2007 Undergraduate Fellows Report

Religious Advocates: A Force in US Politics?
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**2007 Undergraduate Fellows Biographies**

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About this report

The Berkley Center’s 2007 Undergraduate Fellows Program gave a select group of ten Georgetown undergraduate students the resources to study the role of religious advocacy groups in United States politics. Under the direction of Professor Clyde Wilcox of the Department of Government, the Fellows spent the 2007 academic year defining their research agenda, studying the key issues as a group, and learning from experts in seminars with speakers such as a prominent religious advocate and a leading journalist of religion and politics. They then reached out to leaders of a variety of religious advocacy groups in Washington, D.C., to conduct in-person interviews and an online survey. Driven by awareness of the importance of religion to United States policies, especially as it relates to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the Fellows sought to understand the influence of religious advocacy on national politics today. They hope their findings will serve as a useful tool to better understand this important issue.

This is the second annual Berkley Center Undergraduate Fellows report. In 2006, the Fellows studied the role of religious and secular organizations in development policy and released a report with their findings entitled Secular & Religious Approaches to Global Development: A Common Ground?

For more information, visit the website at http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu

Acknowledgements

Faculty Advisor
Professor Clyde Wilcox
Department of Government

Program Coordinator
Melody Fox Ahmed

Project Leaders
Jenna Cossman
Todd Wintner

Authors
Jenna Cossman
Catherine Currie
Nadia Khan
Camille Kolstad
Megan O’Neill
Eric Nowicki
Jeff Pan
Nicolas Sementelli
Eric Wind
Todd Wintner

About this report

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, created within the Office of the President in March 2006, is part of a university-wide effort to build knowledge about religion’s role in world affairs and promote interreligious understanding in the service of peace. Through research, teaching, and outreach activities, the Center explores the intersection of religion with four global challenges: diplomacy and transnational relations, democracy and human rights, global development, and interreligious dialogue. Thomas Banchoff, Associate Professor in the Department of Government and the School of Foreign Service, is the Center’s first director.
Introduction

Since the 2004 U.S. presidential election, much attention and scrutiny has been given to religious advocacy groups and the perceived rise in strength of the “religious lobby.” Many commentators have claimed that these groups have an undue effect on American politics, and a myriad of articles and books have been written on the subject. With approximately a year left until the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the spotlight is once again focused on religious advocacy groups as candidates vie for the support and votes of the American people.

Relatively little is known about the composition and influence of religious advocacy groups in the U.S. Between February and November 2007, the Berkley Center Undergraduate Fellows set out to provide some definition to this often misunderstood community. Specifically, our project seeks to better understand how religious advocates conduct their affairs and achieve their goals by focusing on the strategies of insider versus outsider advocacy, the partisanship ties of advocacy groups, the coalitions shaping the advocacy environment, and the religious language these groups and coalitions employ in advocating for specific issues. Ultimately, the goal of evaluating the effectiveness of
religious advocacy groups on U.S. policy provided the framework for this study.

The methodology used for the project consisted of in-person interviews of religious advocates as well as an online survey sent out electronically to numerous religious advocacy organizations. The surveyed groups include some that are explicitly religious in their platform as well as others that do not specifically mention religion, but advocate for what could be considered religious issues based on the group’s target constituency, the intentionality of their constituents, their cause, and their rhetoric. The survey included both qualitative and quantitative questions, and groups who responded to the electronic version of the survey were allowed to answer anonymously. See Appendix A for a list of questions used in the survey and Appendix B for a list of the organizations interviewed and surveyed.

The United States Congress is the avenue by which the vast majority of religious advocacy groups attempt to influence public policy. Congress itself is a model of religious pluralism as no individual religious denomination finds majority representation. The chart on the previous page represents the declared faith of the 535 members of Congress.

**Important Advocacy Issues**

The survey results show a wide range of interests and issues addressed by religious advocacy groups over the past year. Notably, issues frequently associated with religious advocacy in the media, such as abortion and family issues, were equally accompanied by a number of other concerns such as human rights, justice and the environment. The following graph illustrates the diversity of issues taken up by religious advocacy organizations. Other less frequent responses are listed in Appendix B.

**I. Insider/Outsider Advocacy Strategies**

Religious advocacy groups, like other interest groups, can choose among a variety of strategies and tactics. However, given that the majority of religious advocacy organizations are registered under 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, they are not “lobbies” in the legal sense and therefore are limited to “educating” policy makers for the sake of “public interest.” In return, 501(c)(3) status offers tax-exemption for both the organization and the donations it receives.
Insider Advocacy

There is a fine line between the strategies used by lobbying organizations on Capitol Hill and the “insider advocacy” tactics employed by religious advocacy groups. Most of these strategies directly overlap, including meetings, phone calls, and other forms of face-to-face interaction between advocates and members of government. Such meetings are invaluable opportunities for members of the advocacy community to educate policymakers about their organizations’ issues of concern and build relationships with politicians who can serve as advocates for their causes. For example, it was only through her discussion with Nancy Pelosi on the topic of the 2007 U.S. Farm Bill that Monica Mills, Director of Government Relations at Bread for the World, had the opportunity to effectively express her moral opposition to certain aspects of the legislation.

