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God, Politics and the Environment: Religious Affiliation and Voting Patterns by Congress On Environmental Legislation, 1970-2010.

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Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed environmental damage in the Gulf of Mexico due to a mishap on the part of BP Oil Company. We have seen verdant forest become commercialized and replaced by cookie-cutter suburban America. Policy makers in the United States stand in a challenging and dichotomous position. In order to satisfy both the economic and environmental needs of our country as well as our planet, balance is key. American citizens are no longer as connected to the natural environment as they once were, due to a culture of commercialism and a migration from rural towns to urban metropolises. We rely on elected officials to make decisions that will protect our environment and allow forthcoming generations to prosper. Regardless of one's personal beliefs relating to the precise causes of climate change and other environmental issues, we must recognize the importance of the environment in our future. From preserving dwindling icecaps to defending the last remaining areas of untouched wilderness, politicians have great influence over related legislation. We find that religious affiliation impacts votes on environmental legislation and stance on environmental policy.

Interpretation of the Bible also can influence the position legislators take on environmental policy. Within the Genesis creation narrative, Christians and Jews are told to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28, New American Standard). According to Oxford theologian Peter Harrison, there are various ways to interpret this mandate. A literal interpretation of this verse can reduce or eliminate concern for protecting the environment for future generations. However, a less literal interpretation of the Scripture suggests humans are “called to tend the earth in responsibility to its Creator” (Harrison 1999, 89). Although many American politicians' faith is based in the

Christian tradition, differing interpretations of the Bible also can influence their perspective on environmental policy.

From the foundation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 to current regulations on air pollution and vehicle emission standards, elected policy makers have made a significant impact on environmental legislation and a “greener” future. How does one’s religious background affect his or her position on environmental policy? When predicting a politician’s vote on an environmental issue, we find religious affiliation is an important contributor (Guth et. al. 1995, 377). Though our country separates religious matters from governmental matters, religion continues to indirectly impact the political sphere on ethical, economic, and environmental issues. Religion plays a significant role not only in our culture, but in our legislature and without it, “issues of morality, meaning, and the pursuit of a sustainable truth to live by get marginalized” (Nash 2001, 1). Religion shapes one’s moral development and worldview and likewise influences a politician’s views on moral problems. Furthermore, contemporary environmental issues *are* moral problems because they are created by humans and negatively affect the well being of both humans and non-humans alike (Nash 2001, 23). Regardless of a politician’s personal beliefs, religion (or lack thereof) influences their moral formation, and contributes to their stance on environmental policy.

Over the past four decades, we find several politicians whose religious backgrounds have greatly influenced their views on environmental policy. James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan, and thus the administration’s point person on the environment, exemplifies a politician whose religious background shapes his political duties as well as his view on the environment. An extremely religious man and a member of the Assemblies of God, Watt was convinced he “had God on his side” (Andersen 1982). Watt worked as a lobbyist and

strived to overcome all legislation dealing with environmental protection. Time magazine commented, “Watt's politics, like his ramrod Christian morality, were firmly set” (Andersen 1982). One of his most noteworthy actions took place in 1982 when he proposed to amend a wilderness ban to allow all wilderness lands to become available for exploitation within the coming 18 years (Andersen 1982). He believed we should use our resources *now* because “after the last tree is felled, Christ will come back” (Moyers 2004). Watt, like other Christian politicians during this period, favored many “pro-development” policies, which supported economic growth and development, due to his conservative political and religious beliefs.

Rick Santorum, a former Senator from Pennsylvania and a 2012 Presidential candidate, serves as a more recent example of a politician whose religious background plays a considerable role in his political campaign. In 2006, Santorum, a devout Roman Catholic, voted “pro-environment”¹ only 14% of the time as determined by the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) (LCV Scorecard 2006). Santorum voted to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and made an affirmative vote for budget cuts on environmental programs; he has continued to make an effort to connect his political beliefs on the environment to his religious worldview, leading him to call global warming a “junk science” (LCV 2006) (Samuelsohn 2011).

