itself as specially positioned to serve in American political life. For example, Asad notes that there is an assumption that while Christians "are free to interpret the Bible as they please," the "Qur'anic text ... force[s] Muslims to be guided by it" (2003: 10-11). This sense of individualism began centuries ago, as Protestants sought to differentiate themselves from the papal hierarchies and uniform biblical interpretations promulgated by the Catholic Church. Yet this suspicion of subservience to religious authority continues to this day. Religious minorities, then, are often seen as incapable of independent thought because they are chained to their religious texts. Put simply, in this view a Muslim candidate lacks agency and is therefore a threat to democracy. Tisa Wenger affirms this interpretation, writing that in early America many Protestants viewed Protestantism as forming "subjects uniquely capable of free moral judgment, enabling them to function as citizens of a free republic" (2017: 20). Protestant candidates are assumed to make independent, rational decisions for the polity, and can exercise personal moral judgment separate from biblical commands. A Protestant ethic, therefore, informs American political culture and institutions. While politically the United States is liberal and secular, its religious roots form the political conceptions of which groups correctly align with founding principles of rationality and individualized morality.

A candidate who is a member of a minority religion, not fitting into this Protestant vision of an individualized rational interpreter, is therefore met with suspicion. For her, questions over her loyalty and morality remain. Of course, which particular groups are targeted with suspicion changes over time and with new political circumstances. While the September 11 attacks fueled resentment against Muslim Americans, in the early 20th century Catholics were the targets. As we will see, similar to Muslims being chained to the Qur'an, Catholics were viewed as loyal primarily to the papacy. Overall, religious affiliation has developed into a subtle signal of a candidate's capacity for moral judgment and ability to love community and country.

The Functions of Belief

These dual suspicions of loyalty and morality beg the question of whether or not these signals correspond with reality. Is a candidate's religiosity or lack thereof actually indicative of her views on patriotism, community mindedness, and morality? Objective moral standards that are consistently followed by every faction within a diverse religious group are rare. Furthermore, increased patriotism is not always a beneficial thing to a country's well being; the rise of German National Socialism showed how destructive hyper-nationalist political groups can become. Yet there is some truth to the notion that certain religious affiliations do often correlate with specific political parties and sets of views on social issues. For example, in 2014, 56% of Evangelical Protestants identified as Republicans, and 69% of atheists identified as Democrats ("Religious Landscape Study" 2014). However, it would be a vast oversimplification to claim that one's religious ideology always operates as a deciding factor on these questions, no matter which religion is being discussed. In other words, just because religiosity may inform a Protestant's patriotism and morality does not mean a Muslim or nonreligious American's beliefs necessarily operate in the same way. An individual's beliefs may or may not function as a

decisive factor that leads to the opposite conclusions regarding certain moral values. Unfortunately, in American politics the oversimplified Protestant narrative regarding how beliefs function has remained hegemonic.

In *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad notes that each culture's beliefs and practices should be considered on their own terms, without using a lens that may apply only to Protestant understandings of how religion operates. Essentially, "there cannot be a universal definition of religion" because "its constituent elements and relationships are historically (and culturally) specific" (1993: 29). Asad specifically focuses on how anthropologists historically have used inaccurate Protestant assumptions in their writings. For example, Clifford Geertz's universalist assertion that all religions work to establish interiorized moods and motivations over believers is faulty because early Christianity did not focus on moods, but rather outward discipline as its goal. As a result of these misconceptions, Western society now has a "very privatized, Christian... conception of religion" (47). While Asad is focused primarily on anthropology, his broad point is that many Westerners often conflate how Protestantism operates with how religion operates in general.

In fact, Asad's anthropological assertions can be extended into American politics as well. The American political system has institutionalized in both government and majority consciousness the notion that Protestant beliefs function identically to any individual's religiosity at large. These disparities are particularly noticeable in the U.S. judicial system, where Protestant assumptions are apparent when considering religious freedom cases. For example, the 1957 decision in the *Fellowship of Humanity v. County of Alameda* case (153 Cal.App.2d 673) declared a belief system would be treated as legitimate only if the beliefs "occupy the same place in the lives of its holders that orthodox beliefs occupy in ... believing majorities" (see Davis 2005: 714). Essentially, this means that for a minority faith to be given the same rights and privileges that an orthodox faith enjoys, the beliefs must be functionally similar to the majority. As Asad's writings show, this is an unfair standard to meet as each faith may have an impact upon different spaces within a believer's life. Even more absurdly, in 1965 the courts decided to create precedent from a strictly theological definition of belief, rendering atheistic groups legally inferior compared to orthodox religious groups. The *United States v. Seeger* decision (380 U.S. 163) states that a true religious belief system cannot be based on "policy or pragmatism, but rather ultimate concern" (see Davis 2005: 714). An atheist's "pragmatic support" of gay marriage, for example, would therefore not be equal to a Protestant's opposition to it, as the latter's views are based on "ultimate concern." In fact, this prioritization of "ultimate concern" in the court documents is drawn explicitly from Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's definition of religion (1948: 57; see also *Seeger*, at 187).