Interestingly, 97% of the organizations surveyed reported meeting with government officials ten or more times during the past year. Only one organization, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, reported no engagement in “insider advocacy” activities. The advocacy groups surveyed reported approaching policymakers across the three branches of government, not only meeting with high-level officials but their staff as well.

Some well-connected religious advocates exert enough political clout to warrant regular meetings with high-ranking government officials. Richard Land, a highly visible advocate with the Ethics and Public Policy Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, meets personally with President George W. Bush on an average of three times a year. Similarly, Jim Wallis of Sojourners has met with Congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid multiple times. Regardless of stature, however, the overwhelmingly positive response elicited from most organizations with regard to their use of insider advocacy suggests that government contacts play an important role in the advocacy strategy of powerful and less established organizations, alike.

Grassroots Advocacy

Notably, not a single organization relied solely on insider lobbying. Most reported that the grassroots contacts between their members and policymakers are more important. By mobilizing constituents to push towards political change, grassroots advocacy is inextricably tied to insider strategies. When Monica Mills was asked about her organization’s preferred advocacy strategies, she insisted that insider and grassroots advocacy “cannot be separated,” noting that the two strategies “feed on each other.” Religious advocacy organizations engage in grassroots advocacy when they know they have dedicated members who are willing to contact policymakers and share their religiously-informed views. Respondents mentioned frequently using grassroots advocacy methods such as letter writing campaigns, call-ins, demonstrations, and advocacy training.

Political advocacy groups utilize weekly emails, newsletters, and community-based leaders in order to educate and mobilize members. For example, the conservative group Concerned Women for America (CWA) is organized into state chapters and prayer action groups. The CWA headquarters routinely provides these subsidiary organizations not only with lists of issues to pray for,
but also with action-lists of recommended steps they can take to influence their congressional representatives and shape legislation. The majority of the surveyed organizations reported spending more time on grassroots advocacy than on insider advocacy. While a majority of religious advocates stated that both types of advocacy are equally important, 28% said grassroots is more important compared to only 13% who believe that insider advocacy is of greater importance.

By emphasizing their connections with grassroots constituents, religious advocacy groups act as important liaisons between their members and politicians. The effectiveness of insider advocacy largely depends on outside grassroots support, which is most likely why elected officials give religious advocates, especially those representing larger religious populations, an audience. While corporate lobbies can afford to “wine and dine” members of Congress as well as give to campaign election funds, religious advocacy organizations often lack such financial resources and are legally prohibited from donating to campaigns because of their 501(c)(3) status. What religious advocacy organizations do have to offer, however, is the social capital found in their membership bases. The effectiveness of their advocacy increases when they can demonstrate strong support among a large membership base on a particular issue.

Determining The Issues

When religious advocates were asked whether they had ever advocated for a position that the majority of the membership base did not support, 19% of respondents claimed to have done so. Even more interesting was that 33% of respondents claimed to have advocated for a position that they did not personally support. The question then becomes, how do religious advocates determine their issues?

Among the groups surveyed, a wide variety of techniques emerged for determining a group’s political agenda. On one side, there is the unique consensus model of the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), which goes through a careful tradition-inspired process in order to reach a nationwide consensus among their supporters on any policy position before advocating for or against legislation to Congress. Ruth Flower, Legislative Director for FCNL, describes the process as a “long, highly participatory consensus-building model for articulating policy [that] usually takes 15 months or longer.” In contrast, other organizations, such as Bread for the World and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) largely rely on senior staff to determine their priorities. However, the NAE membership reserves the right to overturn staff priorities if they strongly disagree with a decision made by the leaders of the organization.
For some groups, such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), issues are as much defined by the current reality of the political world as they are by the long-term interests of the members. The rise of civil rights infringements following the “War on Terror,” for example, has become paramount to the MPAC’s agenda. In the case of groups like MPAC, where constituents have strong ties to populations abroad, a tension often emerges between the advocacy organization’s focus on domestic issues and the wishes of some members to see the organization advocate for the community’s broader international interests. While some Muslim advocacy groups have been vocal on the Arab-Israeli conflict, others avoid Middle East politics altogether, recognizing that an international focus could hurt the organization’s objectives by shifting attention away from more pressing domestic concerns. Similarly, since Hindu temples are the only religious institutions under government control in India, many members of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) wanted the organization to exert pressure on the Indian government to prevent government intervention of temple disbursements, monetary and otherwise, and to eventually grant independence to Hindu temples equal to that of other religious institutions in India. However, HAF Executive Director Ishani Chowdhury explains, “While we do feel that this [issue] needs to be pursued, [it] is simply not something that can possibly be done by an organization whose primary purpose is to promote Hinduism’s voice in America. [The protection of Hindu temples] is something that is best suited for organizations in India to take up and work to change.”

Although religious advocates may take different approaches to prioritizing the issues they choose to promote, the common thread underlying the religious advocacy community seems to lie in the religious foundation of the decision. When Richard Cizik of the NAE was asked if his faith influenced the organization’s issue-selection, he replied simply, “Christianity is fundamental to our issue choice. I see the job of a Christian to be a workman, watchman, and a witness.”

