



# **“After the Culture War: Shifts and Continuities in the Obama Era and Beyond”**

---

Prof. John Dombbrink

Criminology, Law & Society UC Irvine

Boisi Center for Religion and the Public

Boston College February 17, 2010



- 
- This presentation will discuss certain key enduring and shifting elements of the American culture war as it moves forward:



## today's considerations

---

- a) the broadening and moderating of the role of religion;
- b) a drop in salience of certain wedge issues, such as same sex marriage;
- c) continued ambivalence surrounding abortion and reproductive rights; and
- d) the rise of a new/old culture war resistance (“You Lie,” “birthers,” “tea parties”)

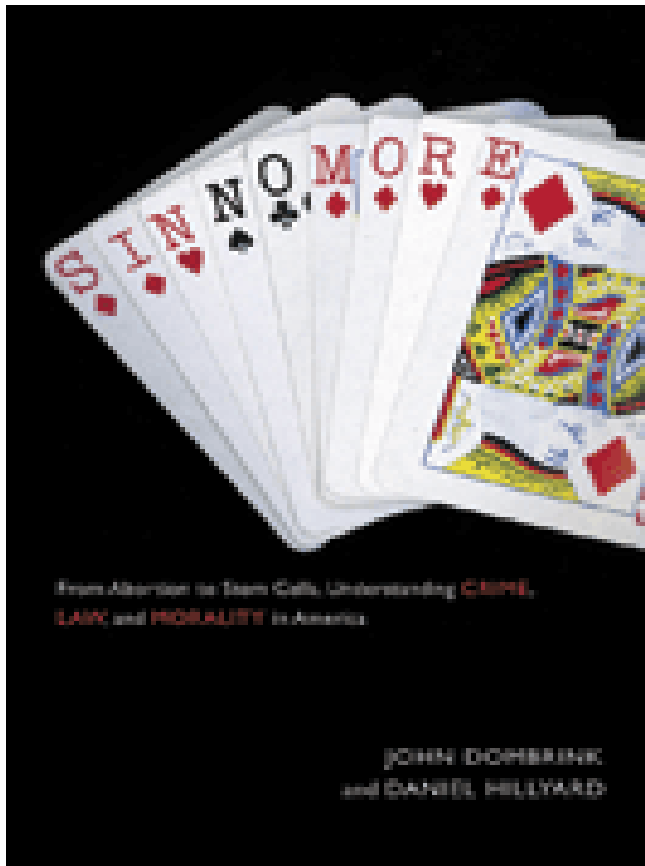


that makes the predictions of realignment and hopes for post-partisanship weaker.

Together, the elements suggest a reconfiguring of the culture war.

# The purpose of Sin No More

---



- **Sin No More (2007)** sought to show what these laws and attitudes tell us about Americans approach to law and morality, and about our changing conceptions of sin, crime and illegality.



## Sin outline/2

---

- Despite conservative rhetoric we argued that the tide was turning on each of these issues, with all moving toward normalization in American society – but not always easily.
- We challenged the dominant interpretation of the 2004 election as showing a social conservative America (what Karl Rove has called a “center-right” country).

# I. “Ending the Culture Wars”

---



- Peter Beinart: “When it comes to culture, Obama doesn’t have a public agenda; he has a public anti-agenda. He wants to remove culture from the political debate...Barack Obama was more successful than John Kerry in reaching out to moderate white evangelicals in part because he struck them as more authentically Christian. That’s the foundation on which Obama now seeks to build ” (01-2009)



## On “Ending the Culture Wars”

---

○ The  
Democratic  
Strategist

○ Ed Kilgore: “..the critical plurality of Americans are happy to declare a truce in the culture wars as long as progressives don’t behave like conquering secularist radicals.”



# resistance

---



- But this victory was also met with resistance



# Post-partisan?

---

- **“Within hours of Senator Barack Obama’s election, those on the Left, in the media and even some in our ranks began making demands for conservatives to cooperate with the new administration in the early months of his presidency. I reject those demands. It won’t be easy, but more Americans still describe themselves as conservative than as liberal, and they are looking for leadership, not more sellouts. ” (Gary Bauer 11-06-08)**

# “birthers,” “deathers” and “tea parties”

---

- The new backlash
- “You lie!”



# “Deathers”

---



- “Death panels” ranked as one of the top phrases of 2009
- Seniors and the disabled "will have to stand in front of Obama's 'death panel' so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their 'level of productivity in society,' whether they are worthy of health care." Palin 08-09

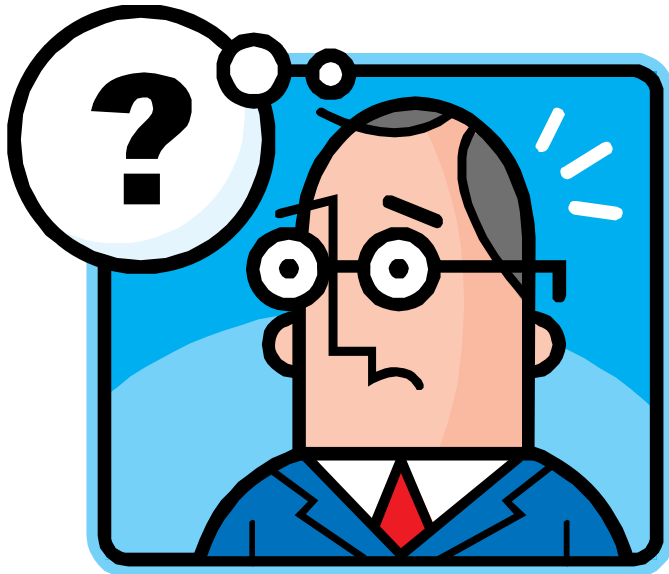
# 2008: realignment?