While courts obviously do not vote in elections, these examples illustrate the degree to which religious minorities find themselves on the defensive when confronting the U.S. government. Courts are a reflection of national norms and values, often challenging minority faiths in ways similar to electoral politics. When religious minority candidates are questioned about their faith, the charges that are raised invariably relate to where, if not from the Bible, the candidates derive their morals. Again, this assumes that all religions function as a provider of morals for an individual to interpret. An atheist, essentially lacking religious belief, is therefore considered not to have any moral foundations. While the Muslim candidate cannot participate in civil religion because of her assumed subservience to religious text, the atheist cannot follow civil religion because she has no

religious text. These statements may appear contradictory, but they are both premised on the same basic idea that there is an established way morality should be derived. Faith has a "correct" way it functions and contributes to civil religion, where a belief system that does not fit this mold is viewed not only as foreign and suspicious, but simply as incompatible with perceived "American values."

Considering this conspicuous lack of religious diversity in the federal government, and the continued suspicions minority candidates face, it is important to observe how candidates who have broken through these barriers have done so. While obviously a Muslim candidate may get elected by running in a heavily Muslim district, what is more interesting is analyzing the rhetoric religious minority candidates use to appeal to those who might view them with mistrust.¹ In fact, whether it was Catholics a century ago or Muslims and nonbelievers today, there are common themes in their campaign rhetoric. These candidates recognize fully the defensive position into which their religious affiliation puts them, and the need to indicate to the majority they are in fact loyal and moral public servants. As the following exploration shows, candidates who successfully overcome this bias do so by reconciling their beliefs with Protestantism, and explain how their faith is functionally similar and able to fit into American civil religion.

Anti-Catholic Bias in the 20th Century

While Muslims and atheists are the contemporary religious identities many voters appear hesitant to support, up until the mid-twentieth century Catholics in the United States were strong targets for bias. Many Protestant preachers "defined American culture in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church," and even groups like the Ku Klux Klan were explicitly anti-Catholic (Carty 2004: 12). Historian John Higham writes that "no other xenophobia functioned in so highly an organized way as anti-Romanism" in the United States (Carty 2004: 11). The charges commonly lobbed at Catholic Americans are familiar ones. First, they were branded as fundamentally immoral and a threat to established American values (Carty 2004: 15). Second, in the words of Samuel Morse, new immigrants were "human priest-controlled machines" (Carty 2004: 16). This attack echoed the loyalty question by claiming that a Catholic was not a free interpreter like a Protestant, but was chained to her text and religious authorities. Unlike the rational Protestant, the Catholic did not make moral judgment for himself, but followed what was told to him by his priest. Therefore, if allowed into government a Catholic would be subversively loyal to the Pope, working behind the scenes to undermine American democracy.

This meant that Catholic candidates running for office faced quite a challenge. They had to convince skeptical, sometimes outright xenophobic voters that they, too, fit into American civil religion. In 1928, the first Catholic presidential candidate to receive a major party nomination, Gov. Al Smith, faced vicious attacks on his character. The KKK burned effigies of him, magazines declared he would destroy religious freedom as a "pawn of Catholic clerics," and First Lady Lou Hoover declared that Americans had a right to vote against Catholic candidates without being labeled persecutory (Carty 2004: 32-33). While Smith ran a strong campaign, he unapologetically supported African American and Catholic

¹ Most often, this defensive rhetoric is employed when appealing to a national (hence more diverse) audience; for example, an interview broadcast on CNN as opposed to one published in a local newspaper.

equality, and was viewed as a legitimate challenger to Protestant hegemony. Despite high levels of support from immigrant, black, and Catholic communities, he was soundly defeated by Herbert Hoover in the 1928 election.