Standing in stark contrast to Watt and Santorum is Bill McKibben, a leading Christian environmentalist from Vermont and a premier spokesperson for the Creation Care² movement. He is a Methodist who has been called the “world’s best green journalist” and who believes that churchgoers “should be at the fore of the environmental movement, because Christianity teaches social justice, creation care, and selfless concern for others” (Neff 2010). McKibben has largely

¹ The LCV chooses 10-25 bills of particular environmental importance from each Congressional session, determines whether a yay or nay vote most protects the environment, and rates each Representative on a scorecard based on the percentage of votes that the member voted consistently with the LCV position.

² A form of environmentalism among evangelicals; caring for all of God's creation by stopping and preventing activities that are harmful (Evangelical Environmental Network).

influenced the modern movement among Evangelicals to care for our Earth, leading a large grassroots campaign to “force real action” (McKibben 2010).

Through an analysis of nine years, we investigate the link between House Members’ environmental voting records and religious affiliation. We find self-identified religious affiliation to be an important factor in predicting how politicians will vote on environmental legislation.

Research Methods

In order to test for religion’s role in affecting congressional voting patterns on environmental legislation, we examined the voting records for members of the U.S. House of Representatives. This group of 435 lawmakers provided us with a large enough sample to reveal significant trends and correlations. Next we chose bills or amendments to examine the voting record of each member of Congress. Since our goal was to determine how members voted on environmental legislation, we turned to the LCV. Though a reputable source, the LCV was our sole resource when deeming what legislation was most environmentally significant. It is possible that several important environmental bills have been left out of our research. We identified nine roll call votes listed on the LCV scorecards from 1970-2010 as especially significant:

1. Toxic Substances Control Act of 1973 (1973)
2. Energy Conservation and Oil Policy Act of 1975 (1975)
3. Superfund (1980)
4. Endangered Species: Leopard Darter Protection (1987)
5. Clean Air Act Amendment (1990)
6. Takings (1995)
7. ANWR (Markey Johnson Amendment) (2001)
8. CAFÉ Standard (2005)

9. American Clean Energies and Security Act (2009).

Because each of these years included a vote on an important piece of environmental legislation, we examined the LCV scores of each member of the House for each roll call vote.

In order to find religious affiliation we turned to two reference books: *The Almanac of American Politics* and *Politics in America*. These books are published biannually and contain basic information, including religious affiliation, for every member of Congress as provided by the members themselves. These two were consistent in the way they listed religious affiliation and allowed us to readily identify each member's self-described religious preference.

Based on the religious affiliation listed, we categorized each member in a religious tradition using Guth, et al's classification system (Guth et al. 2006). Guth, et al. place 137 different Christian denominations into religious traditions (Guth et al. 2006). The main religious traditions relevant to our study are Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and Jewish. We also include a catch-all category, "Protestant" for members who stated a "Protestant" or "Christian" affiliation with no further specification.

Data/Results

To display this information in an understandable and effective way, Figure 1 presents the average LCV score of six religious traditions for each of the nine years: Protestant, Mormon, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. Additionally, we included a line for the average voting record for all members of Congress to use as a comparison for the six religious groups. These results are displayed in Figure 1.

During the years surveyed, Representatives who self-identified as Jewish scored the overall highest League of Conservation Voters percentages. Figure 1 shows that Jewish Representatives scored notably higher average LCV scores than any of their Christian peers

across every year surveyed. Even the lowest score of 71 in 1980 towered twenty-three points higher than the overall average scores that year. Examining the same figure also reveals that Jewish Representatives never scored less than 22 points higher than the average (1990), nor less than 15 points more than the next highest religious group (Protestants in 1980).

