



A New Faith Coalition

by [Jim Wallis](#) 11-06-2008

Most elections are just power rearrangements; this one was a transformational moment in our history. A fundamental shift is taking place in America, and we saw the evidence on November 4th. It is a political shift, a cultural and racial shift, a generational shift, and a religious shift.

The leadership of African-American and Latino Christians along with a new generation of the faithful in white America are ending an age of narrow and divisive religion. This new faith coalition voted for a broad new moral agenda for faith in public life. Racial and economic justice, creation care, peacemaking, and a more consistent ethic life will be the keystones of this growing shift.

This changing face of religion in America gave Barack Obama a 4.4 million voter net gain of Protestants and Catholics over John Kerry and helped lock up key swing states across the country. Real number gains were made among a new generation of white evangelicals. In James Dobson's home state of Colorado, the percentage of white evangelicals voting for Obama nearly doubled from those voting for Kerry. In Indiana, a state Obama won with little more than 26,000 votes, he picked up over 160,000 white evangelical votes over 2004. In Florida, Christian voters of all stripes swung hard for Obama giving him a net gain of 485,000 Catholic and Protestant voters over 2004. This year it was just about 200,000 votes in Florida that made the difference; in years past it was just a few hundred votes that swung the state.

Further polling results will help to answer the critical question of *why* religious voters cast their ballots the way they did. But three factors are likely key to understanding the religious shift.

First, the leadership of the African-American and Hispanic churches was more important than ever before in an American election. This time, white evangelicals played a supporting role while it was Christians of color—who are almost all “evangelical” in their theology—who led. The election results reflect a surge of support among black and Latino voters, galvanized by a campaign and a candidate who better spoke to their aspirations and values. Their overwhelming support marks a growing shift within the religious landscape toward marrying social conservatism with a deep commitment to social justice. Recent studies indicate that Latino voters are very pro-life on abortion yet also consider the debate on immigration as a key religious and “life” issue for their community.



Second, a new generation of pastors and students cast a “post-Religious Right ballot” this election. Polls leading up to the election showed a significant break from the previous generation on issues like gay marriage and abortion, which while still a top concern, it is not the only one. For those Christians, sanctity of life now includes poverty, war, genocide, and climate change. Healthy families are also still a top concern, but many Christians don’t see gay and lesbian rights as a primary cause of family breakdown. These religious voters refuse to be distracted by the culture wars of the previous generation. This new generation are not the evangelicals the country is used to seeing and hearing about in the media, and they are already reshaping the future agenda. The break is so stark that several conservative evangelical college newspapers endorsed Obama.

Third, we see a broadening of the agenda with fewer single issue voters. “Pro-life” voters are realizing that their faith calls for a consistent ethic of life from “womb to tomb.” Voters are now judging candidates based on who best addresses all the threats to human life and dignity. And for some, a more pragmatic strategy of serious abortion reduction, rather than a strategy of continuing only to try to make abortion illegal, is appealing. It is becoming a common ground that could break the ideological deadlock of the past 30 years. This consistent ethic of life has caused a significant shift in the political agenda of many Christians by expanding their definition of what it means to be pro-life. They are tired of political pandering to the issue that seems to be more about winning elections than pragmatic solutions.

Christians of color, younger white Christians, “new evangelical” pastors and leaders, and progressive Catholics and Protestants from many denominations are reaching across barriers to change the face of Christianity in this country—and also to engage with allies in other faith communities. They have learned many lessons from the mistakes of the Religious Right and aren’t about to repeat them. And they are not about to become a new “Religious Left.” When asked if they are liberal or conservative, many answer “yes,” depending on the issue. And because they don’t easily fit the political categories of left and right, they could become bridge-builders, bringing a divided nation together on the really big and politically transcendent issues like poverty, human rights, climate change, energy transformation, and the urgency of peace. And isn’t that just what our new president is calling for?