Before Sen. John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic President in 1960, he had taken many lessons from Smith's defeat. While his own religion was a major campaign issue, Kennedy was able to overcome the biases he faced. His father, Amb. Joseph Kennedy, strongly believed that "Catholics needed to work within the Protestant system" to have national success, and advised John "not to challenge the rules of a Protestant dominated political system" (Carty 2004: 37). During the campaign, Kennedy knew he needed to reconcile Catholic beliefs with the skeptical majority. First he strongly defended his patriotism, declaring "I am not a legal subject of the Pope" (Carty 2004: 43). Yet many nativist Protestant preachers continued to claim that "Protestantism molded the national traits of independence and individualism" (Carty 2004: 50). The question remained whether or not Kennedy could still represent Catholics while essentially disavowing the Church's influence over the beliefs of individual worshipers. To combat the attacks, Kennedy gave strongly worded speeches touting religious freedom, arguing that religion should be a private affair that does not act as a test for office. As he stated before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, he did not "speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me" (Kennedy 1960 / 2007). Yet in effectively distancing himself from the organized hierarchies of the Catholic Church altogether, he subtly indicated that his faith allowed him to make individualized moral decisions. On the topic of national policy, Kennedy declared he would decide issues "in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures" (Kennedy 1960 / 2007). This rhetoric was a stark departure from how an anti-Catholic skeptic would expect a Catholic to speak about his faith.

However strongly worded his statements were, Kennedy did not apologize for his faith but rather reconciled it functionally with Protestant expectations. He understood that Catholic loyalty and patriotism were being questioned, so first he made sure to reject the power of organized church hierarchies over his decision making. Like a Protestant, he too would disavow loyalty to the papacy in favor of loyalty to the country and national interest. Next he addressed his capability for individualism without the Protestant mold many skeptics believed was a requirement. He demonstrated that on national issues he would rely on his conscience, as a rational and individualized interpreter of moral questions. Nonetheless, his Catholicism could still reassure the religious community that his interpretations would be based in the same sort of modern interpretations of Biblical morals that were common for mainstream (primarily Protestant) Christians of the day.

In these ways, Kennedy took his Catholicism and molded it functionally to fit within the expectations set by the Protestant framework for governing. For Kennedy, Catholicism did not function as a connection between a believer and the Roman Church or its scriptural interpretations. He established his independence and individualism regarding loyalty and morality, and these eloquent defenses helped Kennedy claim the White House in 1960. Today, while there has been no other Catholic president, Catholics are well represented in the U.S. Congress, holding 31% of congressional seats while representing only 21% of the population (Sandstrom 2017). Gallup polling indicates that 94% of adults asked would vote for a Catholic candidate, and only 4% would not (Jones 2012). While many may still hold anti-Catholic biases, it no longer appears to be the major election roadblock it once was.

Modern Day Targets: Muslims

As the previously mentioned polling and representation numbers indicate, the two major religious affiliations that currently face the greatest barriers when campaigning are Muslims and nonbelievers. Despite these two groups being extremely different from one another, the criticisms lodged against them are both similar and familiar. When campaigning, Muslims and nonbelievers are encouraged to defend their loyalty to country and community, as well as their ability to make acceptable moral judgments. Particularly for the small yet growing Muslim community in the United States, political climate clearly plays a large part in fostering this animosity. With the attacks of September 11, 2001, still a recent memory, and U.S. involvement in multiple wars in the Middle East continuing, Muslim-American candidates are popular targets for scrutiny. Even President Barack Obama was accused of harboring loyalty to Islamic terror groups, demonstrating how Islamic religious adherence has become an accusation rather than simply a different religious affiliation. These fears partially stem from factors noted in Asad's observation that Muslims are perceived as chained to their religious text, privileging their faith above all other loyalties. If Muslims were allowed into office, critics believe, they would work for the best interests of other Muslims first, and the rest of the country second.

