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## RELIGION IN THE 2008 ELECTION POST-ELECTION SURVEY

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## Executive Summary

*Sponsored by Faith in Public Life, in partnership with Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Sojourners, and conducted by Public Religion Research, the “Religion in the 2008 Election” post-election survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,277 voters from November 5-7, 2008 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 points. Key findings:*

**Almost twice the number of white evangelicals who voted for Obama say he shares their values, is “friendly” to religion.** Although only 21% of white evangelicals surveyed voted for Obama, nearly double that number say he is “friendly” to religion (39%) and shares their values (39%).

**Obama significantly improves upon perceptions of Democratic Party’s “friendliness” to religion.** Fifty-four percent of voters see Obama as friendly to religion, and a similar percentage see McCain as “friendly” to religion (58%). While McCain’s numbers are similar to those [Pew](#) found in August 2008 for Republican Party “friendliness” to religion (52%), Obama’s numbers represent a 16-point improvement over his party’s numbers (38%) and a 5-point increase from Faith in Public Life’s pre-election findings among the general public ([49%](#)).

**Palin nomination resulted in net loss for GOP ticket.** Palin’s nomination increased support among fewer than one-third of white evangelicals (30%), and decreased support among every other religious group and political independents. Among white evangelicals, a majority (54%) say her selection didn’t affect their support for McCain, and an additional 14% say her selection made them less likely to support McCain.

**While 1-in-5 evangelicals and 1-in-8 Catholics say an agenda focused primarily on abortion and same-sex marriage best reflects their values, majorities of evangelical and Catholic voters want a broad agenda.** While 1-in-8 Catholics (13%) say an agenda primarily focused on abortion and same-sex marriage best reflects their values, 1-in-3 (32%) say an agenda primarily focused on issues like fighting poverty, protecting the environment, and ending the war in Iraq best reflects their values. Fifty-one percent say an agenda focused on all of these issues best reflects their values. Among white evangelicals, roughly the same number say an agenda that primarily focuses on abortion and same-sex marriage on the one hand (21%) and poverty, the environment, and the war in Iraq on the other (18%) best reflects their values. Fifty-five percent say an agenda that focuses on all of these issues best reflects their values.

**Evangelical, Catholic voters reject narrow political focus, embrace the common good.** Large majorities of Catholics (72%) and white evangelicals (81%) say people of faith should focus on all issues that are central to their values even if it makes them less effective in politics, rather than focusing on one or two issues in order to be more politically effective. Strong majorities of Catholics (71%) and evangelicals (62%) also believe people of faith should advocate for policies that “protect the interests of all and promote the common good,” rather than policies that “protect their values and way of life.”

**Common ground approach to reducing abortion is overwhelmingly popular.** The vast majority (83%) of voters, including white evangelicals (86%) and Catholics (81%), believe elected leaders should work together to find ways to reduce abortions by helping prevent unwanted pregnancies, expanding adoption, and increasing economic support for women who want to carry their pregnancies to term.

**All religious groups rank economy as top issue, blame institutions rather than individuals for economic crisis.** When asked to identify the first and second most important issue to their vote, 70% of voters say the economy, followed by Iraq (35%), health care (31%), terrorism (19%), abortion (14%) and same-sex marriage (6%). Asked who they think is responsible for the current economic crisis, a plurality (38%) say corporations who were greedy, nearly one-third (31%) say negligent government, and one-quarter (25%) say individuals who were careless.

**Twice as many Catholics believe diplomacy rather than military strength is the best way to ensure peace; evangelicals are split.** Nearly twice as many Catholics think the best way to ensure peace is through diplomacy rather than military strength (61% vs. 32%), much like the general population (61% vs. 29%). White evangelicals split evenly over whether diplomacy or military strength is the best way to ensure peace (43% each).