The large gap between Jewish Representatives' LCV scores and those of their peers could be partially attributed to the predominantly Democratic affiliation of Jews in Congress. Indeed, when only comparing results within the Democratic Party the gap between Jewish LCV scores and the average LCV scores shrinks noticeably, as seen in Figure 2. In 1990, Jewish Democrats scored an average of 81 points, only 0.3 points higher than Protestants the same year. In 2009, Jewish Democrats barely edged out Protestants again with a score of 97.9 points compared to 96.8 points. However, even after controlling for party affiliation, the Jewish Representatives' LCV scores still remain higher than both the average score of their party as well as the average score for every other religious classification across all years surveyed.

Various Jewish organizations within the United States have issued statements in strong support of the environment. One typical position on the environment, stated by the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis, affirms the role of Jews in "supporting and promoting legislation to preserve and protect the environment, as well as to protect the health and safety of children, workers, and adults through such efforts as reducing the use of toxic materials" (Massachusetts Board of Rabbis 2008). This support of environmental issues within the Jewish community could be influential in the voting patterns of self-identified Jewish Representatives.

Roman Catholics stand as the next-highest scoring religious group. Compared to all members of Congress, Roman Catholics scored above the average LCV percentage every year analyzed and scored higher than every other Christian classification, with the exception of

Protestants in 1975. When the results are narrowed to only the Republican Party in Figure 3, the chart shows Roman Catholics averaged a higher LCV percentage than the overall Republican percentage for every year analyzed. Furthermore, Representatives who self-identified as Roman Catholic also averaged higher than every other Christian group in the party.

When the results are narrowed to only include the Democratic Party, however, Figure 2 shows that Roman Catholic Representatives voted much more closely to the party average. Furthermore, Catholic Representatives scored an LCV percentage consistently lower than the general Protestant group across all years surveyed. Still, the Roman Catholic average LCV score proved slightly higher than the party average, indicating a relatively positive correlation between self-identification as Roman Catholic and higher LCV scores, even within the Democratic Party.

Part of this correlation could possibly be due to the pro-environment stance taken by both the Vatican and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In 2002 Pope John Paul II signed a “Common Declaration on Environment Ethics” that reads:

God has not abandoned the world. It is His will that His design and our hope for it will be realized through our cooperation in restoring its original harmony. In our own time we are witnessing a growth of an ecological awareness which needs to be encouraged, so that it will lead to practical programs and initiatives. An awareness of the relationship between God and humankind brings a fuller sense of the importance of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, which is God's creation and which God entrusted to us to guard with wisdom and love (cf. Gen 1:28). (Vatican 2002)

Nine years earlier, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops created an Environmental Justice Program to raise awareness and take positive environmental action within the American Roman Catholic Community (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2011). This general attitude of conservation and protection within the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, especially the American leadership in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, could influence the voting of Roman Catholic Representatives.

The next religious category of Representatives examined is Protestants. Representatives labeled Protestant self-identified as “Protestant” or simply “Christian,” without specifying any particular church affiliation. After Roman Catholics, Protestant Representatives scored the next highest overall LCV percentages, with two exceptions in 1995 and 2005. Figure 1 shows that, during the 1970s, Protestant Representatives scored above the average LCV percentage for all Representatives, even posting a higher score than Roman Catholic Representatives in 1975. From 1980 until 1990, Protestant Representatives followed the overall LCV percentage averaged from all Representatives. Figure 1 also shows the overall Protestant scores began to dip after 1990, and Protestant Representatives averaged lower LCV scores than Mainline Protestant Representatives in 1995. Protestants scored higher than Mainline Protestant Representatives in 2001 and 2005, but in 2009 Protestant Representatives’ LCV scores once again fell behind Mainline Protestants.

When the results are narrowed to the Republican Party in Figure 3, Protestants also score the next highest LCV percentages after Roman Catholics from 1980 until 2005, with a large dip after 1990. However, Republican Protestants still scored higher than the Republican average until 2001. When the results are narrowed to the Democratic Party, Figure 2 shows a steadily increasing LCV average for Protestant Democrats, with only one dip in 1980. Protestant Democrats scored comfortably above the party LCV score average, second only to Jewish Democrats, and even outscored Roman Catholics during each of the surveyed years.

