PRESS CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT

On September 15, 2009, the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics and Public Religion Research hosted a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, to release the findings of the 2009 Religious Activists Surveys. These surveys show the divergent ways conservative and progressive religious activists understand their religious identity, engage in politics, and prioritize issues. The Religious Activist Surveys were conducted by the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron in partnership with Public Religion Research.

The full results of the survey, including an audio recording from the press conference, survey report, and top line questionnaires, can be found at http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=237.

Speakers:

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JOHN GREEN: Thank you all for coming today. The best way to begin this release is to talk about some of the principal findings. I'll talk for a couple of minutes and then Robby Jones from Public Religion Research will speak, and then we have two excellent commentators who are going to explain it all to us when we're finished. The conclusion that we drew from our initial analysis of the survey data is that religious and progressive activists could be characterized as being faithful, engaged in the political process, and divergent in their political goals and views. For those of you who have a copy of the report with you, you might want to follow along. I'll point out a couple of tables and charts as we go that highlight some of the findings.

Religious Profiles
I think perhaps the most obvious question to ask about this survey is, "What about the religious characteristics of these activists?" Up until this point, not that much has been known about the religious characteristics of the people who actually do this kind of political work all across the nation. And what we find is that the conservative activists and the progressive activists have sharply different religious profiles. If you look on page 6 of the full report, you'll see a couple of pie charts that show the religious affiliation of these two groups of activists.

The conservative activists are by and large Christians of one type or another. There are very few people in that group that are not a member of one of the major Christian communities. But within that, there's a great deal of diversity. Just a little over half of them are Evangelical Protestants, a little more than a third are Roman Catholics, and Mainline Protestants make up about 10%. There's actually even more diversity and that will be discussed a little bit later in the report when we look at religious beliefs and identifications. For instance, among these conservative activists, about 15% identify themselves as fundamentalists, another 15% identify themselves as Pentecostals, and about a third simply identify themselves either as Evangelical or born-again.

If you look over on the progressive activist side, we see a lot more diversity in terms of affiliation, and this crosses the lines of religious traditions. There's a much larger number of people who are from outside of Christian communities. But the largest single group is Mainline Protestants with a little more than two-fifths. But Evangelicals are represented, so are Roman Catholics. There's a large group of people that might be loosely defined as being in liberal faiths: Unitarians, people of mixed faith and ecumenical perspectives. Also there are a significant number of Jews and people who are non-believers or former believers of one kind or another.

If you look over on page 7, you'll see just a couple of religion measures that are kind of interesting. One is the standard measure of religious salience, another is worship attendance, and then the view of scripture by these different groups. And as you can see, the conservative religious activists tend to be somewhat more intense and traditional in the importance they assign to religion and their level of worship attendance. But notice that the progressive activists care a great deal about religion and also are fairly frequent attenders. In fact those numbers for the progressive religious activists are a good bit higher than for the American public as a whole, which as you all know is a very observant public when it comes to these types of measures. It is worth pointing out though that the worship attendance data may be skewed a little bit by the fact that many of the progressive activists belong to congregations that only worship once a week; whereas many of the people on the conservative side belong to congregations where there are frequent worship services. So that may have something to do with the frequency of attendance.

But the biggest difference is at the bottom of the chart, which is the view of scripture. Almost half of the conservative religious activists took a literal view of scripture. Only 3% of the progressive religious activists had a similar view, and the largest single category on

that side was the idea that scripture "contains" the word of God; it's not the literal word of God or the inspired word of God but simply contains the word of God.

Issue Priorities
One way to look at these data is that these religious conservative and progressive activists are coalitions of different religious communities and they contain within them different kinds of diversity. A lot of the effectiveness of these groups in politics has to do with how they put those coalitions together. There are also sharply different priorities among these two groups of activists, and if you turn to page 11, you'll see something I think is really quite interesting. There's a chart there that looks at the relative importance of different kinds of issues. And if you look at the bottom of the chart, you can see the two issues where conservative religious activists assign top priority: abortion and same-sex marriage. They really don't assign very much importance to any of the other issues in the chart. That doesn't mean they don't have opinions on them, but just that they're not priorities.