Much like Catholics allegedly prioritizing the papacy above their country, Muslims are also often accused of helping radical Islamic groups or of trying to inject Islamic values into the U.S. government. As evangelical and recent Senate candidate Roy Moore put it in a 2006 op-ed, "Islamic law is simply incompatible with our (American) law" (Moore 2006). This assertion is built on many erroneous assumptions about the functions of Islam in an individual's life. First, it assumes that Muslims are not rational interpreters of moral texts as Christians are, and that Muslims will follow uncritically whatever moral code is written in the Qur'an. Second, it assumes that Islamic law is relevant to every Muslim, and that Islam acts as his moral guide. Essentially, through this lens every Muslim inherently is a fundamentalist. Finally, Moore explicitly writes that Muslims believe "the state must mandate the worship of its (Islam's) own god, Allah" (Moore 2006). If true, Islam would destroy American religious liberty by imposing a religious test for office. Of course, Moore overlooks that his op-ed is implicitly advocating the destruction of those very same principles; by claiming that Muslims are not fit to serve in government, he is supporting a de facto religious test himself.

Faced with these criticisms, a Muslim candidate is encouraged to demonstrate that her faith is truly compatible with holding public office. In 2007, the first Muslim candidate was elected to national office when Keith Ellison (D-MN) won a congressional seat in Michigan. Interestingly, Moore's aforementioned op-ed was directed specifically at Ellison, proof that Ellison faced these exact criticisms during his candidacy and into his tenure in office. Ellison's ability to communicate with a skeptical voter base—using the same techniques employed by Kennedy half a century earlier—enables us to analyze these strategies across religious identities.

Ellison made a video ("My Faith: From Catholic to Muslim"), explaining that Islam furthers his love for his community and helps him make sound moral decisions. Ellison notes that his faith helps him "with individual decision making," so that his choices "reflect the spirit of generosity and inclusion ... not selfishness" (Ellison 2011: at 0:42-1:00). The decisions he makes therefore benefit all members of the community, not just other Muslims. Ellison is subtly addressing the criticisms that Muslims are immoral, and use a

moral code incompatible with “American values.” Not only is he capable of individual decision-making, but these decisions lead him to the same set of values that voters expect to hear from any candidate. Ellison spends the first half of the video explaining what his faith helps him do; he reserves the second half for addressing the loyalty question. Much like Kennedy asserting that he is no papal subject, Ellison assures viewers that “there is no religious leader telling me to press red or green, or what bills to introduce ... we respect our different roles” (Ellison 2011: at 2:53-3:03).² His statements are designed to show he does not harbor subversive loyalties and is not tied inextricably to any religious leaders; like any other candidate or member of Congress, his loyalty is to the country first. Faced with an exclusive political system, Ellison reconciles his faith with the American civil religion interpretation of how faith should function. By making such a video, he is clearly responding to that which Muslims are commonly accused, and using his platform to disprove the stereotypes.

It is interesting to compare Ellison’s defense of his faith to a statement from a national politician in the Protestant majority speaking about his faith in relation to policy decisions. During President George W. Bush’s administration America became embroiled in extensive military conflicts in the Middle East, some of which continue to this day. One might expect Bush to have justified his wartime decisions (essentially parallel to Ellison’s “which button to press”) through individual rational interpretation and pragmatic national security reasons. While these reasons were certainly used, Bush was also quoted as saying “I am driven with a mission from God. God would tell me ‘George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq.’ And I did” (MacAskill 2005). This rhetoric, coming from a wartime president, is surprising enough; what is notable is the lack of widespread backlash for these comments. In the months following this admission, Bush’s approval rating remained consistent (albeit consistently low), around 40% (“Presidential Approval Ratings” 2019). While many people did raise concerns, the President’s statement was by no means a defining scandal for the administration. One could rightly presume that, were Ellison to claim that Allah commanded him to cast his vote a particular way, there would be a severe (and likely disqualifying) backlash. Minority politicians go to great lengths to persuade others that they are not chained to a religious authority; yet President Bush felt comfortable claiming he was taking instructions on foreign policy directly from God.

For a politician in the religious majority, his faith is already presumed to function the correct way, aligning with American civil religion. Bush’s comments can be interpreted as referring to the nondenominational God of civil religion, or the specifically biblical God. In fact, for many voters they are one and the same. The latter case is not perceived as a threat to American freedom or values because Bush, as a Protestant, is still interpreting God’s word individually, not through a temporal religious hierarchy. His faith functions the correct way, and therefore he can speak with a freedom Rep. Ellison could not until he first proved himself capable of moral decision-making.

Modern Day Targets: Nonbelievers

In addition to Islam, there is another religious affiliation that is openly discriminated against, and which has yet to make a major breakthrough in national government:

² At each Representative’s seat there is a green button representing a “Yea” vote and a red button representing a “Nay” vote.