Mainline Protestant Representatives follow next in LCV scores. Mainline Protestants include Representatives who self-identified as Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Mainline Protestant Christian Representatives overall scored consistently below the overall LCV percentage of their peers from both parties. Figure 1 shows that only

Evangelical Representatives received a lower LCV score than Mainline Protestants in 1973, although from 1975 until 2009 Mainline Protestant Representatives outscored both Evangelical and Mormon Representatives. In both 1995 and 2009, the overall Mainline Protestant Representatives' LCV percentage even jumped above that of Congressional Protestants. However, Figures B and C both indicate that Mainline Protestant Christians scored under the party average for both Republicans and Democrats respectively. Additionally, Figure 3 indicated a downward sloping trend in Republican Mainline Protestants' LCV scores along with the Republican average; whereas, Democratic Mainline Protestants' scores appear to be positively sloping in Figure 2 along with the Democratic average.

Despite the lower than average LCV scores, several Mainline Protestant denominations have issued clear formal statements in favor of the environment. For example, the Episcopal Church's Environmental Stewardship Subcommittee issued a strong statement in support of the environment in 1997:

Greed must be healed. The economics which drive creation's destruction, the dumping of toxic waste and garbage on minority communities, the devastation of forests and wetlands, the total disregard for every living thing, and the inability to find peace in our lives comes from greed... Pollution of our planet affects the health of every living thing. (Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Committee 1997.)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted a similar stance in 1993, claiming, "We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are deeply concerned about the environment, locally and globally, as members of this church and as members of society," (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 1993) and point to the same environmental problems as the Episcopal Church:

Processes of environmental degradation feed on one another. Decisions affecting an immediate locale often affect the entire planet. The resulting damages to environmental systems are frightening:

- depletion of non-renewable resources, especially oil;
- loss of the variety of life through rapid destruction of habitats;
- erosion of topsoil through unsustainable agriculture and forestry practices;
- pollution of air by toxic emissions from industries and vehicles, and pollution of water by wastes;
- increasing volumes of wastes; and
- prevalence of acid rain, which damages forests, lakes, and streams. (“Caring for Creation”)

Both the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America form large portions of the Mainline Protestant community, and their formal statements on the environment clearly support conservation and protection. Although these statements issued by Mainline Protestant churches support environmental concerns, Representatives that self-identify as Mainline Protestants still voted in favor of the environment less often than the average.

Evangelical Representatives posted the second-lowest LCV scores, consistently averaging beneath all other categories except Mormons. Figure 1 indicates that from 1973 until 1990, Evangelicals’ LCV scores gradually rose, but in 1995, their scores dropped along with the overall Congressional average and remained beneath their 1995 percentages through 2009. Figure 3 shows Evangelical Christians compared to other Christian groups only within the Republican Party, and demonstrates Evangelicals averaged the second-lowest LCV percentages every year except 1975. Figure 2 indicates that Democratic Evangelicals Consistently scored the lowest LCV scores out of all the Christian groups in the Democratic Party, though from 2001 to 2009 the Evangelical LCV scores increased dramatically. Figure 3 also shows an increase Republican Evangelical LCV score in 2009, though not before.

Perhaps part of the recent increase in Congressional Evangelical LCV scores can be attributed to an increasing awareness within the Evangelical community. For example, in 2008, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a declaration on the environment advocating for greater

environmental care. The declaration, signed by the Convention's President Johnny Hunt in 2008, reads:

We believe our current denominational engagement with these issues have often been too timid, failing to produce a unified moral voice. Our cautious response to these issues in the face of mounting evidence may be seen by the world as uncaring, reckless and ill-informed. We can do better. To abandon these issues to the secular world is to shirk from our responsibility to be salt and light. The time for timidity regarding God's creation is no more. (Southern Baptist Convention 2008)

While the Southern Baptist Convention in no way represents all of the American Evangelical community, the Convention is perhaps one of the community's largest organizations and indicative of a growing trend within Evangelical Christianity.