---

- Realignment?
- Dealignment?
- Re-realignment?
- (the Karl Rove jinx)



- 
- 2008 as anomaly?



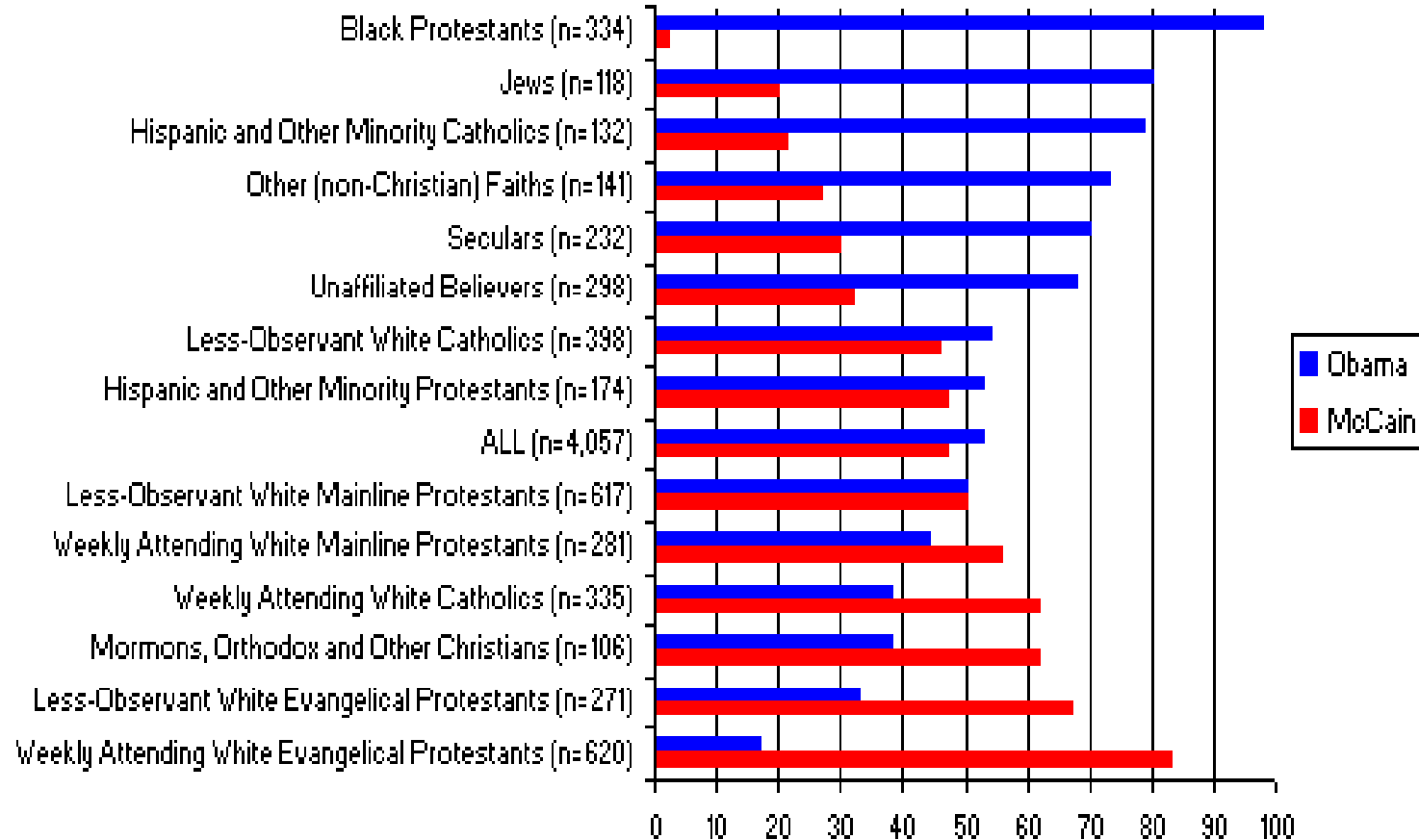


## II. Moderating religion

---

- “An Obama presidency will force the Religious Right to re-think its strategy and tactics; a process that has been happening over the past few years due to the deaths of several prominent conservative Christian evangelical leaders and the aging of others.” (Bill Berkowitz, 11-08)

## Religious Groups and the 2008 Presidential Vote





## Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation and Race

	2000		2004		2008		Dem change 04-08
	<u>Gore</u>	<u>Bush</u>	<u>Kerry</u>	<u>Bush</u>	<u>Obama</u>	<u>McCain</u>	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>+4</b>
Protestant/Other Christian	42	56	40	59	45	54	+5
White Prot/Other Christian	35	63	32	67	34	65	+2
Evangelical/Born-again	n/a	n/a	21	79	26	73	+5
Non-evangelical	n/a	n/a	44	56	44	54	0
Catholic	50	47	47	52	54	45	+7
White Catholic	45	52	43	56	47	52	+4
Jewish	79	19	74	25	78	21	+4
Other faiths	62	28	74	23	73	22	-1
Unaffiliated	61	30	67	31	75	23	+8

Note: Throughout the report, "Protestant" refers to people who described themselves as "Protestant," "Mormon" or "other Christian" in exit polls.

