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Religion's Big and Unprecedented Role in '08 Politics Advertisement

From the Presidential Election to the Debate on Gay Marriage, Faith-Based Issues Dominated

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[Barack Obama](#) chose [Joe Biden](#), and [John McCain](#) turned to [Sarah Palin](#), but in the end the most sought-after running mate in the 2008 campaign never appeared on a single ballot.

God, it seems, couldn't be entirely wooed by either party.

The unprecedented and extraordinary prominence of religion in the 2008 election was easily the year's top religion story. Both parties battled hard for religious voters, and both were forced to distance themselves from outspoken clergy whose fiery rhetoric threatened to become a political liability.

In the end, the top prize went to Obama, the son of a Muslim-born father and an atheist mother, who spent much of the campaign fighting off persistent -- and untrue -- rumors that he was a closet Muslim. His party, after years of consistently losing churchgoers to Republicans, decisively won Catholics, Jews and black Protestants, and made small but significant inroads among some evangelicals.

McCain, meanwhile, managed to shore up his dispirited base of religious conservatives, winning three of four born-again or evangelical votes, but his troubled campaign could not overcome an onslaught of negative economic news that, in the end, trumped all other issues.

"It's very tempting but a bit dangerous to over-interpret what happened," said Luis Lugo, executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. "Clearly Obama improved across all religious groups, but the economy just overwhelmed every other issue."

Still, the 2008 campaign was remarkable for the ways religion -- or religious figures -- played such a prominent role. Obama was forced to sever ties with his fiery pastor of 20 years, the Rev. [Jeremiah Wright](#) of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, for sermons that were deemed racist, anti-American

and at times downright bizarre. McCain, in turn, was forced to return the endorsements of Texas megachurch pastor [John Hagee](#) and Ohio's [Rod Parsley](#).

Focus on the Family founder [James Dobson](#) tried to play kingmaker by first saying he would not vote for McCain "under any circumstances" and later calling the Palin pick "God's answer" to prayer. [Mike Huckabee](#), the former Arkansas governor who proved most popular among religious conservatives and won the Iowa Republican caucuses in January, failed to gain traction despite ads that dubbed him a "Christian leader."

Obama and Biden faced strong opposition from Catholic leaders over their support of abortion rights. One American cardinal, James Stafford, called Obama's election "apocalyptic," and a South Carolina Catholic priest told Obama supporters to head to confession before receiving Communion.

All of that, Lugo said, shows that voters want politicians to be at least somewhat religious -- but prefer to make up their own minds, without the interference of politically outspoken clergy.

"People still do not want religious institutions or religious leaders to weigh in on politics," Lugo said. "There's strong opposition to it, and a strong consensus against it."

Even after the election, contention over a religious figure continued to dog Obama. The president-elect's selection of megapastor [Rick Warren](#) to give the inaugural invocation spurred anger among liberal groups and gay activists. They have criticized Warren's opposition to abortion and gay marriage and are unhappy that Obama has given him a prominent role.

One religious leader whose politics are fairly well known -- and not always embraced by the American public -- received a 21-gun salute when he arrived at the [White House](#) in April for a six-day U.S. tour. When [Pope Benedict XVI](#) arrived for his first U.S. visit, many Catholics were still clinging to fond memories of his predecessor. But by the time he wrapped up his whirlwind spin around New York and Washington, Benedict left with higher approval ratings.

"What I saw in the faces of the people who waited to greet him, who had a chance to hear his message, was more than just happiness. It was a sense of profound joy," said the Very Rev. David O'Connell, who hosted the pope as president of [Catholic University](#) in Washington.

The pope surprised his U.S. flock with an unexpected attention on the clergy sex-abuse crisis. He told American bishops that the scandal had "sometimes been badly handled" and said they had a divine mandate to "bind up the

wounds . . . with loving concern to those so seriously wronged." He met privately with a small group of abuse victims and told a stadium Mass of 46,000 that "no words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse."

"There was an expectation and a hope that the pope would say something comforting and consoling to a wounded church, and I think he accomplished that," O'Connell said.

Despite their loss at the polls, conservatives continued their winning streak on the volatile question of gay marriage in California (where the state Supreme Court overturned the state's ban on same-sex marriages in May), Arizona and Florida. The high-stakes and expensive California fight reflects conservatives' ability to rally the troops at the ballot box in opposition to gay marriage.

Meanwhile, the top Washington lobbyist for the [National Association of Evangelicals](#), the Rev. [Richard Cizik](#), was forced to resign his longtime post after voicing tentative support for same-sex civil unions. Cizik had already angered some conservative leaders for his support of stepped-up environmental protection.

A related fight over homosexuality continued to roil the Episcopal Church, which saw dioceses in Fort Worth, Quincy, Ill., and Pittsburgh secede to realign with a more conservative Anglican province in Argentina. Related big-ticket legal fights resulted in a \$2.5 million deficit for the national church.

In August, Episcopalians emerged from a once-a-decade summit of Anglican bishops in England relatively intact despite calls for discipline from conservative Anglican bishops, most of whom boycotted the three-week [Lambeth Conference](#). That fragile unity will be tested next year, however, as conservatives move to establish a separate-but-equal province on U.S. soil.

The [United Methodist Church](#) voted to keep its traditional stance on homosexuality, maintaining rules that call homosexual activity "incompatible with Christian teaching." The [Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#), meanwhile, voted to remove a constitutional rule that requires clergy to maintain "fidelity in marriage . . . or chastity in singleness." However, a majority of local Presbyteries must approve the amendment, which might prove too high a hurdle.

Religion and secular law collided at a fundamentalist Mormon polygamist compound in Texas, and controversial sect leader Tony Alamo's compound in Arkansas, over charges of sexual abuse of minors. In Oregon and Wisconsin, three sets of parents were charged in the faith-healing deaths of children who were denied routine medical treatment.

In November, the small, Utah-based Sumnum sect asked the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) for the right to erect monuments to its "Seven Aphorisms" alongside existing Ten Commandments markers in a case that could decide how much government can -- or should -- memorialize religious tenets.

Interfaith relations continued their difficult dance in 2008 as several high-level attempts at dialogue -- by the [United Nations](#), Saudi [King Abdullah](#), the Vatican and former British Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) -- sought tentative common ground between the Muslim world and the largely Christian West.

At the same time, relations between the Vatican and Jewish groups remained tense after Benedict revised, but still allowed, a Good Friday prayer that God would "enlighten [Jews'] hearts so that they may acknowledge [Jesus Christ](#), the savior of all men." On Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, Benedict marked the 50th anniversary of the death of wartime pontiff Pope Pius XII, who some Jewish groups say didn't do enough to save Jews during the Holocaust.

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