II. Partisanship

Religious advocacy groups seek to enact public policy that is consistent with their faith’s teachings. Political parties take a series of policy positions that frequently fit well with the agenda of these religious groups. Thus, while no group claims party affiliation, many advocacy groups’ stances make it more likely that a group will work with one party or another. In fact, 66% of respondents stated that one party was more open to their organization’s policies than another. Therefore,
Religion has been at the forefront of discussion for the 2008 Presidential campaign; particularly, the importance of the Evangelical and Catholic communities in the election. Candidates from both parties are working diligently to court conservative religious voters and the media is paying attention:

**Giuliani Works to Win Over Religious and Social Conservatives**  
—The Washington Post, 10/22/07

**Helping Democrats Find a Way to Reach the Religious**  
—The New York Times, 10/20/07

**Gingerly, Romney Seeks Ties to Christian Right**  
—The New York Times, 10/16/07

**Clinton Hires Faith Guru**  
—The Hill, 12/13/06

**Obama: GOP Doesn’t Own Faith Issue**  
—CNN, 10/8/07

Political scientists believe that demographic groups receive attention from candidates if they have three factors: size, voter turn-out and the ability to be swung from one party to another. In 2004, Evangelicals were able to prove that they have the size and the voter turn-out, as they comprised close to a quarter of the aggregate voting community, partly because President George W. Bush’s campaign worked diligently to mobilize them. Catholics also demonstrated their political importance, as many believe that John Kerry’s loss can partially be attributed to his inability to carry the Catholic vote.

The 2008 election is quickly approaching and there is an effort by the Democrats to swing religious voters, as well as to mobilize them. Currently, there is no leading Republican candidate who fits the typical Christian-Right mold, so Democrats are throwing out the preconception that Evangelicals only side with Republicans and are courting them as well. Democrats are seeking out Catholics and moderate Evangelicals who, because they have not found a Republican candidate to support, may be able to be politically swayed.

The leading Democratic candidates (Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards) are working hard to take advantage of their religious backgrounds. These candidates are frequently visiting houses of worship and religious communities, and using them as a platform to speak. In fact, religious rhetoric has become so commonplace on the campaign trail that the Berkley Center has implemented “Faith 2008,” an online database that tracks religious rhetoric used by the 2008 presidential candidates.

Candidates from both parties understand the importance of religious Americans and are searching for a way to balance their own ideology with that of the religious core of the country. However, swaying the vote of the Evangelicals, in particular, is a difficult task. As Richard Land, the President of the public policy branch of the Southern Baptist Convention pointed out in our interview with him, as a religious advocacy organization, they are under divine guidance and their politics follow accordingly. That being said, politicians have a lot to live up to if they want to be the chosen candidate.
religious advocates are not immune to party politics for the simple reason that issues on their agenda often yield an inherent partisan tie.

At the same time, religious advocacy groups have to be aware that allying too closely with a political party might limit the organization’s ability to work with certain members of Congress and weaken the legitimacy of their religious appeal. To this end, religious advocates realize the advantages of non-partisanship. A non-partisan advocate has credibility with a broad scope of politicians; a partisan advocate is disfranchised when the party he or she supports is the minority in Congress. Additionally, religious advocacy groups are continually focused on implementing their policy goals, which requires them to reach across the aisle for votes. This commitment to bipartisanship resonates in a comment from Adam Gerhardstein in the Office of Advocacy at the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA): “while most of the bills we work on are more heavily supported by Democrats, we don’t focus all of our effort there.”

Thus, religious advocacy groups face a dilemma with partisanship. To successfully implement their goals, they must be open to both parties, balancing the fact that one party may present itself as being more receptive to their goals than the other.

**Elections: If You Can’t Change Policies Change Politicians...**

Despite the most rational and faith-based arguments, there is generally a limit on how many congressional opinions can be changed by religious advocates. Therefore, religious organizations rely on elections to create a more friendly Congress. When asked which government officials are most receptive to their organization’s issues, we received a number of interesting responses: The Traditional Values Coalition stated “Religious Conservative members of the House and Senate” and The Interfaith Alliance said “Progressives, Moderate Republicans.” On the other side of the aisle, the Unitarian Universalist Association noted “the most progressive, liberal officials,” the American Atheists stated “Democratic politicians,” and Pax Christi USA: National Catholic Peace Movement responded “primarily Democrats.” Understandably, advocates seek to help election candidates from the party that is most supportive of their agenda.

Access is a two-way street. For a religious advocate, an ally in Congress can be a useful tool to push their issues onto the national legislative agenda. This access, however, requires some incentive for politicians to hear their case. Usually, this incentive comes in the form of mobilizing voters to support a particular candidate or party. For politicians, religious advocates are also a means of access to the large voter base drawing their alliances on religious networks. Therefore, there is a symbiotic relationship between religious advocacy groups and political candidates.