Throughout the report, figures may not add to 100, and nested figures may not add to the subtotal indicated, due to rounding.

Source: 2008, 2004 and 2000 national exit polls. 2008 data from MSNBC.com.

# Whither evangelicals?

---

- When evangelical pastor Rick Warren was chosen to lead a prayer at President Obama's inauguration, it set off a firestorm of critique from left and right





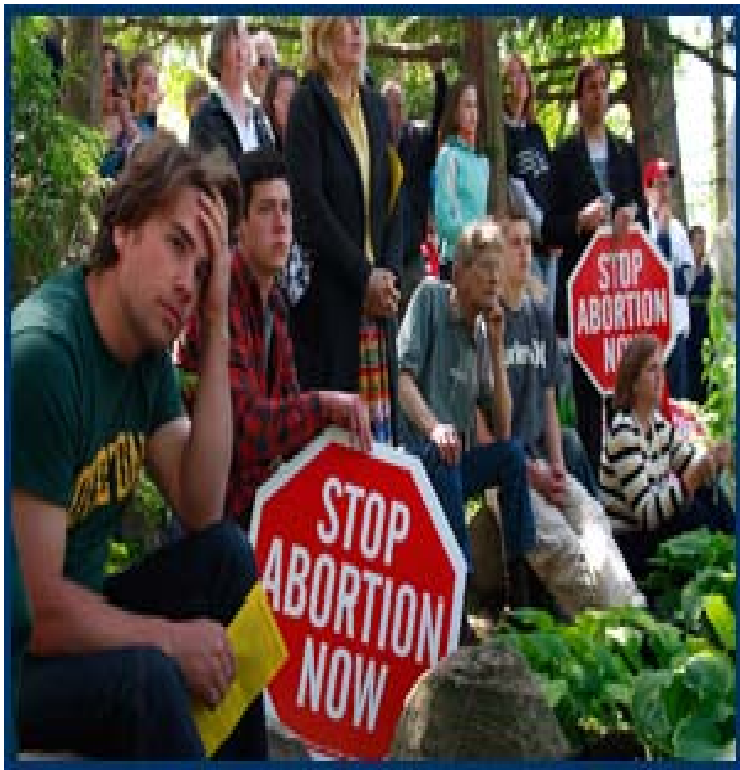
## New Evangelical Partnership

---

- Cizik, ...describing the efforts of his organization to reorient conservative Christians away from issues such as homosexuality and abortion and toward more “common denominator” concerns such as global warming, prison reform, human trafficking, and HIV/AIDS.”

### III. Abortion

---



- While this wasn't much of a 2008 election issue, it is today, and underlies a lot of the momentum, meaning and context of the culture war

## Of “big tents”

---



- Democrats evidenced belief in bigger tents for a winning coalition
- 2008 Democratic platform signaled willingness to embrace wider views on reproductive rights

# Single issue politics

---



- To what extent do voters cast their votes?
- single issue politics

# Catholics and 2008 vote

---

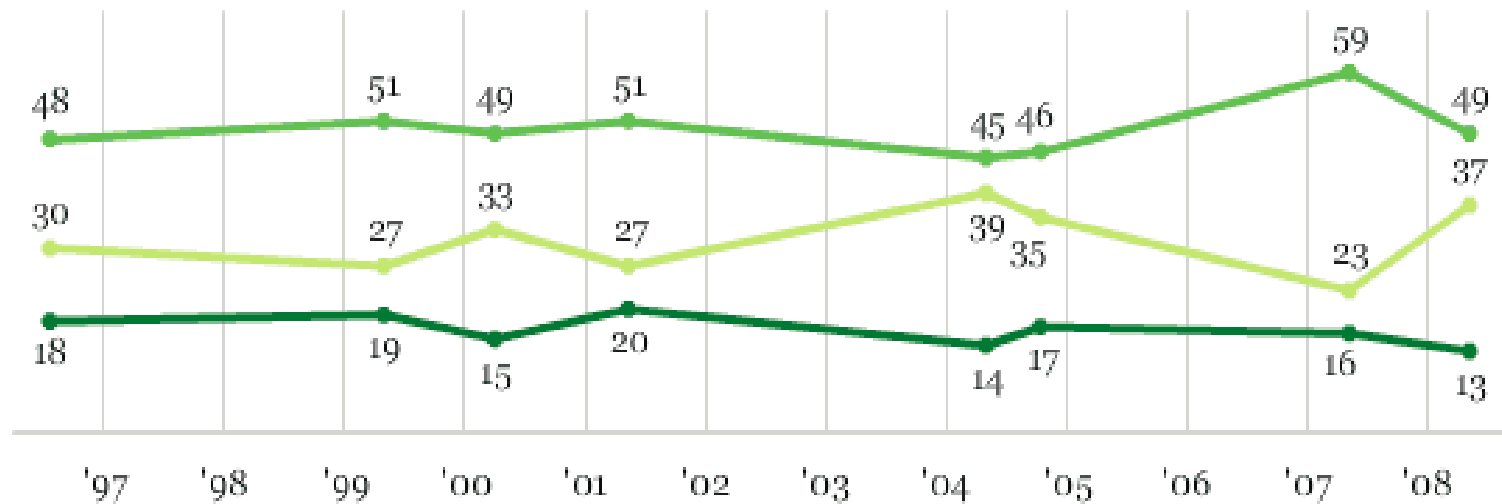


- Obama and Catholics
- Kmiec
- Anti-abortion but Pro-Obama

# Abortion/salience

## *Impact of Abortion Issue on Voting for Major Offices*

- % Candidate must share your views
- % Just one of many important factors
- % Not a major issue