Mormon Representatives averaged the lowest LCV scores of all the religious groups. Only in 1973, 2001, and 2005, did Mormon Representatives outscore Evangelicals, and they never outsourced any other religious group. Figure 1 indicates Mormon Representatives posted the group's highest LCV score in 1973, out of all the years surveyed. After 1973, Mormon LCV percentages steadily dropped until a brief spike in 2001. Figure 3 shows the same trend with Republican Mormons relative to the GOP as a whole. Though we searched thoroughly for an official environmental statement issued by the Mormon Church, no such statement could be found.

Conclusion

Although voting patterns on environmental issues clearly follow party lines, Figures 2 and 3 show that religious affiliation is independently important, with consistent correlations emerging for the differing religious groups and similar patterns holding constant across party lines. When interpreting this data, we see that whom we vote for in Congressional elections

matters when considering environmental policy and the well-being of our Earth for future generations. By researching the religious affiliations of potential Members of Congress, we can have a general idea of how this candidate will vote on future environmental issues. However, due to the broad nature of the religious affiliations in the *Almanac of American Politics* and *Politics in America*, it is imperative to take into account smaller denominations that could hold different viewpoints than their larger counterparts within the same category. In an age of dwindling natural resources and increased environmental protection, it is vital to understand how the politicians that we elect will influence the environment. As illustrated through the data above and supported by environmental statements from each religious group, religion is an influential factor in dictating how Members of Congress vote on environmental issues.