## The 2008 Election and the Candidates

### *Candidate “Friendliness” to Religion, Sharing Voters’ Values*

Voters see both Barack Obama and John McCain as “friendly” to religion (54% and 58% respectively). While McCain’s numbers are similar to numbers the Pew Forum found in August 2008 for Republican Party “friendliness” to religion (52%), Obama’s numbers represent a 16-point improvement over his party’s numbers (38%) and a 5-point increase from Faith in Public Life’s pre-election survey findings among registered voters ([49%](#)).

More than 6-in-10 (62%) voters say Barack Obama shares their values, compared to 55% who say John McCain shares their values. Obama also has an advantage in intensity on this measure, with 25% completely agreeing he shares their values, compared to only 12% completely agreeing that McCain shares their values.

While only one-fourth of white evangelicals voted for Obama (26% in National Election Pool exit polls; 21% in our poll), 39% agree that Obama shares their values and 39% perceive him to be friendly to religion. While 54% of Catholics voted for Obama (53% in our poll), 64% agree that Obama shares their values.

### *Choice of Sarah Palin Net Loss for Republican Ticket*

John McCain’s selection of Sarah Palin hurt him more than it helped him. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of Americans say her selection made them less likely to vote for the Republican ticket, compared to only 18% who say her selection made them more likely to do so. A majority (56%) report her selection made no difference.

Among white evangelicals, although three-quarters (75%) agree that Palin shares their values, only 30% say her selection made them more likely to support McCain. A majority (54%) of white evangelicals say her selection made no difference for their support for McCain, and an additional 14% say her selection made them less likely to support McCain.

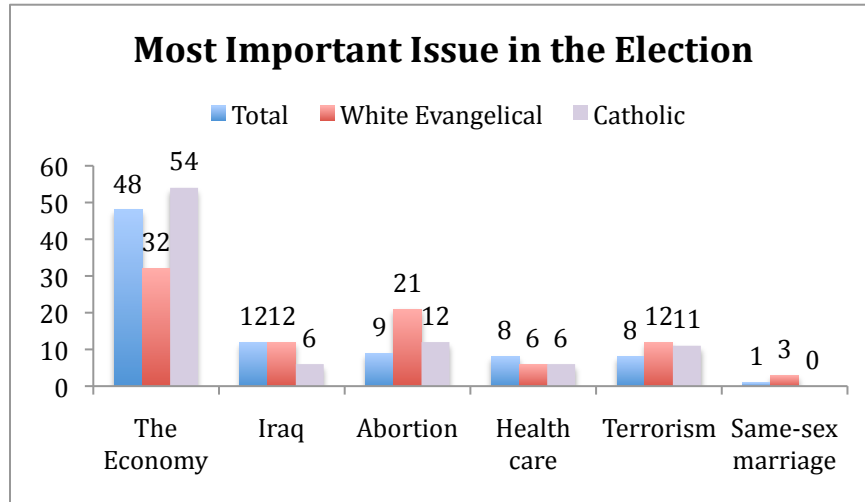
Among political independents, half (50%) say Palin’s selection as running mate made no difference, and twice as many say her selection made them less likely rather than more likely to support McCain (32% compared to 16%).

In the end, the Palin effect was a net loss for the Republican ticket. Palin’s selection increased support among less than one-third of evangelicals, while decreasing support among every other religious group and among political independents.

## Most Important Issues in the Election

### Economy Single Most Important Voting Issue

Nearly half (48%) of all voters say the economy was the single most important issue in the election. Fewer than one-in-ten voters say abortion was the single most important issue, and only 1% say same-sex marriage was the single most important issue.



Among white evangelical voters, 32% say the economy was the most important issue, and approximately 1-in-5 (21%) say abortion was the most important issue. Only 3% of evangelical voters say same-sex marriage ranks as the most important issue. Catholic voting priorities are similar to the all voter's priorities. A majority (54%) of Catholics say the economy is the most important issue in the election. Only 12% of Catholics cite abortion and none cite same-sex marriage as the most important issue in the election.

### Economy, Iraq and Health Care Among Top Two Most Important Election Issues

When we asked voters to identify the top two most important issues to their vote, 70% say the economy, followed by Iraq (35%), health care (31%), terrorism (19%), abortion (14%) and same-sex marriage (6%).