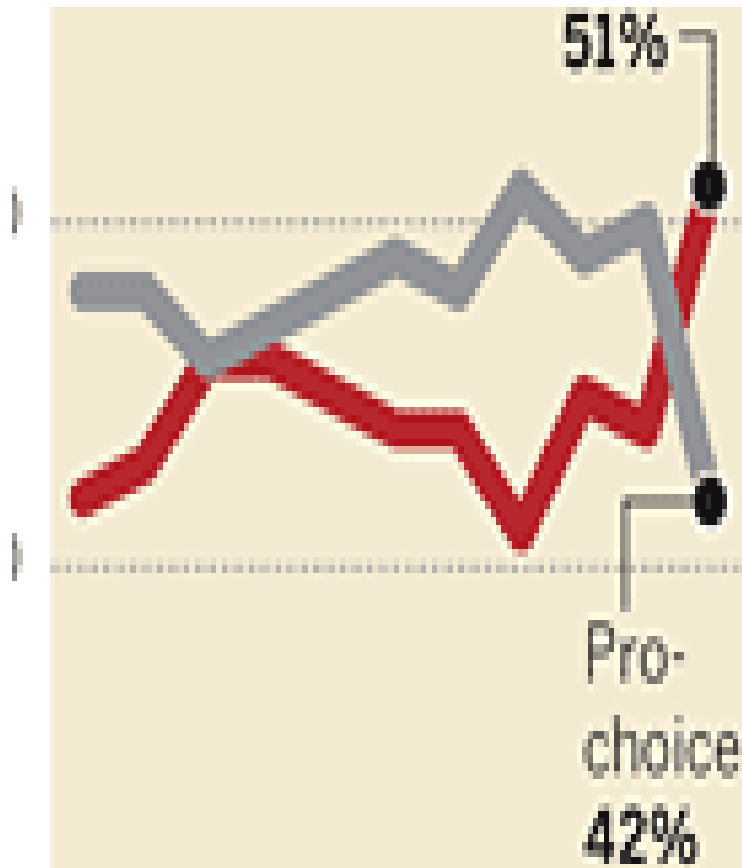


GALLUP POLL



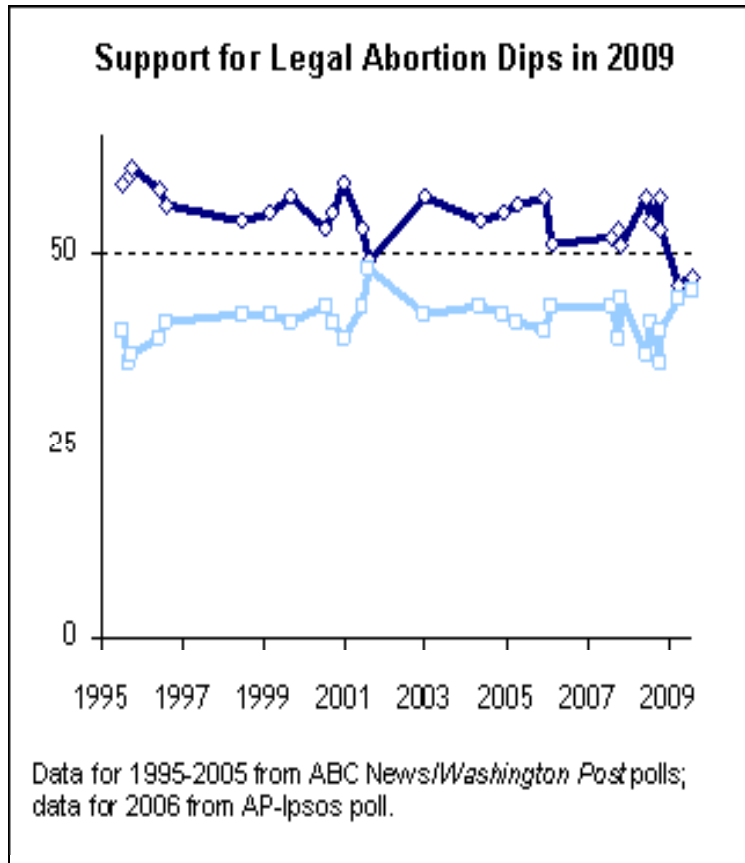
## 2009: Shift in abortion attitudes?