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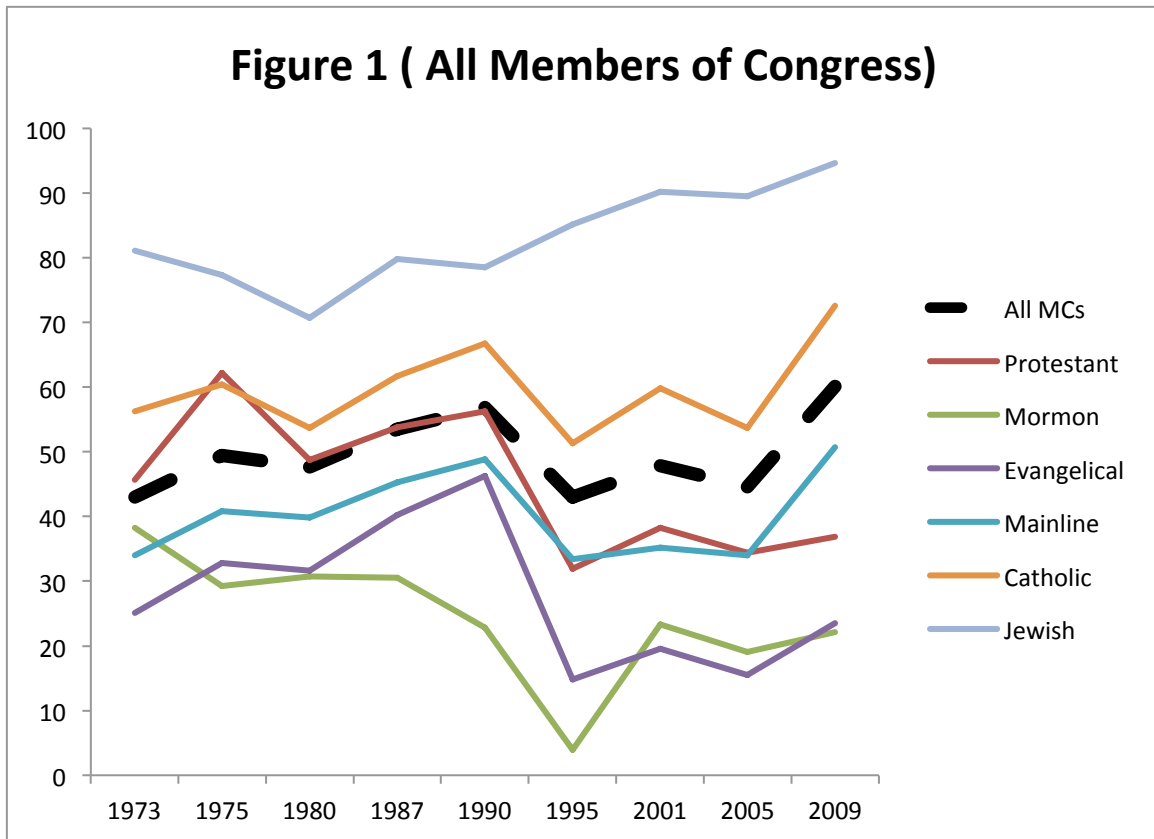
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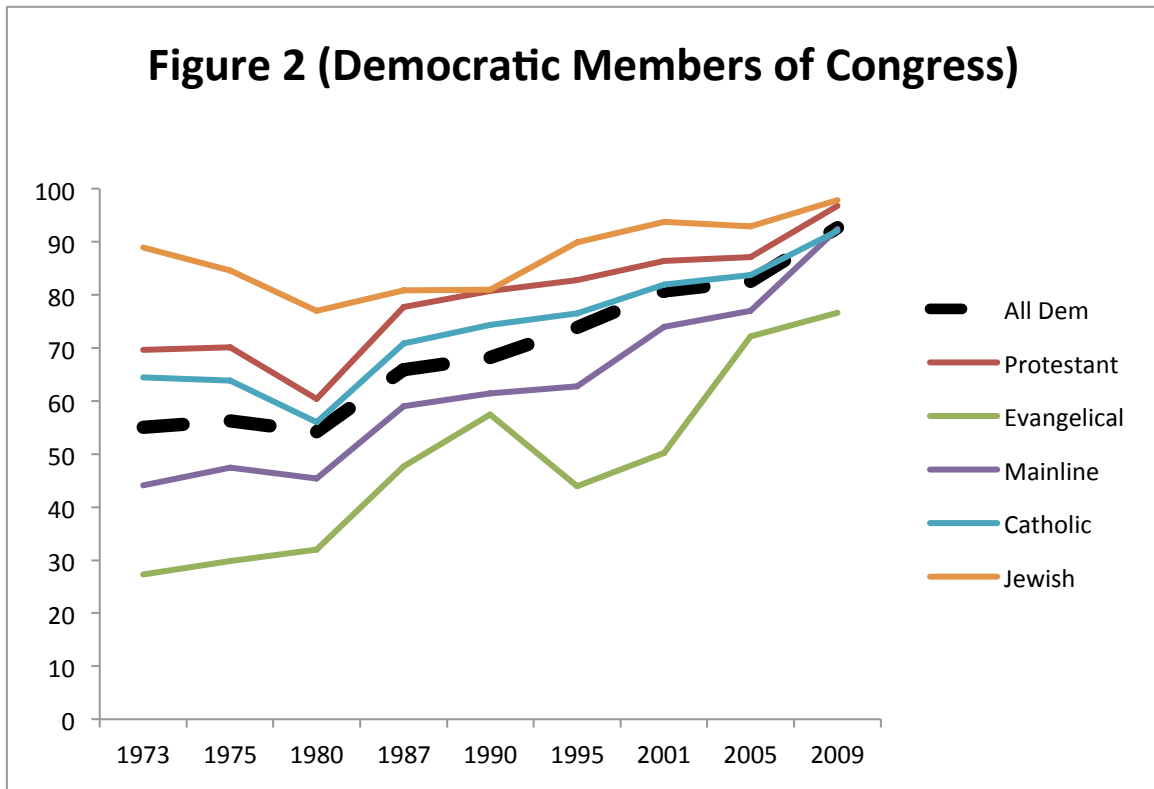


Figure 3 (Republican Members of Congress)

