

Religion in the 2012 Elections

By Cara Fullerton, Rice University '12



Panelists passionately discuss the role of in the upcoming elections



Leonard Pitts speaks with an audience member after the panel

On January 25, 2012, the Religion and Public Life Program and the Baker Institute for Public Policy co-hosted the symposium "Religion in the 2012 Elections". The event began with a panel outlining religion's significance in the upcoming presidential campaign. Panelists included scholars John Green and D. Michael Lindsay as well as newspaper columnist Leonard Pitts Jr.

The panel began with John Green, a prominent researcher of religion and politics, showing graphs displaying the party-line votes of numerous religious demographics. He also demonstrated the importance of the level of religious observance in political affiliation.

For example, observant white evangelical Protestants were more likely to vote Republican than their less observant counterparts. "This is a powerful picture," he said, "because it shows that while political affiliation matters, for some, the level of religiosity matters as well." He also showed the differences between the faith-based vote of 1960 and that of 2004. Shifts included the fact that while in 1960 Roman Catholics were the most likely to vote democratic, black Protestants were the most likely to do so in 2004. Such changes, he argued, have occurred because of cultural issues, such as gay rights and abortion, and because of new social movements. He said that the faith-based voting of 2012 will be similar to that of 2008, stating "We will see a variation on the theme we saw in 2008, but the variation will be very fun to watch."

The next panelist, D. Michael Lindsay, sociologist and president of Gordon College, presented findings of his research on the religious life of government, business, and non-profit leaders. Lindsay's "Ten Myths About Religious Conservatives" challenged misconceived concepts that the media and public have about evangelicals. One such misconception was that evangelicals are part of a conserving movement to preserve the status quo. Rather, he stated, the Religious Right sees themselves as reformers who hope to change the world. Lindsay additionally explained other aspects of religious conservatives' political leanings, from the relative unimportance of the mega church in political influence, to the division between Evangelical leaders and Evangelical preacher

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Religion in Politics 2012 (continued)

Finally, political pundit Leonard Pitts Jr. commented on the state of faith in today's politics. Drawing back on the examples of the religiosity of the Freedom Riders of 1961, Pitts held that while

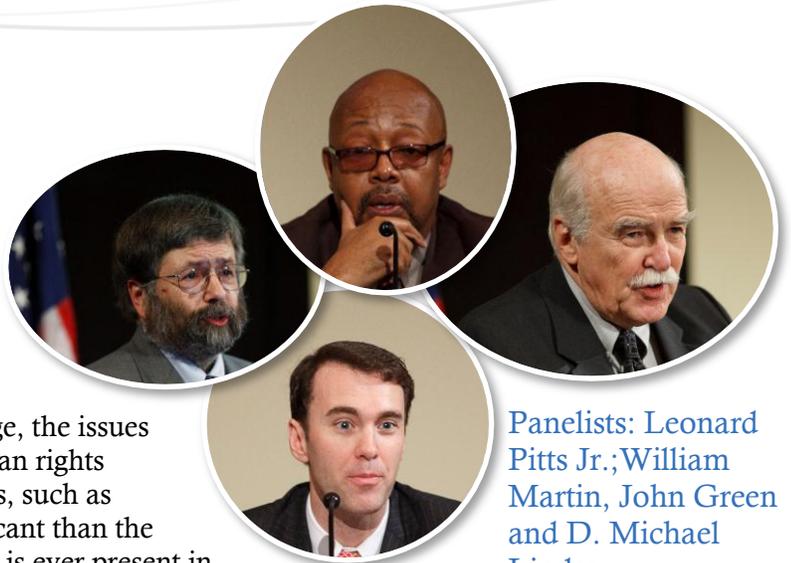
faith has become magnified on the modern public stage, the issues that it confronts seem petty in comparison to the human rights issues that ought to be addressed. The bigger problems, such as rape, poverty, and injustice, certainly are more significant than the "War on Christmas." "We're in a moment where faith is ever present in the dialogue," he said, "but where it somehow seems shrunken."

Following the presentations, the panelists participated in a brief discussion moderated by Paul Burka, the senior executive editor of Texas Monthly. Discussion topics included the extinction of political idealism and the question of an alliance between social conservatives and the Tea Party movement. Both the panelist presentations and the discussion underlined the importance of religion in the presidential elections. While Green effectively displayed the facts and figures of religious demographics' voting tendencies, Lindsay challenged previous interpretations of these facts. Furthermore, Pitts confronted the triviality of topics focused upon in this intersection between politics and religion.

Speaking to a packed audience despite the rainy day, the panelists were often interrupted by both applause and laughter. Audience member Ida Bathey commented that this was her first Baker Institute event and that she found it highly informative. "Religion in this year is critical, with Mitt Romney being Mormon, and even with the idea of some candidates leading 'sinful lives.' I'll definitely come back for another event," she said. Another audience member, Janette Zercher, stated that

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she found the forum informative and appreciated its exposition of the topic. Indeed, as the panel opened up to later breakout sessions that focused upon more specific issues, the panelists succeeded in both presenting and challenging the role of religiosity in the 2012 campaigns. Affiliate postdoctoral fellow with the Religion in Public Life Program, Jared Peifer, found the session to be a reminder of the significance of the upcoming elections. "It got me excited about the election season and helped me gain some muster to follow the elections and storylines. It was a good way for me to keep an eye on campaign points and to keep in mind the key issues that will be playing out."



Panelists: Leonard Pitts Jr.; William Martin, John Green and D. Michael Lindsay