---



- The Gallup Poll reported May 15 that 51 percent of Americans now call themselves pro-life rather than pro-choice on the issue of abortion

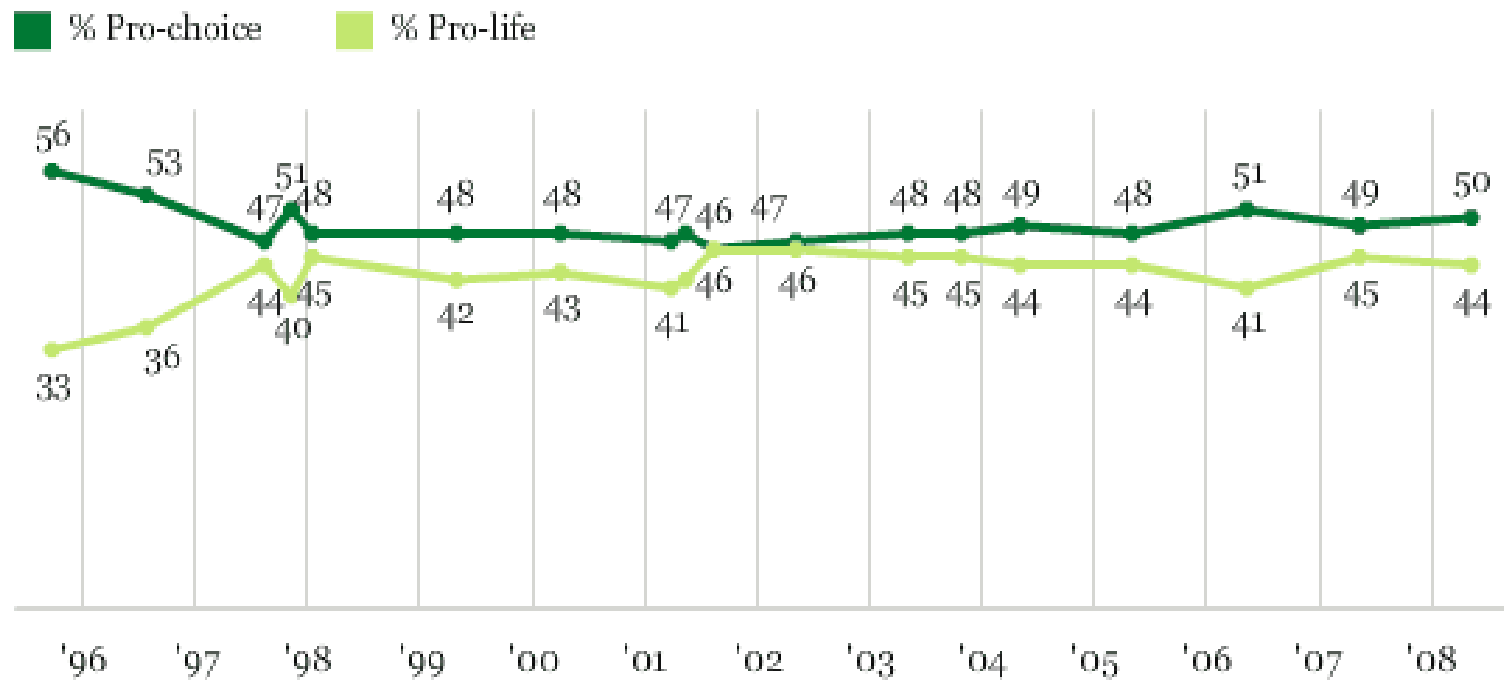
# Abortion support dip 2009



○ Pew

# Partial birth effect?

*Trend in Pro-Choice/Pro-Life Abortion Views*

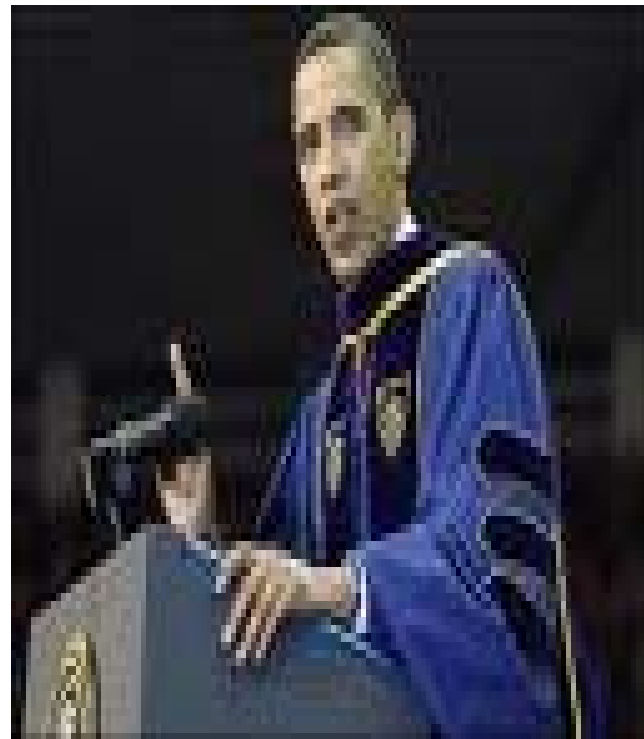


GALLUP POLL

# “common ground” on abortion?

---

- “Third Way”
- “abortion grays”
- Contraception, pregnancy prevention



# American Catholic politicians and the Vatican

---



- House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and HHS Secretary-designate Kathleen Sebelius
- Attacked for prochoice views
- But former Sen. Robert Dole recommended her as someone who crosses the aisle, and Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kansas) voted for her



- 
- And what if any accommodations should Obama or progressives generally make to neutralized culture-based opposition? (Kilgore 2009)



## Bauer – abortion/young cohorts

---

- Bauer – (02-10) “It [the Tebow Super Bowl ad] speaks to the core values of our nation’s founding – that all are created equal and endowed by our Creator with the inalienable right to life the Left knows it is losing this debate, especially among our nation’s youth. One recent poll found that 58 percent of those aged 18 to 29 believe that abortion is ‘morally wrong.’” (Marist poll)



## “The Mysterious Disappearance of Young, Pro-Choice Women” (Dominus)

---

- “Once strong supporters of unrestricted abortion, women under 30 are suddenly ambivalent. What's behind our change of heart on this crucial women's issue?”



