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Obama results show gains in key religious voters

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-- In building a winning coalition of religious voters, Barack Obama cut into the so-called God gap that puts frequent worshippers in the Republican column, won Catholics, made inroads with younger evangelicals, and racked up huge numbers with minorities and people with no religious affiliation.

By some measures, the faith-based equivalent of the red and blue map didn't change that much: Large voting blocs like white Catholics and evangelical Protestants remained in the Republican camp, for example.

The early indications from exit polls don't suggest a fundamental reshaping of religion's role in electing presidents, but they do show Obama made progress on important fronts that hold promise for future Democratic religious coalitions that cross racial lines, analysts said.

"It really doesn't look to me like a realignment," said John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Rather, he said, Obama made religion work for him in a way other Democrats haven't.

The economy, meanwhile, dominated voters' priorities across religious lines, blunting the impact of issues like abortion and gay marriage that historically help move religious votes.

The Obama campaign made a strong pitch for religious voters, building grassroots support through "faith house parties" where religion and the candidates were discussed, putting Catholic and evangelical surrogates on the stump, and holding faith caucus meetings at the Democratic convention in August.

Yet when it came down to the final Sunday, the campaign turned to traditional Democratic religious turf: African-American churches, where a letter from the candidate was read urging voter participation.

Exit polls showed Obama winning nearly all black Protestants, and a strong majority of both Catholic and Protestant Hispanics. Obama won the election handily even though white Catholics and white Protestants backed Republican John McCain.

"This is a coalition that includes white Christians," Green said of Obama's

faith-based bloc. "It's just white Christians aren't the senior partners in this coalition."

On one key measure that has hurt Democrats before _ the God or religion gap _ Obama made up ground. He won a slightly larger share of weekly churchgoers than John Kerry did in 2004.

White evangelicals remain a key component of the Republican coalition. And exit polls show they made up nearly a quarter of the electorate, a little higher than in 2004.

On Tuesday, McCain carried white evangelicals by about a 3-1 margin _ a dominating performance, but somewhat less than George Bush in 2004. McCain also fell short of Bush's numbers on white evangelicals in swing states such as Colorado and Ohio.

Young evangelicals were part of the reason, exit polls show. Nationally, about a third of white evangelicals under 30 favored Obama. Comparatively, less than a quarter of white evangelicals between 30 and 64 supported Obama.

The Obama campaign never had designs on carving out a big chunk of the white evangelical vote. But because it's such a large bloc, a little can make a difference _ and the target was young evangelicals.

If young evangelicals are more open to Democrats, that carries implications for the Republican Party, the direction of the evangelical Christian movement and Democratic politics.

"If you put younger white evangelicals together with black evangelicals, Hispanic evangelicals, progressive evangelicals and others who are not evangelical, I think there is perhaps a shift in the religious landscape and the political landscape that may be a long-term shift," said David Gushee, a professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University in Atlanta.

Conservative evangelicals, meanwhile, found something positive in the success in Arizona, Florida and California of constitutional amendments that define marriage as between one man and one woman.

"When the values and what's at stake is clear, the voters get it every time," said Carrie Gordon Earll, senior director of public policy for Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family. "With Obama, there was a concerted effort to court evangelicals by misrepresenting, in our view, Obama's positions."

Again, Catholics proved to be a swing vote. A majority of white Catholics voted for McCain, but Obama's showing was slightly better than Kerry's.

A number of U.S. Catholic bishops emphasized abortion as a paramount voting issue this year, including Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, who strongly

criticized Obama's abortion rights positions. In an e-mail Wednesday, Chaput said the attractiveness of Obama as a candidate, the primacy of the economy as an issue and the Democrats' "explicitly religion-friendly public relations" played a role in the Catholic result.

He also said: "The more serious Catholics are about their faith _ in other words, where they invest their time, convictions and behavior _ the less likely they were to vote for Sen. Obama." Chaput said Obama's strong showing among Latino Catholics doesn't make them less serious about their faith, but means other factors are at work, including the experience of being a minority.

Obama's Catholic showing was greeted differently on the Catholic left. Stephen Schneck, director of the Life Cycle Institute at the Catholic University of America, said Obama's emphasis on service, the communal good, pragmatic solutions and "raising the quality of life for the least among us" were all Catholic draws.

One of the Democrats' largest gains came among voters unaffiliated with any religion. Obama won about three-quarters of that demographic.

The results were from exit polling by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International for The Associated Press and television networks conducted in 300 precincts nationally. The data was based on 17,884 voters, including telephone polling of 2,407 people who voted early, and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 1 percentage point for the entire sample, smaller for subgroups.

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