"nonbelievers." This label is a broad term used for those who do not identify with an organized faith tradition because they are atheist, agnostic, unaffiliated, "none," or because of some other reason. Within this already broad label are those lacking any sort of metaphysical belief and those who may just be spiritual but do not belong to any particular organized group. We are left with a "heterogeneous group of individuals" whose relations to "God" is "a broad and ill-defined spectrum" of various belief systems (Weller 2013: 379). Among younger Americans, this category is fast growing. Over 22% of Americans now identify as unaffiliated, with 70% of this group comprised of those born between 1981 and 1996 ("millennials") ("America's Changing Religious Landscape" 2015). Yet no major results have been seen at the ballot box for outspoken "none" candidates. In fact, while one may expect the criticisms of nonbelievers to be very different from what a Muslim might face, the crux of the attacks remains consistent. The consensus remains that a nonbeliever truly cannot be a functioning member of government because she is subversive, lacking both morality and loyalty.

Nonbelievers are commonly depicted in the media as either inherently immoral or cultural elitists, either of which is detrimental to society. The assumption of the morality question is that atheism precludes one from truly understanding America's "social and civic values" (Weller 2013: 382). Again, these institutions are built on a Protestant understanding of how belief functions, wherein one's faith determines one's morals. A nonbeliever, lacking a faith, therefore lacks morals or a consistent moral code altogether. She may be able to claim independent decision-making skills, but these skills are seen as being built on intrinsically immoral foundations. These perceptions of nonbelievers lacking social and civic values forget or simply ignore the point raised by Asad. Drawing out his claim that each faith's function is historically and culturally specific, we can conclude that each individual's lack of faith is also historically and culturally specific. There is no written code or set of beliefs to which a general nonbeliever would be expected to adhere. Nonbelief can function in numerous ways in an atheist's life, from not informing any other views to serving as a guiding principle. To assume someone's lack of belief informs her moral code in the same way that beliefs inform a Protestant's moral code is a Protestant preconception.

With regard to loyalty, again there is a strong link between belief in God and patriotism in America. Whether or not a voter defines God in terms of Unitarian civil religion or specifically biblical Christianity, a rejection of God altogether is taken as a rejection of American civic values. A nonbeliever refusing to say "under God" in the pledge of allegiance typically is not applauded as a religious freedom advocate. Instead, she is accused of lacking loyalty to country and community. While her disloyalty may not be tied to outside religious authority, the lack of any authority whatsoever is perceived as a threat to the government. This particular set of minority candidates therefore is faced with the difficult problem of convincing voters they share the same basic social and civic values. Politicians understand that terms like atheist or nonbeliever are used as powerful pejoratives and potentially can damage their campaigns. The simplest solution is just not to admit they are nonbelievers, but many prefer to pivot around these questions and reconcile their beliefs with the majority faith. Just like other minority affiliations facing presumptuous mistrust, they are forced to prove their loyalty and morality to voters.

This rhetoric is evident in campaign statements made by the few politicians who have been elected despite identifying as nonbelievers. Arizona Democrat Krysten Sinema is the first (and so far, only) member of Congress officially to list her religious affiliation as

“none.” While this may lead one to assume she is comfortable and confident speaking about her lack of religious beliefs, in the past she has become defensive when asked about what her atheism means to her. While she did not deny the term was correct, in an interview Sinema noted that she “believes the terms ‘nontheist,’ ‘atheist’ or ‘nonbeliever’ are not befitting of her life’s work or personal character” (Flock 2013). Her answer is telling because implicitly it acknowledges those terms as pejorative, associated with immorality, and used to describe one who is not being a productive member of society. She clearly believes that identifying as an atheist would be politically damaging. Without lying about her affiliation, her answer goes on to bridge the gap between her beliefs and the religious majority. She provides an explanation for where, if not from scripture, she derives guidance for her decision-making: “her experiences as a social worker” (Oppenheimer 2012). This answer demonstrates to voters that Sinema cares about her community, and possibly that she derives her morality and basis for decisions from what is best for the community. The loyalty and morality questions have been answered, albeit with some pivoting involved. There is no way to tell how Sinema’s atheism genuinely functions in her life because this fact must be concealed. For all public intents and purposes, she indicates that they do not lead her down some separate moral path from the majority, but rather act as an alternative path to the same conclusions, namely independent moral decision making based on loyalty toward one’s community.