One way to express support without explicitly stating an endorsement and therefore violating the rules associated with 501(c)(3) status is the increasingly popular “issue guide.” These guides explain the organizations’ positions on election worthy issues. It should be noted, however, that telling constituents to support candidates who want to “develop clean and renewable energy” and “end capital punishment” is to many voters the same as saying “vote Democratic”. While the guides vary in degree of partisan bent, the reality is that a majority of the American populace use party affiliation as voting
cues. Therefore, when a guide covers the issues supported by one party, religious advocacy organizations are able to translate their opinions into non-explicit partisanship and clear votes.

**Membership and Party Ties**

92% of respondents claim that the partisan ties of their members do not restrict their issue positions. This result is most likely attributable to the overlapping ideology of advocates and their members; however, this is not always the case. Ruth Flower of FCNL noted that there has always been a range of views on policy issues within the Quaker constituency. Many meetings in the Midwest tend to be more conservative—anti-gay rights, anti-abortion—versus the bicoastal meetings which tend to be more liberal on social issues. While the FCNL has been able to reach consensus on most issues, it refrains from speaking on abortion because there is no agreement among Friends on this issue. The LDS Church is another religious organization that refrains from taking a stance on certain issues, but encourages its members to be politically active. Pointing out that their members come from a diverse political spectrum, LDS’s Mormon Public Affairs Representative Kenneth Bowler explains, “For the Church as an institution to be anything but totally neutral in partisan political activities would cause division within the membership.” Thus, in extreme cases, partisan divisions hold the power to keep specific issues off the agenda altogether.

**Policy, Not Party**

Despite the close interactions with political parties, religious advocates realize they must constantly re-evaluate these relationships. In respect to the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, Richard Land notes, “I have been in too many discussions over the last 15 years where Evangelical leaders have said, ‘The one thing we will never allow to happen is for the Republican Party to take us for granted.’”1 The breakaway session at the September 2007 Council for National Policy meeting illustrated another example of this idea, where it was decided that “if the Republican Party nominates a pro-abortion candidate [such as Rudy Giuliani] we will consider running a third-party candidate.”2 This bold threat shows the dangers involved in strong party loyalties, but moreover reinforces the notion that religious advocates refuse to let party ties restrict their ability to impact issues. Amy Ard, former National Field Organizer for Sojourners, expands this line of thought by declaring, “We don’t feel beholden to any particular member or party because our moral authority comes from elsewhere.”

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Partisanship may advance policy, but policy, not partisan ties, is the true objective of religious advocates. As Leslie Woods of the Washington Office for the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly Council summarizes, “our work is not partisan because neither political party takes a prophetic stance on issues, the Church speaks out about issues that are important for the community of faith, not about political parties or candidates.” Therefore, despite correlations and connections, we must remember that there is no rigid formula for attaching faith to party allegiance.

**III. Coalitions**

Even if it has long been accepted that politics makes for strange bedfellows, the heterogeneity of religious coalitions reveals the astonishing flexibility of partnerships among advocates on the Hill. With no religious community comprising more than 25% of the US population, religious advocates understandably have come to depend on coalitions as a means of pooling the resources and gaining the influence needed to push their issues onto the national policy agenda. Nevertheless, this study finds that organizations are far more likely to

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define themselves by the issues they promote than by the coalitions they form. Consequentially, as the survey data makes clear, the stereotype of the religious coalition as an inflexible political powerhouse is simply not valid:

- 78% of respondents reported working with other groups either “more than half of the time” or “always” on any given issue. Notably, no group reported taking a unilateral approach to advocacy. Every group surveyed reported working with other advocacy organizations at least some of the time.

- When asked about the composition of these coalitions, 92% of the respondents reported working with secular groups at least some of the time, with 49% working with secular partners “equally” or “more than half the time.” Moreover, only 8% of respondents reported working solely with religious partners.
Bridging the Religious-Secular Divide

Of course, these results do not imply that there are no constant allies and enemies in Washington’s tight-knit network of religious advocates. On the contrary, the religious advocates surveyed were quite eager to share stories of loyalty, and less often animosity, in past experiences working on the Hill. Most respondents were able to provide at least five groups, both religious and secular, with whom they have worked with frequently across a number of issues. Moreover, the list of secular partners ranges from the Human Rights Campaign for LGBT rights to Debt AIDS Trade Africa (DATA) for issues surrounding debt relief in Africa.

It is not surprising that many secular organizations would see the benefit of aligning with religious advocacy organizations. As Amy Ard, formerly of Sojourners contends, religious advocacy groups can provide their secular counterparts with additional, otherwise unavailable, means of mobilizing their membership. However, as Monica Mills of Bread for the World added, aligning with secular organizations risks altering the policy priorities of the religious advocate. Though not necessarily in disagreement with the policy, Mills was forced to advocate for deficit reduction in the Farm Bill as a result of a coalition she formed with many secular and religious relief organizations—a position her organization would probably not otherwise have taken.

