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Re-energized religious left delivers for Obama

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service



Obama made faith outreach central to his campaign

WASHINGTON -- After Tuesday's election of Democrat Barack Obama as president, you might expect religious progressives to start polishing their resumes for prominent Washington posts.

But liberal faith leaders said they have little interest in securing White House sinecures, and even less in forming a political machine to match the religious right. They're more concerned, they say, in keeping Obama honest.

"Let's put it this way," said the Rev. Jim Wallis, a leading progressive evangelical, "the prophets of God were always more comfortable in the wilderness than in the corridors of power."

According to exit polls, Obama, aided by a new cadre of liberal and centrist religious groups, made gains over past Democratic presidential candidates with a host of faith voters.

Progressive groups helped by framing the current economic turmoil as a failure of morals as much as policy; promoting Obama's pledge to reduce abortions; and urging religious voters to broaden their agenda beyond political hot-button issues.

Largely shut out of the Bush White House for most of the past eight years, liberals learned some important lessons while wandering the political wilderness, Wallis and others said. One is that Americans seem to have wearied of culture-war politics.

"I think what the emerging progressive religious movement is poised to do is to help us move from the culture wars, where religion is the tip of the spear that divided Americans," said Robert Jones, a sociologist and author of "Progressive & Religious."

Still, Obama made faith outreach central to his campaign, and now religious leaders expect the president-elect to make good on campaign promises.

"We expect inclusion," said the Rev. Wilfredo De Jesus, an Obama campaign adviser and vice president of social justice for the National Hispanic Leadership Conference. "We expect the issue of immigration to be tackled -- education, the reduction of abortion. We want to make sure the senator will be keeping his word."

Hispanics like De Jesus were a key part of Obama's winning coalition, according to pollster John Green of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. The Democrat won two-thirds of the Hispanic vote, an increase of about 13 percent from 2004, helping flip states like Florida, Nevada and New Mexico into the Democratic column.

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"Part of the success of the Obama campaign was maximizing support among cultural groups," said Green. "We expect that will extend to Hispanic Catholics and Hispanic Protestants."

De Jesus said Republicans took Hispanics for granted, expecting their party's stance on hot-button issues to carry the day. "You can't just throw up one button -- abortion -- and expect us to cross over to your corner," he said.

While Obama may not have completely closed the so-called "God gap," a newly revived religious progressive movement helped him make small but significant gains among white Catholics, evangelicals, Jews and the religiously unaffiliated, according to exit polls.

Overall, Obama won 55 percent of the Catholic vote, outperforming Democrats John Kerry in 2004 and Al Gore in 2000. White evangelicals continued to vote Republican, with 75 percent casting their ballot for Sen. John McCain. But Obama won 43 percent of weekly churchgoers, shaving a key slice of this traditionally Republican group.

"What we're really seeing is a rebalancing in many ways in this election," said Jones. "In 2004, we had the artificial constriction of religion to a couple of hot-button issues and one party."

Katie Paris, director of communications strategy for the left-leaning group Faith in Public Life, said it's clear the political landscape changed dramatically from 2004 -- in part because of a re-energized religious left.

"Actual groups with multimillion-dollar budgets have been formed," she said. "We have real infrastructure and leadership and ability to reach people that didn't exist four years ago."

For instance, Paris said, Faith in Public Life has helped two progressive interfaith groups, We Believe Ohio and We Believe Colorado, get off the ground. Obama won those states Tuesday, after both voted for President Bush in 2004.

Of course, weaving a winning electoral coalition from diverse religious strands is one thing; getting results in Washington often requires a narrowing of priorities, which may pose a challenge for progressive leaders.

Many also warn that the fragile coalition could fall apart if Obama fails to make good on his pledge to reduce abortions.

"I don't expect him to go for a radical-left position on abortion," Wallis said. "If he did, he would alienate many religious people looking for a more balanced approach."

On the other hand, there appears to be a consensus among progressives that the Obama White House could readily rally progressive religious leaders around fighting poverty and climate change.

"I'm optimistic about the opportunity to work with an administration and Congress that understand the needs of the poor," said the Rev. Roman Tune of the Washington-based Clergy Strategic Alliances. "The real work begins now."

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