Catholics largely mirror the voting priorities of the general population, with the economy (77%) leading all issues, followed by Iraq (36%) and health care (30%), with issues such as abortion (16%) and same-sex marriage (4%) ranking last as important voting issues.

Among white evangelicals, the economy (60%) also trumped all other issues, followed by abortion (30%) and Iraq (27%) and terrorism (25%). Same-sex marriage (14%) was also last on the list of voting priorities for white evangelicals.

Issue	Most Impt Issue	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Impt Issue	Top Two Impt Issues
The Economy	48	22	70
Iraq	12	23	35
Health care	8	23	31
Terrorism	8	11	19
Other	10	6	16
Abortion	9	5	14
Same-sex marriage	1	5	6
DK/Ref	4	5	9
Total	100	100	

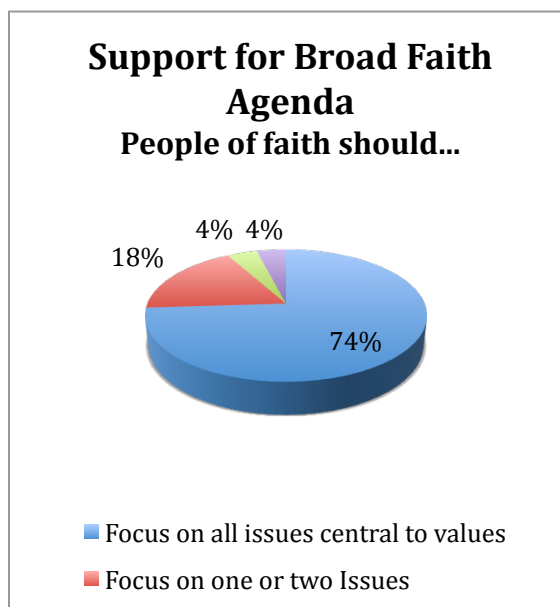
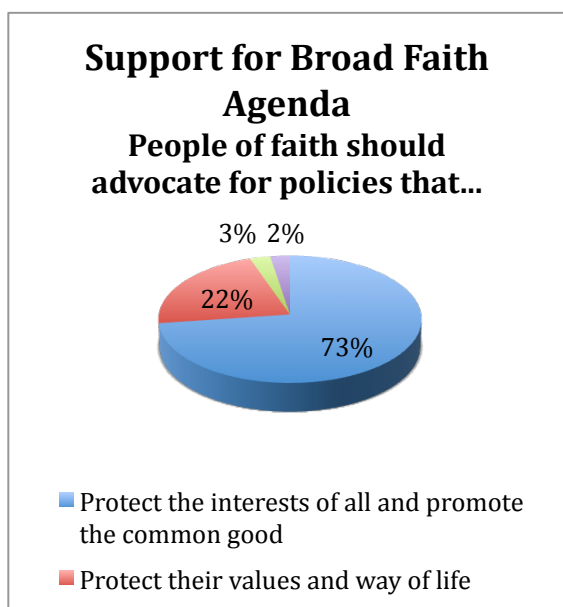
## Support for Broad Religious Engagement and Public Policy Agenda

### *Religious Voters Reject Narrow Political Focus, Embrace the Common Good*

Support for broad religious engagement was evident in a number of questions. Overwhelming majorities of every religious group agree with a broad approach to public policy that focuses on all issues central to their faith and look out for the interests of all.

Nearly three quarters (74%) of religious voters (and 81% of white evangelicals and 72% of Catholics) say people of faith should focus on all issues that are central to their faith even if it makes them less effective in politics, rather than focus on one or two important issues in order to be more politically effective.

A similar number (73%) of voters (and 62% of evangelicals and 71% of Catholics) say people of faith should advocate for policies that protect the interests of all and promote the common good, rather than advocating for policies that protect their own values and way of life.