Building Bridges Within the Religious Community

Aside from bridging the secular-religious divide, it is equally important to note that coalitions frequently bridge the partisan divide. Though partisan blocs did clearly emerge out of the survey responses—the liberal bloc of Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism (RAC), the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Friends Council on National Legislation (FCNL), and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) comes quickly to mind—even Richard Land of the conservative-leaning Southern Baptist Convention admitted working at least one time on the same side of an issue as the liberal American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) when supporting a measure on grassroots lobbying. To this end, the claim of inclusiveness by the NEA’s Richard Cizik echoed a number of his counterparts: “We try to build bridges with our opponents on whatever issues that we can.” At the same time, Cizik noted that when working with like-minded advocacy groups “the key is to keep the movement on the same page, deflecting opposition.”

Perhaps it was in this interest of building bridges that nearly every respondent was hesitant to point out even a single religious organization which they frequently worked against. Most groups cautiously remarked that conflict only arose on a case-by-case basis, while others, like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, credited “the teachings of Buddha of non-separation and interbeing” as the source of their spiritual justification for inclusiveness and refusal to work against any particular group. Interestingly, however, religious groups had less trouble when it came to naming secular organizations detracting from their cause.

We try to build bridges with our opponents on whatever issues that we can.
— Richard Cizik, NEA

While not a single conservative respondent named the UUA, UCC, or other liberal religious denomination on their list of political adversaries, Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, and the People for the American Way received a number of mentions from groups typically associated with the “religious right.” The closest example to a religious foe any conservative group mentioned were “Islamic Terrorists.” Similarly, while some liberal religious groups did point generally to the “Christian Right” or religiously-founded think tanks as frequently providing opposition to their advocacy campaigns, they almost always steered clear of naming specific religious denominations or their representative advocacy groups when generating lists of political foes.

That said, it would be a mischaracterization of the religious advocacy community to describe coalition building as a purely congenial process. Some respondents noted being perennially left out of the coalition process, whereas others warned of “nasty play” and a hostile environment where “facts don’t always matter.” The Hindu American Foundation (HAF), for example, expressed distress about the “flurry of venomous calls and emails from evangelical and missionary groups” following their first report on Internet hate speech. Ruth Flower of
In 2005, in the wake of midterm elections dominated by the success of the Religious Right, a diverse collection of liberal faith leaders met to discuss strategies for increasing the voices of religious organizations focused on issues relating to social justice and the common good. This meeting produced a commitment to fostering greater collaboration, coordination, and communication amongst the religious left by establishing a central resource center to help like-minded groups unite their messages and develop common advocacy strategies. The resulting center, named Faith in Public Life, acts as a “matchmaker” of sorts by coordinating meetings between different religious groups, training faith leaders at national, state and local levels, and providing shared media resources and infrastructure for its members.

Shortly after its founding, a group of faith leaders from various regional organizations approached Faith in Public Life with an important problem: they knew there were a robust number of groups engaging in similar policy advocacy around the country, but they had no easy way of contacting each other or connecting to national coalitions and campaigns. In response, Faith in Public Life set out to create a national database mapping the “justice and common good initiatives” at the grassroots level throughout the nation. By using Google Maps technology, Faith in Public Life was able to graphically locate over 3,000 grassroots faith leaders and organizations in a database sortable by geography and policy priority.

Faith in Public Life’s map has served as a crucial tool for religious advocates in building coalitions. With easy access to organizations across the country, advocates can quickly coordinate national campaigns around shared policy objectives, bringing together national leaders to work on insider advocacy as well as mobilizing large grassroots support across the country.
FCNL recalled a similar rash of personal attacks from a pro-Israel lobby following FCNL’s campaign to end arms trades to Israel and the Middle East.

The composition of inter-religious coalitions may provide another area of concern. Though both Christian and Jewish groups were quick to recognize their partners across the religious divide, few of these groups listed a single Muslim, Sikh, or Buddhist organization among their coalition partners. This division resonated in our interview with Safiya Ghori of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who explained that while MPAC works very closely with non-Muslim groups such as the Interfaith Alliance and the RAC, they deal primarily with active coalitions of Arab, Muslim, and Sikh groups because of common civil rights issues. The larger point is that religious minorities look for partners outside their tradition because they need this support, whereas religious majorities are less likely to do so.

IV. Religious Language

Out of 535 members of Congress, only one member does not profess any religious belief. The remaining 534 members cover a wide spectrum of religious beliefs and denominations. Thus, when religious advocates interact with members of Congress, they can utilize a variety of religious language to make their voices heard. At the same time, the religious language that appeals to certain members of Congress might also alienate others, which is why advocates coming from minority faith traditions often resort to more secular language when dealing with politicians on Capitol Hill. Nevertheless, since most members of Congress do come from either a Christian or Jewish tradition, many groups are able to employ broad Judeo-Christian language to appeal to a wide range of representatives. Overall, both Christian and non-Christian groups report that their religious affiliation adds to their effectiveness in advocacy.
Leslie Woods works as the Associate for Domestic Poverty and Environmental Issues for the Washington Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA), a denomination which has 2.3 million members and is one out of only five religious groups whose membership includes over forty Presbyterian members of Congress. Leslie Woods emphasizes that faith is the major reason the PC (USA) and other faith-based groups are involved in advocacy in the first place. She states “there is a very clear Biblical mandate for the Church to be involved in public policy.” She goes on to explain, “Because a sovereign God is at work in all the world, the church and Christian citizens should be concerned about public policy.” Woods points out that Christian advocacy groups have the advantage of creating policy positions grounded in a strong Biblical foundation: “We bring a desire for a positive world order because it’s the way things started off, because we are justice driven; God intended this world to be a place where people have bread. While faith-based public policy advocacy groups are a small community and so cannot have as much influence on legislation as many would desire, Leslie Woods argues that they have been effective at changing the debate. For example, religious members of Congress might come to faith-based advocacy groups such as the PC (USA) in order to gain a better understanding of the religious basis for a certain issue. They also might approach religious advocacy groups to receive advice on how to communicate an issue using language that resonates with their faith. In this way Woods feels that PC (USA) and other faith-based advocacy groups have a unique role among advocates on the hilltop.

