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Have Democrats lost faith in faith-based outreach?

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A Maryknoll nun votes at a polling station inside the Maryknoll Sisters auditorium in Ossining, N.Y., Nov. 2. (CNS photo/Jessica Rinaldi, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- As Democrats conduct a grim postmortem on Tuesday's elections, some liberal leaders say one diagnosis is already clear: the party's outreach to religious voters was lifeless from the start.

Democrats took control of Congress in 2006 and the White House in 2008 in part because they wrested Catholics and some white Protestants from Republicans' tight grip. Gains among those voters helped elect Democrats in rural and suburban areas that had long been GOP strongholds.

But in 2010, progressive leaders say, Democrats largely retreated to the same-old wonky language to explain their policies, and same-old political strategies to drum up voters -- with predictable results.

"One of the ironies is that we had huge success with (faith outreach)," said Eric Sapp, a partner at Eleison Group, a consulting firm that worked on religious outreach for dozens of Democratic campaigns in 2006 and 2008 -- but none this year.

"It's part of why we are in power. It's been rough to see us go back to that pre-2004 strategy that had kept us in the minority."

Democrats, at least in the House, will again be in the minority, and their party's hard-won gains among religious voters are largely gone. Sixty percent of weekly churchgoers voted for House GOP candidates on Tuesday, according to exit polls. Nearly seven in 10 white Protestants punched their ballot for the GOP, a six-percent surge from 2008, and up eight points from 2006.

Catholics swung even harder toward the GOP, according to the exit polls, with 54 percent voting for House Republicans, compared to 42 percent in 2008, and 44 percent in 2006. Catholics and Protestants combined to make up nearly 80 percent of the electorate on Tuesday.

Lackluster commitment from party leaders, a failure to connect their policies with moral values, and the dire economy all explain Democrats' lack of success with religious voters, according to politicos and faith leaders.

"The God gap doesn't explain these election results," said Mike McCurry, a White House press secretary under Bill Clinton who has encouraged Democrats' faith-based outreach. "It was driven by real anxiety people feel about the economy and their future -- but there are moral and ethical components to that, too."

In previous elections, the Democratic National Committee hired staffers for Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, and evangelical outreach. This year, those jobs are not filled, said the Rev. Regena Thomas, the DNC's director of faith and constituent outreach.

Thomas, a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, said she organized conference calls and events on religion with black women, state party chairs, and college Democrats. In some areas, however, religion was subsumed within other programs -- such as Hispanic and gay outreach, Thomas said.

"Staff responsible for constituencies were responsible for adding faith outreach to that," she said.

But McCurry said religion "is not something you tack on to the end of your game plan. It's fundamentally at the heart of how you connect with voters, who clearly drifted from the Democratic Party last night."

Sapp said party leaders spent little money on religious outreach, signaling to rank-and-file Democrats that they shouldn't either.

"A lot of campaigns we worked on in the past wanted to do this stuff, but they didn't have the funding," he said. "And they worried if they spent a lot of money on this they wouldn't get support from the national committees."

Instead, the DNC concentrated on turning out the party's base -- primarily in urban areas -- and reconnecting with the first-time voters who lifted President Obama into office, he said.

"What does that do for Democratic incumbents and challengers in rural and non-urban areas?" asked Burns Strider, Sapp's partner at the Eleison Group and a veteran in Democratic faith outreach.

Independent liberal groups such as Catholics United battled for several Democratic candidates through radio ads, phone banks, and legal maneuvers. In those campaigns, the Democrats, all Catholics, were blasted by conservatives because they voted for health care reform over the U.S. bishops' objections. The candidates -- Reps. Tom Perriello of Virginia, Kathy Dahlkemper of Pennsylvania, and Steve Driehaus of Ohio -- all lost close races on Tuesday.

"Those are folks who are really committed to the common good, with a strong sense of Catholic social teaching," said Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby. "But they really got lost in whatever this fear is that is gripping our country."

Stephen Schneck, a scholar at Catholic University in Washington and a Catholic political insider, said religious outreach from DNC or the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee could have made a difference in those races.

"I'm not sure I would call it a step backwards," said Schneck of the party's faith efforts. "But it does seem like there has been a loss in organization."

Part of that loss, some Democrats say, can be blamed on the success in 2006 and 2008: many of the people who ran Democratic faith-outreach programs now work in the Obama administration, draining an already shallow pool.

But the Rev. Jim Wallis, a progressive evangelical who is close to Democratic leaders, said Tuesday's election pointed to the party's lack of vision, not networks.

"It's a lot deeper than outreach," Wallis said. "They haven't connected with many Americans in terms of their daily lives and values. As Proverbs says, `Where there is no vision, the people perish.' And people are perishing."

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