### *Little Support for Agenda Focused Primarily on Abortion and Same-Sex Marriage*

Nearly three times as many religious voters say an agenda primarily focused on fighting poverty, protecting the environment, and ending the war in Iraq, rather than an agenda primarily focused on opposing abortion and same-sex marriage, best reflects their religious values (33% vs. 12% respectively). Forty-nine percent say an agenda focused on all of these issues best reflects their values.

White evangelicals are roughly split between preference for an agenda that primarily focuses on abortion and same-sex marriage on the one hand (21%) and an agenda that primarily focuses on poverty, the environment, and the war in Iraq on the other (18%). Fifty-five percent say an agenda that focuses on all of these issues best reflects their values.

While 1-in-8 Catholics (13%) say an agenda focused primarily on abortion and same-sex marriage best reflects their values, 1-in-3 (32%) say an agenda primarily focused on issues like fighting poverty,

protecting the environment, and ending the war in Iraq best reflects their values. Fifty-one percent say an agenda focused on all of these issues best reflects their values.

## Abortion

A majority (52%) of American voters think abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 42% of voters think abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

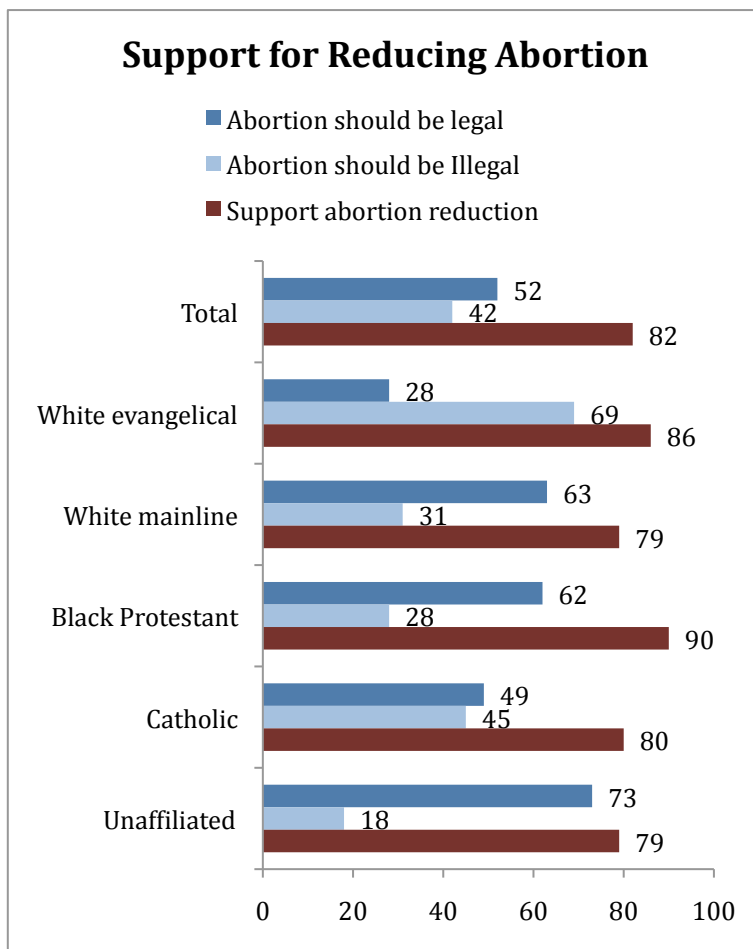
White evangelicals strongly believe abortion should be illegal in all or most cases (69%), rather than legal in all or most cases (28%). Catholics, on the other hand, lean slightly “pro-choice.” A plurality (49%) of Catholics think abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 45% think abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.

### *Broad, Overwhelming Support for Common Ground to Reduce Abortions through Prevention and Support*

Despite the divides in public opinion on the legality of abortion, we found that the vast majority (83%) of voters agree that “elected leaders on both sides of the abortion debate should work together to find ways to reduce the number of abortions by enacting policies that help prevent unintended pregnancies, expand adoption, and increase economic support for women who wish to carry their pregnancies to term.”