**How often do you find yourself using religious language when engaging in insider advocacy (i.e. talking to elected officials and the offices of elected officials)?**

- **Never/Rarely**
- **Less than Half of the Time**
- **Half of the Time**
- **More than Half of the Time**
- **Always/Almost Always**

![Bar Chart](image-url)
Faith Talk: The Language of Religious Advocates

Statistics show that the vast majority of religious advocates use faith-based language. When surveyed, 84% of political advocates responded that they use religious language, with 58% using it more than half the time. Notably, all of the 84% who use religious language come from a Judeo-Christian faith as compared to the minority religious advocacy groups—Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh—along with Atheists, which reported either rarely or never using religious language when speaking with public officials.

Judeo-Christian groups hold an obvious advantage in being able to employ a religious language that resonates with the majority of the members of Congress. The fact that there is only one Muslim member of Congress, on the other hand, poses obvious challenges for Muslim advocacy groups wishing to express their positions using religious language. Safiya Ghorai of MPAC contends that religious “references may threaten to illegitimatize MPAC’s stance, so MPAC will couch their language in terms of what Americans of other faiths can understand.”

When Christian advocacy groups lobby on the Hill they report, on average, using religious language at least half the time. Amy Ard, formerly of Sojourners, affirms that Christian language can be an effective way of communicating and explaining issues: “Politicians want to know why an issue resounds with their constituents and if this reasoning is religious they want the basis.”

The Religious Edge: Effectiveness of Religious Advocates

Despite their discrepancies, Christian and non-Christian groups surveyed were able to agree that their status as religious groups increases their effectiveness in advocacy. In fact, not only do 83% of the groups surveyed feel that their religious status allows them to be more effective, but also none of these groups see their religious status as a detriment to their effectiveness. Ron Jackson, the Executive Director of the D.C. Catholic Conference, explains one reason behind the success of religious advocates: “There are natural advantages because no matter how adverse an elected official may be toward your particular ‘faith’ there is a natural inclination to be respectful. In a funny kind of way we represent God.”

This overall trend of greater effectiveness due to their religious status can be attributed to several different factors depending on the faith that the advocacy group represents. Most Christian groups find that politicians want their religious angle on political issues in order to

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**RECOMMENDATION TIP**

1. Faith Talk: The Language of Religious Advocates
2. The Religious Edge: Effectiveness of Religious Advocates
3. Religious Status: Scale of 1-5

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**Do you believe that your religious status as an advocacy group allows you to be more or less effective as compared to non-religious advocacy groups? (Scale 1-5)**

Range of scores: 1 (Hurts) to 5 (Helps)
better understand how the Christian faith of their constituents informs their political choices. With the 2004 race said to be determined by religious voters, politicians are interested in what their religious constituents think and why. Simone Campbell, Executive Director of NETWORK, explained that candidates use religion as a tool to validate their credentials with religious voters and boost their image. This does not necessarily imply that candidates are not genuine in their faith, but it does give religious advocacy groups a chance to push politicians to adopt policies that the faith community favors. In addition, Christian advocacy groups point out that on certain issues the Christian faith resounds with politicians whereas purely secular analysis or policy briefing would not. Leslie Woods of the Presbyterian Church (USA) states, for example, that a politician who asks about climate change does not want her advice on science or economics. She emphasizes that what politicians want to hear from her and what she uniquely brings to the table is her faith.

Religious organizations that represent multiple denominations or faiths have also found their place on the Hill by offering more balanced and pluralistic viewpoints. Preetmohan Singh, Deputy Director of Public Policy for the Interfaith Alliance, noted the recent success of his organization in generating thousands of communications to the Hill, which in turn warranted unprecedented media coverage and public acknowledgment on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He attributes the organization’s effectiveness to the distinctiveness of their voice, as they are a “people of faith and good will that can counteract the radical religious right.” In addition, interfaith groups have the potential to mediate or foster cooperation between different faiths and denominations.

Even smaller religious traditions find their voices to be important as politicians are eager to understand the position of minority communities of which they may not have in-depth knowledge. Safiya Ghorí explains that there is “an appeal to know more about Muslims in general” and MPAC provides the Muslim perspective which can give “another angle to issues Congress is currently grasping with.”

