

# Examining Old Issues in Culture Wars

*By James Phillips, Rice University PhD Student*

In a talk entitled, "Examining 'Old' Issues in the Culture Wars: Social Issues, Religion and the 2012 Election" Dr. Anna Greenberg, a former professor of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and current research methodologist at the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner survey research firm, reported on some of the "old" issues between religion and politics: abortion and gay rights.

Greenberg presented several survey reports outlining religion's influence on recent political trends. Over the last several elections, the two-party voting trends have been divided along various racial and religious lines. Greenberg mentioned, "Our electorate remains polarized along religious and racial lines" highlighting that White born-again Evangelicals voted 57% Republican in 2006 and 77% Republican in 2010. These lines are less clear for Catholics, however. In the 2006 and 2008 elections, a majority of Catholics voted Democrat, but in 2010 the majority of Catholics voted Republican. As a result, Greenberg highlighted that "Catholics are the critical swing vote in national elections."

Additionally, voting trends reflect a gradual shift in values regarding specific political issues. In particular, Greenberg



*"Our electorate remains polarized along religious and racial lines"*

emphasized the decreasing importance of various social issues, such as abortion and gay rights, for many Americans' voting choices. More specifically, she reported that a

majority of voters do not consider gay marriage to be of critical importance in their political decision making. This is very different from previous voter-reports, in which Americans reported that gay marriage was a central factor.

Greenberg reported a similar decrease in the importance of abortion to voter behavior. In fact, she claimed, those who consider themselves pro-choice and those who consider themselves pro-life, increasingly find common ground on their beliefs regarding abortion policy. For example, those on either side of the debate often support an "informed consent" requirement. Where the major divisions occur, however, is around opinions on legality of abortions for victims of rape or for women in their second or third trimester.

Here religion is crucial. Indeed, the role of religion on abortion attitudes has been noted for some time, but Greenberg reported several new developments. Currently, most Americans (72%) are comfortable with holding a personal belief on abortion that differs from that officially adopted by their religious group. This means that religious adherents may have a personal stance on abortion that is not the same as what they might be encouraged to believe from the pulpit. This may be related to the reality that the majority of Americans today do not describe abortion as "a sin," effectively allowing them to come to terms with it outside of a religious framework.

Finally, Greenberg concluded that economic issues are becoming much more important than social issues in today's political arena. A majority of Americans today consider the economic issues to be "critically important" in determining their voting behavior. The importance of economic progress is perhaps an obvious concern to many, but the effect of such an emphasis on economic issues means that abortion, gay rights, and other social issues are becoming more peripheral in politics today than ever before.