

## Religion, Science and Politics (continued)

Similarly, while religion is an important force in the lives of many citizens, the American public tends to hold scientists in high esteem and is generally willing to support scientific research. Though science is a powerful force in American society, it has not really entered political discussions aside from a few "hot-button topics." Lane stressed the need for a greater scientific understanding on the part of the American public, as well as increased dialogue between scientists, political leaders, and voters. Such dialogue, he argued, is only possible when the public understands the issues being discussed. Thus, Lane believes that education is the first step in bridging the gap between scientists and the general public.

A lively discussion followed the presentation, centering on the current state of science education in America. Several audience members raised questions regarding what they perceived as the "dumbing of America." These attendees cited efforts by political and religious leaders to implement science curriculum that omits topics such as evolution. The audience also voiced their concern over declining levels of scientific knowledge among students in the United States relative to those in countries like China. Matthews responded that instances of biased curriculum likely demonstrate an

"avoidance of difficult issues" rather than an active effort to "dumb down" American citizens. Lane explained that teachers at the primary and secondary level are often not given the resources and scientific training they need to effectively pass on such knowledge to their students. Lane and Matthews highlighted the importance of training teachers so that they can enable their students to become active consumers of scientific research.

Event attendee Shatia Safford agreed with Lane and Matthews about the need for improved science curriculum. Although she is religious, Safford stated that she would want her future children to have a well-rounded science education. She said that "it's ultimately up to kids to decide what's important," and believes that a balanced understanding of scientific issues would allow them to make an informed decision. Another attendee, Tom Leffler, appreciated Lane's full disclosure regarding his stance on political and scientific issues, and "thought his talk was excellent." Leffler expressed a hope that future talks will continue to explore the interplay of science, religion, and politics in order to promote public dialogue regarding these topics.

## Religion, Immigration and Politics

*By Samuel Kye, RPLP Post-Baccalaureate Fellow*

In the U.S. today, nearly a fourth of the U.S. population is composed of immigrants and their children. How might immigrant experiences influence political action and what role might religion play in this process? Continuing to explore the theme of Religion in the 2012 elections, a conference session explored the contours of the immigrant vote, both for the upcoming election and in the years to come. Led by Elaine Howard Ecklund, associate professor of sociology and director of the Religion and Public Life Program, the discussion focused on the intersection of separate yet importantly related social phenomena: religion, immigration, and politics.



Elaine Howard Ecklund discusses religion and immigration

## Immigration (continued)

Using data from the "Religion, Immigration, and Civic Engagement" study, Ecklund, co-director of the study along with sociologist of religion Michael Emerson, described the effect religion has on voting not just for the general population, but for immigrants as well. For example, in attempting to understand where immigrant minorities' religious commitments lie, Ecklund explained religion often plays a pivotal role in guiding the political vote. "Not only do congregations provide resources through leaders," Ecklund stated, "but also the opportunity for public forums, which provide platforms that can create motivations, rhetoric, and specific issues that religious people may be inclined to support or oppose."

In addition, religion helps immigrants adapt to the United States. Through her interviews with over 150 first-generation immigrants, Ecklund found that the skills and practical means associated with religious participation often triggers involvement in the greater U.S., including civic engagement and political participation. Yet while this was true for the Christian immigrant population, which accounts for 2 of every 3 immigrants, this was not the case for all religious immigrant groups. Those identifying with less visible U.S. religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, often reported a desire to be politically involved, but a lack of networks facilitating political participation. These groups, which Ecklund and Emerson defined as "minority religions", are consequently less likely to vote and therefore find alternative means of civic engagement, including establishing ethnically based community groups or centers.

Ultimately, the interactions between immigration, religion, and politics have notable implications for both present and future elections. But as Ecklund notes, the immigrant vote "does not fall into neat and organized trends." Picking up on this theme, the session concluded with a group dialogue that hinted at the complexity surrounding these issues. Discussed topics ranged from the difficulty of categorizing "Latino" voters to the possibility of silent discrimination that may keep immigrant voters away from the polls. Several members of the audience expressed surprise that in a country with an immigrant population of nearly 25%, recent evidence suggests only 7% of eligible immigrants actually vote. As one audience member put it, "I can only imagine if the percentage of eligible immigrants who vote rose to fifteen, or even twelve percent... the possible effects of those numbers could have a great impact on both national and local politics." Indeed, as the nation continues to grow in diversity, immigrants' political participation should surely be on the minds of politicians, citizens, and immigrants themselves.

## A Look at the Religion & Politics Event