Despite the large budgets and extensive connections to Washington that secular lobbyists possess, religious groups have found themselves effective at advocacy efforts both at the grassroots level and on the Hill. Instead of attempting to deemphasize their faith affiliation by appearing to be more secular, the majority of Judeo-Christian advocacy groups use religious language extensively when speaking with members of Congress. Even minority faith groups, which rarely use religious language as most politicians are not familiar with their religions, have found that they can offer a distinct voice on issues as well. In general, organizations have found that their status as a religious advocacy group and their use of religious language have been assets, increasing their effectiveness in advocacy efforts.
Conclusion

The interviews and survey results reveal a number of salient trends within the religious advocacy community:

• While the methods religious advocacy organizations use to determine the issues they promote varies widely, most organizations prioritize their work in accordance to their faith tradition. Regardless of the organization’s agenda, successful advocacy depends not only on an issue’s resonance in Congress but also on grassroots mobilization which increases “insider” leverage with policymakers.

• Religious advocacy organizations face a dilemma with regard to partisanship. On the one hand, the issues on their agenda often yield an inherent partisanship causing one party to be more open to their positions than another. On the other hand, religious advocacy groups must be willing to reach across the aisle in order to receive broader support for the issues they support.

• Coalitions are a useful tool for strengthening a religious advocacy organization’s message. Surprisingly, the vast majority of religious coalitions bridge the divide between both faith and partisanship to expand their influence on a particular issue. Though lasting alliances do exist, these coalitions are, for the most part, fluidly evolving to represent the issue-based interests of religious advocates at any given point in time.

• While most advocacy groups reported using religious language, Christian advocacy groups were found to use religious language more often in comparison to other faith traditions.

• All religious advocacy groups surveyed feel that their religious status is a distinguishing factor that gives them increased effectiveness over secular organizations in achieving political objectives—whether the goals are secular or religious in nature.

Religious advocacy has come to play an important role in U.S. politics. It unites, motivates, and mobilizes people of faith to take a stand on many of the nation’s most pressing and overlooked issues, alike. Religious advocacy groups are thus the means by which people of faith can become highly involved in the political process, and, while a nation with a modern presumption of the doctrine of the “separation of church and state,” religion and faith-based issues are as intrinsic to civic life as is the secular.

As Richard Cizik explains in reference to the reward of religious advocacy, “the sense that you can change policy and help people’s lives is very rewarding.” Indeed, religious advocacy groups have been involved in many successful attempts at changing legislation in recent years as they operate within their tight network. While smaller than the secular lobbying community in size, they are by no means less powerful. In fact, their religious identity gives them an advantage in terms of their appeal and size of membership base. The strength of religious advocacy groups’ convictions and their ability to galvanize the voting blocs they represent has put religion into the forefront of national politics and in prime position to orchestrate changes to U.S. policy.
Religious advocacy has come to play an important role in U.S. politics. It unites, motivates, and mobilizes people of faith to take a stand on many of the nation’s most pressing and overlooked issues, alike.
The strength of religious advocacy groups’ convictions and their ability to galvanize the voting blocs they represent has put religion into the forefront of national politics and in prime position to orchestrate changes to U.S. policy.
Appendix A:
Survey Questions

1. Please state the name of your organization.

2. In the past year, with which issues has your organization worked?

3. How many times in the past year has your organization met with government officials?

4. Which government officials do you find most receptive to your group's arguments?

5. Estimate the portion of time your organization spends on grassroots advocacy, (i.e. letter writing campaigns, community activism for an issue) as compared to insider advocacy (i.e. meeting with an elected official, speaking to a member of the executive branch)

6. Which form of advocacy do you find more effective for your organization?

7. Has your organization ever advocated for a position that you did not personally support? (Yes/No)

8. Has your organization ever advocated for a position that the majority of your membership base did not support? (Yes/No)

9. When you work on an issue, how often do you work with other groups?

10. Among the groups you work with, what portion of them are religious compared to non-religious?

11. Can you list a few groups, religious and secular, which you would consider allies (meaning you would work with them on numerous issues because you share similar values)?

12. Can you list a few groups, religious and secular, which you typically work against?

13. Is one party more open to your group's issues than another? (Yes/No)

14. Do you ever feel pressured not to take a stand on an issue because of the partisan ties of your membership base? (Yes/No)

15. How often do you find yourself using religious language when engaging in insider advocacy (i.e. talking to elected officials and the offices of elected officials)?

16. Do you tend to approach elected officials from your own faith tradition before you approach other officials? (Yes/No)

17. Do you believe that your religious status as an advocacy group allows you to be more or less effective as compared to non-religious advocacy groups? (Scale 1-5)

18. Rate the responsiveness to the advocacy efforts of your organization with the following descriptions of elected officials (1-unresponsive, 5-very responsive)

19. Can you tell us about the most effective lobbying campaign your organization has engaged in?

20. Please use this space for explanations to any of your responses and to add any additional comments you may have that have not been addressed by this survey.