But look towards the top of the chart. The two issues to which progressives assign the most importance are poverty and health care. It's worth noting that the progressive activists have a broader agenda, they have more issues that they give top priority to than their conservative counterparts. We found this finding quite, quite interesting. Oftentimes these two religious groups are seen or identified as being at loggerheads, that they have opposite views on issue after issue. What this suggests is that these groups are talking past each other, that they have really very different priorities and that a lot of what is going on here is an argument about what the political agenda ought to be and not just arguments about issues.

Issue Positions
When we come to issue positions, we do see some differences based on ideology. The conservative activists tend to be conservative and the progressive activists tend to be liberal. But there is a good bit of nuance in these findings. So for instance, if you will all turn to page 12, you'll see the views on abortion of these two groups. And it's worth noting that the conservative activists are very, very strongly pro-life on abortion, as one might expect. The progressive activists tend to be pro-choice, but notice that there's much more complexity and nuance in their opinion. On this particular issue, the progressives come a little closer to public opinion as a whole, but on other issues it's the reverse.

On other issues we see examples where really, it's the conservatives that come closer, and if you turn over to page 13, you'll see an example of that, views on torture. Notice there that the progressives are strongly, overwhelmingly opposed to the use of torture. Conservative activists tend to be a little more open to it, but notice that there's a great deal more nuance and complexity there on the conservative side on this particular issue.

There are, however, issues on which the two groups line up pretty clearly on opposite sides, and one of them is the issue of national health care. Now the question that we have on national health care does not fit the current debate on national health care very well because we wrote the question before the debate began. One of those things we really wish we could go back and change, but there the conservative activists are very strongly

opposed to the extension of national health insurance, comprehensive national health insurance; on the other hand, the progressive activists are very, very strongly in favor of it. So there's one place where there's something close to polarization. But overall, on issue after issue, we see a lot of nuance and complexity. These religious activists do not fit perfectly within the polarized politics that we see at the national level.

And now I'd like to turn it over to one of the co-authors of the report, Robert P. Jones, to talk a little bit about some of the other findings.

ROBERT P. JONES: Thanks everyone for being here. The first comment I want to make is to recognize Daniel Cox, who's here in the room and was also co-author of the report. I want to give him full credit for being co-author of the report, and much of the good work you have in front of you is due to his work.

I want to cover two key areas: political engagement in the 2008 election, and some divergent approaches to the role of religion in public life. And I want to echo something that John said. What we see here is some things that are confirmed that one might expect and then some things that offer some really significant nuance and some new understandings.

Activists and the 2008 Election

So first, which candidates did these activists support in the 2008 election? And if you want to follow along with me, I'm on page 16 to 18 for these first findings. So which candidates did these activists support in the 2008 election? Well, in many ways, no big surprises here. But there are two different pictures. Progressive activists are moving in a single direction supporting Obama both in the primaries strongly and in the general election. Conservative religious activists were in some disarray during the primaries, but then rallied very strongly to get behind John McCain in the general election. So among progressive activists, we had 6 in 10 saying Obama was their first choice in the Democratic primary with about 1 in 5 favoring Hillary Clinton in the primary. But 93% supporting him in the general election. On the conservative side, conservative activists were initially all over the map; 20% calling Mike Huckabee their top choice, Mitt Romney getting 22%, John McCain getting only 17%. But in the general election, 90% report voting for McCain. One aside here, one interesting finding is very high favorability for Sarah Palin among conservative religious activists, and so her selection clearly resonated very strongly with the conservative religious activists.

Campaign Activities in 2008

Second: how did these activists engage during the 2008 elections? This is on page 18. And here there are some new insights. Both groups report relatively similar levels of participation in traditional campaign activities, such as making campaign donations, signing petitions and the like. But we did see two notable differences. First, progressive activists were more wired, so they were more active in online organizing activities. This may be perhaps because of a stronger online infrastructure in the Obama campaign. Obama

had things like an ad on an X-Box 360 racing game, for example, and he was texting his vice presidential selection to folks. On the other hand, conservative activists report being more active in state level politics, such as congressional campaigns, state-wide campaigns, and ballot issues. This is perhaps due to kind of a longer history of conservative activists having an established local ground game going back a couple of decades.