# Abortion

## A MATTER OF CHOICE

Percentage of respondents who think abortion should be



■ Republicans ■ Democrats  
■ Independents ■ Men ■ Women

Source: Pew Research Center, August 2008

## IV. Gay Rights: Wedding Day in San Francisco

---



- June 16, 2008
- The first couple married in San Francisco had been Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, 83 and 87 respectively, two women together as a couple for 55 years

# Gay Rights 2006

---

- Sin No More had argued:
- Normalization
- Fading since 2004
- Pew 2006
- continuing contestation



## “Bauer: American Values”

---



- **“Your children and grandchildren will be taught that homosexuality is normal and same-sex unions equally valid to heterosexual marriages. So-called “hate crimes” laws will make sure that anyone who objects is silenced.”**

# Spreading legalization of same-sex marriage in 2009

---



- In Iowa, a heartland state beyond the blue coasts

# Vermont April 2009

---

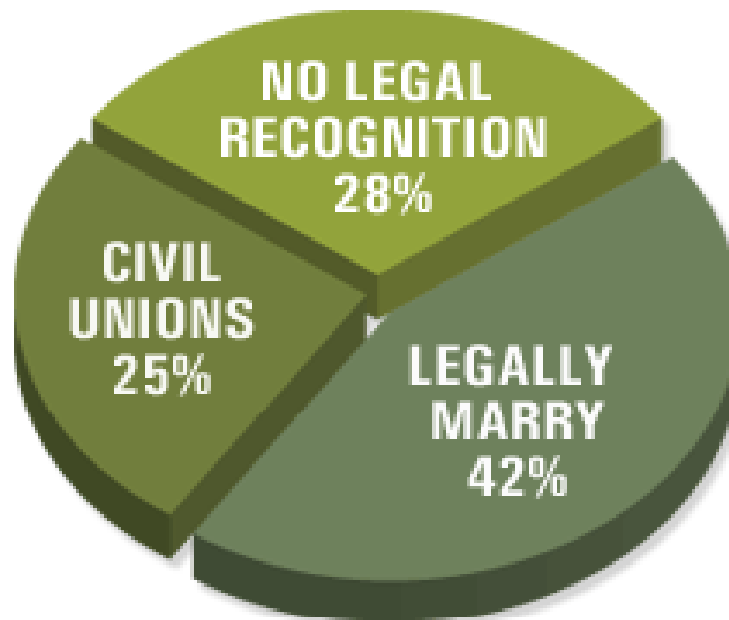
- Not just by courts



## Recent polling (2009)

---

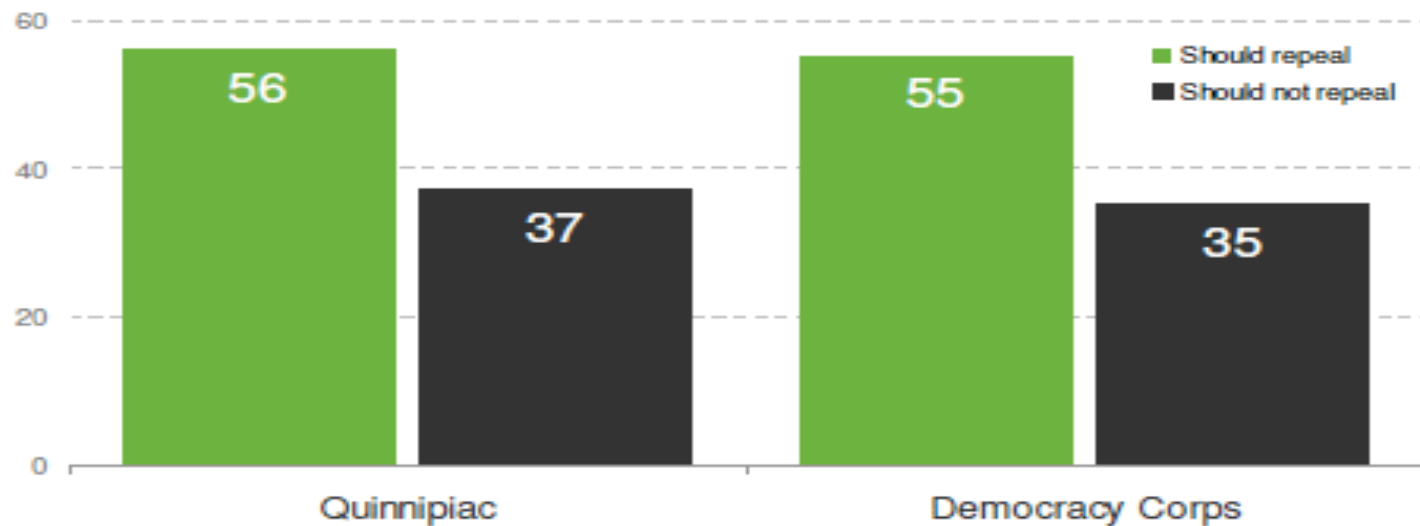
**SAME SEX COUPLES  
SHOULD BE ALLOWED...**



# Support for DADT reform

■ **Figure 1: Stable Majority for Change**

Federal law currently prohibits openly gay men and women from serving in the military. Do you think this law should be repealed or not?