This abortion reduction approach has overwhelming support across all religious groups and among the unaffiliated. Among white evangelicals, 86% agree with this approach, and 81% of Catholics agree with it.

This abortion approach bridges the “pro-choice”/“pro-life” divide. Eighty-one percent of “pro-choice” voters support this approach, and 86% of “pro-life” voters support this approach.



## **Economic Priorities and Views**

### *Voters See Economic Crisis Primarily as Failure of Institutions, Not Individuals*

When asked who they think was responsible for the current economic crisis, voters overwhelmingly see the crisis as a failure of institutions rather than a failure of individuals. A plurality (38%) of voters place primarily responsibility for the crisis on corporations who were greedy and made risky business decisions, and nearly one-third (31%) say government neglected its duty to regulate unethical business practices. Only one-quarter blame the crisis on individuals who were careless and borrowed more money than they could afford. Pluralities of white evangelicals (40%) and Catholics (35%) also place primary blame on corporations.

### *Creating Green Jobs, Cutting Spending, and Providing Affordable Health Care Top Economic Priorities*

When asked what the new administration should pursue in response to the current economic crisis, voters say the following should be the top priorities: investing in renewable energy to lower energy costs and create new jobs (73%); cutting government spending (61%); and providing access to more affordable healthcare (59%).

Providing access to affordable health care emerged as a key priority of voters. In addition to its importance as a top economic policy priority, it also registered as an important voting issue. More people picked health care as the second most important voting issue than any other issue. As one of the top two important voting issues, health care ranked third overall (31%) after the economy (70%) and Iraq (35%); Catholics also ranked health care third overall (30%).

### *Majority of Voters Support More Government Involvement to Meet Needs*

Half of the country thinks the government should do more to solve problems and meet the needs of people (50%), as opposed to thinking that the government is already doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals (45%).

Fifty-five percent of Catholics and majorities of all religious groups except white evangelicals and Mainline Protestants believe the government should do more to solve problems and meet the needs of people. Six-in-ten (62%) white evangelicals and half of mainline Protestants think the government is already doing too many things.

## **Foreign Policy Priorities and Views**

### *Security Concerns, Improving America's Reputation Top Priorities*

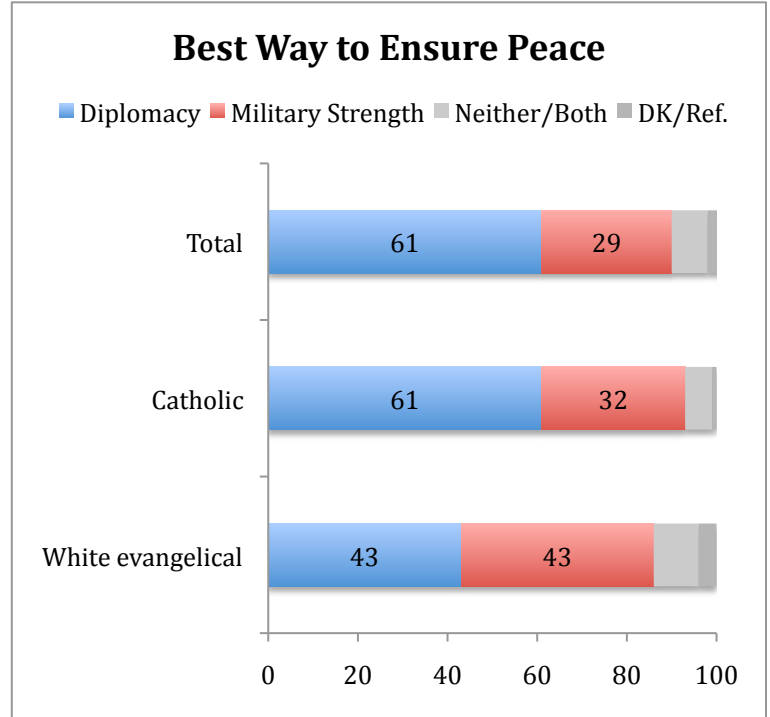
In foreign policy, strong majorities of American voters believe working to stop the spread of nuclear weapons (72%) and maintaining a strong military (70%) are the two top policy priorities. A majority of voters (53%) also say improving America's reputation in the world should be a top priority. Nearly half (48%) say banning torture and addressing global warming should be top priorities.