21. Optional: For follow-up purposes, we would appreciate it if you would be willing to submit your contact information, including job title.
Appendix B:
List of Organizations Interviewed and Surveyed

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Inc. (http://www.adc.org)
American Atheists (http://www.atheists.org)
American Family Association (http://www.afa.net)
Americans for Peace Now (http://www.peacenow.org)
The Balm In Gilead, Inc. (http://www.balmingilead.org)
Bread for the World (http://www.bread.org)
Buddhist Peace Fellowship (http://www.bpf.org)
Catholics for a Free Choice (http://www.cath4choice.org)
Churches for Middle East Peace (http://www.cmep.org)
Concerned Women for America (http://www.cwfa.org)
The Episcopal Church Public Policy Network (http://www.episcopalchurch.org/eppn.htm)
The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (http://www.erlc.com)
Faith in Public Life (http://www.faithinpubliclife.org)
Fellowship of Reconciliation (http://www.forusa.org)
Focus on the Family (http://www.family.org)
Friends Committee on National Legislation (http://www.fcnl.org)
Hindu American Foundation (http://www.hafsite.org)
The Interfaith Alliance (http://www.interfaithalliance.org)
Jewish Council for Public Affairs (http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org)
Jewish Funds for Justice (http://www.jewishjustice.org)
Jubilee USA Network (http://www.jubileeusa.org)
Latter-Day Saints Public Affairs Department (http://www.ldsls.org)
The Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign (http://www.letjusticeroll.org)
Mennonite Central Committee U.S., Washington Office (http://www.mcc.org)
Military Religious Freedom Foundation (http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org)
Muslim Public Affairs Council (http://www.mpac.org)
National Association of Evangelicals (http://www.nae.net)
National Council of Churches USA (http://www.ncccusa.org)
National Council of Jewish Women (http://www.ncjw.org)
National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (http://www.nhclc.org)
National Religious Campaign Against Torture (http://www.nrcat.org)
NETWORK (http://www.networklobby.org)
Pax Christi USA: National Catholic Peace Movement (http://www.paxchristiusa.org)
Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington Office (http://www.pcusa.org)
Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (http://rac.org)
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (http://www.saldef.org)
Sojourners (http://www.sojo.net)
Traditional Values Coalition (http://www.traditionalvalues.org)
Unitarian Universalist Association (http://www.uua.org)
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society (http://www.umc-gbcs.org)
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (http://www.usccb.org)
Appendix C: Other Issues Responses

Assisted Suicide
Civil Rights
Civil Rights of Atheists
Counter-terrorism
Demilitarization
Euthanasia
Health- HIV/AIDS, disparities
Housing
Human Cloning
Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research
Islamophobia
Katrina Redevelopment
Prisons
Jenna Cossman, from Potomac, MD, is a junior in the Georgetown College. She is pursuing a double major in Government and Theology and has focused her studies on the intersection between the two subjects. She has worked for Senator Clinton and the Maryland Democratic Party and is co-student Director of Events at the Berkley Center.

Catherine Currie, from Boston, MA, is a junior in the Georgetown College. Majoring in Theology with a minor in Spanish, she is also a leader in Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and volunteers tutoring inner city children after school. She is interested in issues of politics, social justice, and religion, especially as they relate to reducing poverty.

Camille Kolstad, from Saint James, MN, is a junior in the Georgetown College. She is pursuing a degree in Political Economy and Theology and has interned on Representative Tim Walz’s election campaign and for Senator Mark Dayton. Camille has studied abroad in London and plans to study in Cairo.

Nadia Inji Khan is from Cary, NC. She is currently a senior in Georgetown College. She is a B.A. candidate for majors in Arabic/Studio Art and a certificate from the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. She hopes to pursue Islamic Studies in graduate school.

Eric Nowicki, from East Brunswick, NJ, is a senior in Georgetown College majoring in Government and Arabic. He has had the opportunity to study abroad both in Israel and in Morocco. Eric hopes to continue his studies in Arabic at the graduate level, while also advancing his Hebrew and Spanish language skills, and eventually serving in the U.S. Military.

Megan O’Neill, from Waco, TX, is a junior in the School of Foreign Service. She is majoring in Culture and Politics with a focus on theoretical frameworks for international relations. Megan is also involved in several student organizations, including the Lecture Fund, the Georgetown Program Board, and the SFS Academic Council.

Jeff Pan, from Boston, MA, is a junior in the School of Foreign Service majoring in Culture & Politics with a topical concentration in Religion & Politics. Jeff works part-time for the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown, volunteers at an after school program in Northeast DC, and is a leader for Intervarsity Christian Fellowship.

Nick Sementelli, from Dallas, TX, is a junior majoring in Culture and Politics in the School of Foreign Service. Like many displaced Texans, he suffers a nostalgia for barbecue, high-school football and red dirt country music.

Eric Wind, from Manitowoc, WI, is a junior in the School of Foreign Service. He is pursuing a major in International Politics with a concentration in Foreign Policy and Policy Processes, and a certificate in Islam and Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Todd Wintner, from Pepper Pike, OH, is a graduating senior studying International Politics with a focus on Religion and International Development. He recently returned from studying abroad in Cairo and Tanzania, where he worked on development issues with a local non-profit. At Georgetown, Todd helped found an undergraduate research cluster focused on exploring the issues that surround terrorism and organized crime.