<sup>1</sup> Data from a Democracy Corps survey of 847 likely '10 voters conducted Nov 12-16, 2009. MoE +/- 3.4

<sup>2</sup> Data from a Quinnipiac survey of 2,041 registered voters conducted in April, 2009. MoE +/- 2.2



## DADT – military 02-10

---



- "...devaluing them in that regard is just inconsistent with us as an institution"



## Frank Rich 02-07-10

---

- “To a degree unimaginable as recently as 2004.... anti-gay animus is far more likely to repel voters than attract them.”

## Even red states

---

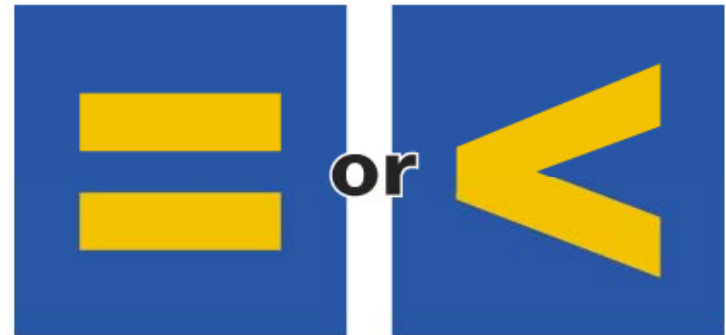


- Salt lake City passes anti-discrimination (gay rights) bill, with Mormon Church support
- Distinctions: salient because of Prop 8 support

## Last of section

---

- Generational issues and same-sex marriage
- "If I were putting money on the future of gay marriage, I would bet on it."  
(Douthat, NYT 10-09)

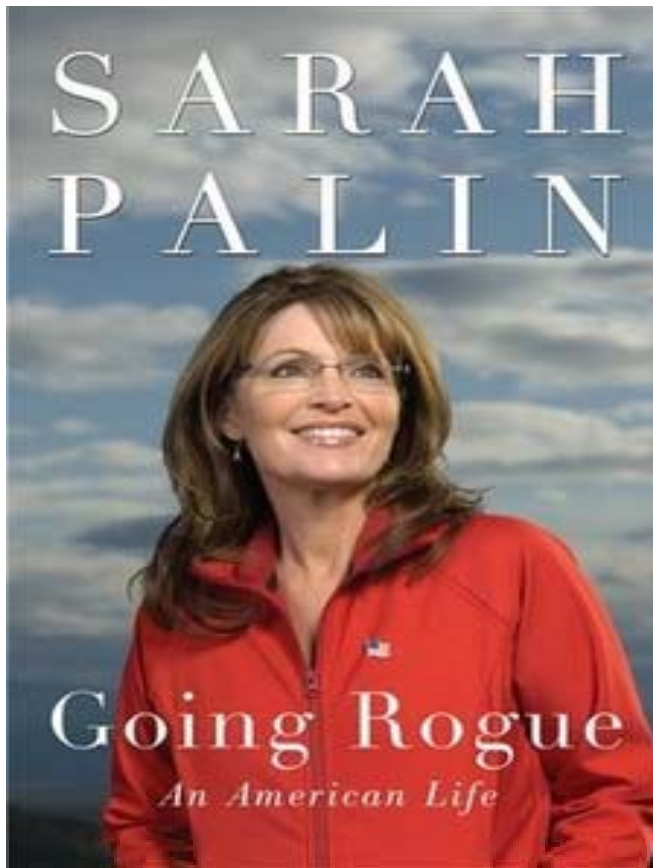


## V. Reignited culture war?

---



- "Glenn Beck, Common Sense Leads Latest Book Sales" (06-09)



- 
- Going Rogue on best-seller charts
  - Palin: “the Last Culture Warrior”? (Salam)

## 2011 – Reagan centennial

---

- Reagan at 100; was a transformative president – was legacy buried too fast in 2008?





- Gallup – 01-10 support/non-support discrepancy for Obama highest in polling





## David Brooks January 2010

---

- “The public is not only shifting from left to right. Every single idea associated with the educated class has grown more unpopular over the past year.
- The educated class believes in global warming, so public skepticism about global warming is on the rise. The educated class supports abortion rights, so public opinion is shifting against them. The educated class supports gun control, so opposition to gun control is mounting.”

# Michelle Goldberg tea parties

---

- “overlap between the tea parties and the Christian right. Both ... arise out of a sense of furious dispossession, a conviction that the country that is rightfully theirs has been usurped by sinister cosmopolitan elites.”



# anger and resentment

---



- "...these voters... overwhelmingly view a successful Obama presidency as the destruction of this country's founding principles and are committed to seeing the president fail."