Catholics largely mirror all voters' foreign policy priorities. White evangelicals also share these top three foreign policy priorities, though they place more emphasis on the military. More than 8-in-10 (82%) white evangelicals say maintaining a strong military is a top priority. More than three quarters of Catholics and white evangelicals (76% each) support stopping the spread of nuclear weapons.

### *Voters Favor Diplomacy over Military Strength by Two-to-One Margin*

Although voters express strong security concerns and support for maintaining a strong military, voters also say that a foreign policy based on diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace. Twice as many voters think that the best way to ensure peace is through diplomacy rather than through military strength (61% vs. 29% respectively).

Much like the general population, nearly twice as many Catholics favor diplomacy over military strength (61% vs. 32%). While 82% white evangelicals say that maintaining a strong military is a top priority, they are evenly split over whether diplomacy or military strength is the best way to ensure peace (43% each).



### **Election Issues in Religious Contexts and the Role of Religious Leaders**

#### *Few Hearing About Election Issues in Place of Worship or from Religious Groups*

Only 1-in-5 voters report that they heard about election issues from their place of worship or from religious groups. White evangelicals and Catholics are more likely to hear about election issues than any other group. Nearly one-third (31%) of white evangelicals and nearly one-quarter (24%) of Catholics report hearing about election issues in religious contexts.

Among the minority of voters who heard about election issues from their place of worship or from religious groups, nearly three quarters (73%) say they heard about opposing abortion and same-sex marriage, compared to 48% who say they heard about fighting poverty, protecting the environment or ending the war in Iraq. Although voters heard more from religious groups about issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, as noted above, more voters think a broader agenda focused on fighting poverty, protecting the environment, and ending the war in Iraq, or an agenda that focuses on all of these issues, better reflects their values.

#### *Voters Cautious About Public Role of Religious Leaders*

As other polls have shown, Americans have mixed opinions about the role of religious leaders in public life. While 6-in-10 voters say religious leaders should stay out of politics, a majority (53%) of voters think religious leaders should speak out on important issues in the election. Most voters, however, are wary of religious leaders getting entangled with candidates. Majorities of voters do not want religious leaders endorsing candidates (56%) or holding candidates accountable for misleading attacks (52%).

## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The survey was designed and conducted by Public Religion Research on behalf of Faith in Public Life, in partnership with Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Sojourners. Results of the survey were based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Opinion Access Corporation. The survey consists of a nationally representative sample of 1,277 American voters and was conducted from November 5 to November 7, 2008.

The margin of error for the national sample is +/- 3.0% at the 95% confidence interval. In addition to sampling error, surveys may also be subject to error or bias due to question wording, context and order effects.

The national sample was interviewed using a random digit dial process and weighted to match the 2008 national electorate parameters from the National Election Pool exit poll on gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, region, and presidential vote. Weighting was accomplished using sample balancing, a special iterative sample weighting program that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables.

## **ABOUT FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE**

Faith in Public Life is a communications and organizing resource center that works to transform the values debate in America by increasing the strength, effectiveness and visibility of faith leaders dedicated to justice, compassion, and the common good. For more information, visit [www.faithinpubliclife.org](http://www.faithinpubliclife.org).

## **ABOUT CATHOLICS IN ALLIANCE FOR THE COMMON GOOD**

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good promotes awareness of Catholic social teaching and its core values of justice, dignity and the common good to Catholics, the media and Americans of all faiths. Through communications, grassroots outreach and strategic coordination, Catholics in Alliance supports other Catholic organizations that work to advance the call to faithful citizenship and the common good. For more information, visit [www.catholicsinalliance.org](http://www.catholicsinalliance.org).

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