

## Religion in the Public Square: Not so Divided Afterall

A casual observer of politics may be surprised to read about [Executive Order 14015](#) in which President Biden, less than one month into his presidency, created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. It would be reasonable for this casual observer to assume that a Democratic president would prioritize separating government from organized religion rather than bolstering the relationship. Perhaps this casual observer would have instead predicted that President Biden would have undone similar partnerships that previous Republican presidents had forged. These assumptions make perfect sense in light of the seemingly endless discussions about the [culture wars](#) that underpin American politics and [battles between the religious orthodox and secular](#). Executive Order 14015 brings to light the less discussed relationship between church-state relations: the large amount of agreement and overlap that exists across party lines.

A key part of the story that is often glossed over is that there has been a great deal of bipartisan cooperation with respect to federal and state funding of religiously affiliated service organizations over the past 25 years. The courts and elected officials alike have evolved in their thinking regarding the First Amendment from the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, moving from a strict separationist interpretation of the Establishment Clause to a viewpoint of neutrality. Whereas the former interpretation prohibits government funding to religious organizations for any reason (see, for example, [Lemon v. Kurtzman 1971](#) and [Committee for Public Education v. Nyquist 1973](#)), the latter viewpoint holds that a religious organization can obtain government funds to provide exclusively secular social services (see [Widmar v. Vincent 1981](#) and [Agostini v. Felton 1997](#)). Importantly, both Democratic and Republican elites have embraced this new interpretation. As Carlson-Thies notes in his original [post](#), the transformative Charitable Choice provision emerged under President Bill Clinton, and there has been bipartisan support for a partnership between government and faith-based organizations in order to provide social services ever since.

Politicians and political commentators frequently overlook this common ground and instead focus on a subset of issues that do divide the parties, particularly as it relates to [Equal Treatment regulations](#). These are complicated and divisive issues to be sure, including whether a religious organization that receives government funding can hire or fire employees on account of their sexual orientation or gender identity. That said, when the narrative focuses exclusively on the deep-seated religious-political divisions rather than about (admittedly real and important) disagreements against a largely cooperative backdrop, the prospects for dialogue, meaningful discussion, and compromise diminish.

Why is there so much bipartisan cooperation over the federal government giving money to religious organizations? The answer lies in another part of the story that is often glossed over: The Democratic Party is much more religiously diverse than many think. While it would be accurate to categorize the Republican Party as the party of religion (among white Americans),

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the Democratic Party is not the party of non-religion or secularism. Instead, the Democratic Party is a religiously pluralistic party.

To start with, the Democratic Party includes both believers and non-believers. Religious non-identifiers make up [27 percent](#) of the Democratic Party. While this number rightfully garners attention—religious “nones” are the single largest religious bloc in the Democratic Party—it means that the overwhelming majority (73 percent) identify with a religious faith. And while Democrats are less likely than Republicans to report being religious using a variety of measures, more than 75 percent of Democrats believe in God and 70 percent report that religion is important in their [lives](#). In other words, two things are true simultaneously. Democrats are less religious than Republicans and, at the same time, the overwhelming majority of Democrats are squarely in the religious fold.

Importantly, the strongest Democrats are also the most religiously devout. Black Protestants—many of whom self-identify as born again and adhere to an evangelical theology—are not only one of the [most religious groups](#) in the United States, they also represent the most politically cohesive racial or ethnic group, overwhelmingly identifying as [Democrats](#) and supporting Democratic candidates. Moreover, waves of immigration from Latin America and Asia have diversified Christianity in the United States, with Latinx and Asian Americans making up an ever-increasing share of evangelical Christianity and coming to represent important [Democratic constituencies](#). Far from being a godless political party, the Democratic Party is racially, ethnically, and religiously pluralistic at the mass level.

At the elite level—among those making the laws—a different story emerges. But even here it is not a story of secular Democrats. Rather, it is one of religious affiliation. A higher percentage of Democrats in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress is Christian compared to the U.S. population (78% vs. 65%) and only one member (Krysten Sinema, AZ) is religiously unaffiliated and one is classified as “other” and describes himself as a humanist (Jared Huffman, CA). (See [Pew Research](#) for a more extensive discussion). Whereas the American population has been marked by an increase in religious non-identification and [secular identities](#), this change is absent among elected officials. Indeed, President Biden is a devout Catholic, attending weekly mass and carrying a rosary in his [pocket](#). When considering the religious makeup of the Democratic Party—at both the mass and elite levels—it is less surprising that there has been continued bipartisan support for actions such as Executive Order 14015.

President Obama said we need an [all-hands-on-deck](#) approach to solve large problems, including bringing religious groups deeper into the process. His viewpoint was not novel in 2008 when he made the comment nor is it outdated today. The government has officially relied on religious organizations to provide secular social services for 25 years, and, indeed, faith-based organizations are currently tackling some of the most pressing issues facing the country. For example, many organizations that help [resettle](#) newly arrived refugees are religiously affiliated as are some of the largest organizations aimed at helping [immigrants](#) navigate American health, educational, and legal systems. Black churches have also been playing a crucial role in the fight against the coronavirus by [providing information](#) about the vaccine as well as using churches as

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vaccination [sites](#). As people of color have been both disproportionately [affected](#) by the coronavirus and have been [vaccinated](#) at lower rates than White Americans, churches and religious organizations are currently playing a lifesaving role. While the Democrats and Republicans have real differences, partnerships between faith-based partnerships and the government are here to stay.

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