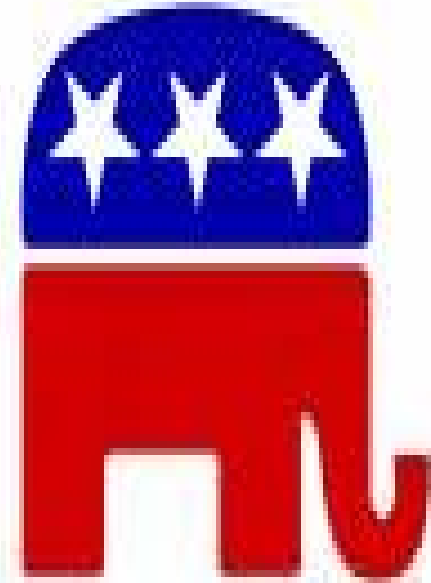
## VI. Conclusion: Through the lens of Massachusetts

---

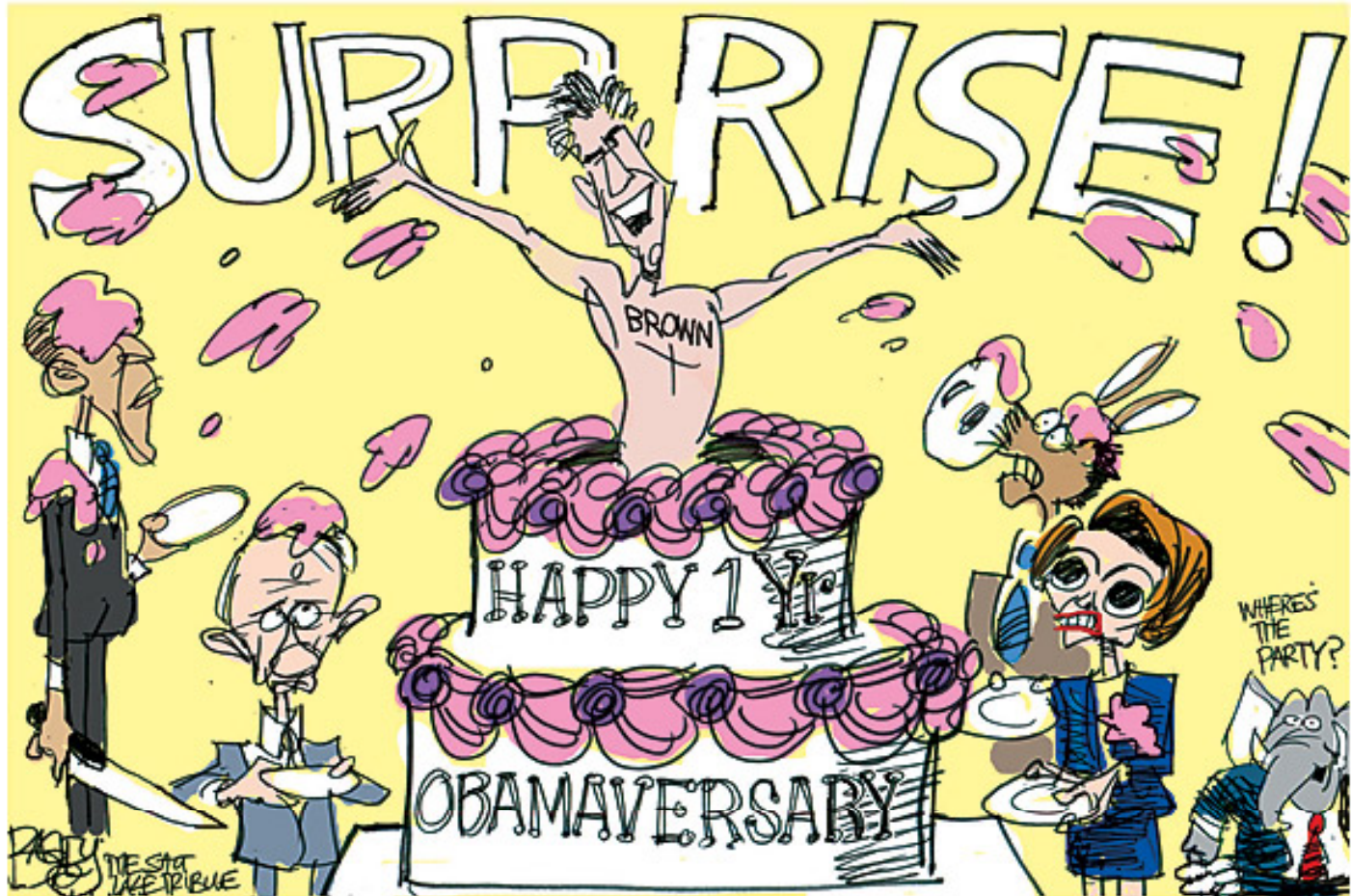
- What is the road to re-re-re-alignment?



- 
- “Can a shattered Republican Party reunite in time for 2012, or will its fixation on ideological purity and the histrionics of its leaders prevent it from returning to national power?” (Blumenthal 12-14-09)



# A Massachusetts moment





## Scott Brown and “big tents”

---

- “Brown said states should be allowed to make their own decisions on marriage rights. He said while he is pro-choice, he is against partial- birth abortions, federal funding of abortions and believes in strong parental consent notification laws.
- “I feel this issue is best handled between a woman and her doctor and her family.”





- 
- On gay marriage, he believes the issue should be left up to the states -- and in Massachusetts, which allows gay marriage, he says the question is "settled." (Eugene Robinson 02-02-10)



## From John Brown's body to Scott Brown's body

---

- "John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the ground"
- But whose truth is marching on?