A similar trend can be seen among politicians who refuse to identify as nonreligious or religious, but rather pivot toward vague moral language when questioned about their beliefs. They ride the fence, basically implying that they are not religious in a traditional sense, but that their “spirituality” is based on what is ethical and what helps their community. The most prominent example of this rhetoric is Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT). When asked if he believes in God, Sanders pivoted and described how we must show compassion and help one another. He declared that “what I believe in, what my spirituality is about, is that we’re all in this together—that I think it’s not a good thing to believe, as human beings, that we can turn our backs on the suffering of other people” (Burke 2016). Essentially, Sanders is tying together spirituality and ethics, attempting to show that even without a defined faith he is not an immoral outsider challenging the religious majority. His faith, however one interprets his statements, informs his moral decisions and frames them in relation to what would alleviate community suffering. He is signaling that whether or not he believes in God is irrelevant. The political dance around the question is probably telling, but what is important to get across to voters is that his beliefs, no matter their definition or origin, function in a familiar way.

Overall, open and vocal nonbelievers have made very few inroads into American politics. There remains little reason for politicians to “out” themselves as nonreligious. Although demographics indicate a steep rise in religiously unaffiliated voters, the label remains pejorative. Candidates still are forced to skirt around their actual opinions for fear of attacks on their morality and patriotism. No matter how their beliefs actually function, whether they truly do inform moral decisions or have nothing to do with them, candidates must tie them back to a comfortable Protestant model. Whether they do this through pivoting, vagueness, or tying two ideas together, the intention is the same. The nonbeliever, placed on the defensive in an exclusive American political system, struggles to prove her loyalty and morality.

Conclusion

Although America has no religious test for office, the political system remains steeped in Protestant institutions and assumptions. Religious minority candidates are confronted with questions over whether they can be moral and independent-thinking members of government who truly love their country and community. Protestant views on religious functionalism are embedded into American civil religion, conceptions of civic values, and assumptions about from where morality and patriotism are derived. The deist God of civil religion is nominally inclusive, yet operates to exclude those who do not accept Protestant framing. Minorities are placed on the defensive from the start, questioned about whether they are secretly beholden to outside authorities, or if their values are compatible with American government.

It should be noted that the intention of this article is not to advise religious minorities to overcome the discrimination they face by "acting more Protestant," or to encourage them to change their belief systems to appease the majority. These examples simply show that minority politicians are faced with this roadblock to office, and successful candidates have pursued a political strategy of reconciliation. This is not to say their rhetoric was the only viable option available, or that their statements were necessarily disingenuous. The nature of politics itself encourages pivoting, vagueness, and many general claims about ideology that may not be totally congruent with the politician's actual opinions. Money, interest groups, polling, constituencies, and various other factors all come into play when making political calculations. The purpose of this exploration is simply to bring to light these issues of embedded Protestantism in a nominally inclusive political system and highlight the religious inequalities that remain in the American electoral system and government.

The particular religious minorities that are targeted have changed over various historical periods, and include many more groups than the sampling here examines. Political circumstances, immigration figures, and socioeconomics all play a role in discrimination, and a more quantitative analysis would be necessary to demonstrate precisely how important religious affiliation is compared to other factors. Yet there clearly remains a situation where despite various time periods and religious groups, very similar accusations are brought against minorities. Voters consistently question whether the member of a religious minority community truly loves her country, can make independent decisions, and has a proper moral framework. While bias against Muslims and atheists remains strong, the example of Kennedy's Catholicism shows that it is indeed possible for a religious minority to make a major breakthrough in the American political system.

Although it may seem that representation in Congress refuses to budge, demographics are rapidly shifting, with fewer Americans identifying with an organized religious group each year. The greatest change is occurring in the younger generations, and since older Americans are far more likely to vote, this may account for the conspicuous lack of electoral wins for nonreligious and Muslim candidates. While there is no way to tell how long traditions like swearing in on the Bible or invoking God on our currency will remain in place, the current representation numbers will not likely remain static forever as these increasingly unaffiliated Americans move into prime voting age. Yet overcoming institutionalized discrimination is rarely a quick or easy process, and there likely will never be a point where all groups receive fair and equal treatment free from suspicion. However, an increased focus on the struggles religious minorities face when campaigning may

eventually help raise national awareness of the lingering religious inequality in the American political system.

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