The Role of Faith in Voting Decisions
Third, I want to mention one fascinating difference we found about how activists understand the role of faith in their voting decisions, and here again, we see some differences that are significant. Both religious activist groups – this is on page 17 – both religious activist groups cite faith as an important factor in their voting decision, but conservative activists were more likely to say that their faith was the most important factor in their voting decision. So this fits fairly well with some of the data that John pointed to earlier with a high religious engagement across both groups but with some differences.

We had nearly two-thirds of conservative activists saying that faith was the most important factor in deciding how to vote in 2008, and another 29% saying their faith was as important as other factors. So that's 9 in 10 conservative activists saying it was the most important thing or as important as other factors in their vote. Among the progressive activists, we found 1 in 5 saying that faith was the most important factor, but another 41% reporting that it was as important as other factors in deciding who to support. So that's about 6 in 10 saying it was the most important thing or as important as other factors in their vote.

These findings offer an interesting insight about how activists integrate then their faith with other areas of life. The picture that we get from this is conservatives have faith playing a more distinct and dominant role in approaching politics, with progressives having faith playing an important but a more integrated and permeable role while in conversation with other areas of life. That's a really interesting insight in terms of how these religious activists approach politics and how they integrate insights of their faith with political action.

Perceptions of Influence of Religious Activists Groups
Finally, I want to cover the importance of each group's perception of its own influence and its priorities for the future. Progressive religious activists perceive themselves as having a significant influence in the 2008 election compared to other groups, while conservative religious activists perceive themselves as having relatively little influence. By a nearly 2 to 1 margin, conservative religious activists agreed that religious progressive groups had a greater influence than religious conservative groups.

Progressive religious activists saw the picture the same way. In fact, they're very optimistic and energized about their role in the 2008 election. More than 4 in 10 reported that progressive religious groups had a great amount of influence and ranked themselves roughly about as influential as labor unions and business groups, so it's a fairly optimistic view of their impact in the 2008 election [laughter]. But it indicates a real sense of energy

and impact on the progressive side and a sense of being a bit dispirited on the conservative side.

Looking to the Future
In terms of the future, we asked an interesting open-ended question about what each of these activists could do in the future, and what came up on both sides was the importance of being publicly visible and politically active. So both sides talked a lot about the need to speak up, to be visible, to be an example, to demonstrate their values both to the media and the wider public, and also to be politically active, to engage in the political process. After these priorities, we saw some differences emerge. Conservative activists were more likely to emphasize the importance of prayer, while progressive activists were more likely to emphasize the importance of striving for civility, pluralism and social justice.

Just to help give you the flavor of this open-ended question, again, we had 3000 responses here, and this is in the report as well on page 23 for the conservatives, 29 for the progressives. But just to give you a couple of quotes to close out, here are a couple of representative examples of what we heard from conservative activists: "All citizens should be involved. It's tough for any conservative to get the truth heard when the media's leftist and unashamedly so. We need to somehow break through the liberal bias in the mainstream to get our message out." On the progressive side, one striking thing on the open-ended question was the widespread use of active verbs like "continue," "keep on," "remain," those kind of verbs that imply a sense of, again, keying into the optimism, some sense of achievement and success going forward. One example here: "Just continue to network and fund-raise and get the word out about progressive religious values." This was a typical comment.

What I think all this implies, and then I'll turn it over to E. J. Dionne and Michael Cromartie, is that in the future what we'll see is perhaps a more balanced set of religious voices in the public square that challenge each other not just on policy points but on the very nature of faith and what it means for the role of religion in the public square.

E.J. DIONNE: Thank you. I guess conservatives felt they had little influence because their side lost that particular round, and that may have played some role. I was also fascinated by prayer versus other forms of action. Maybe it's a rebirth of the debate between faith and works that we're seeing in your survey. I'm really glad to be here, first of all, because I believe this is the first survey of this kind. A lot of us have been interested in the difference between progressive and conservative religious activists and John and Robby have put this together. I think it's also fair to say that I don't think this project would've occurred to anyone ten years ago because I don't think people took the idea of progressive religious activism seriously ten years ago. That probably shouldn't have been the case but there's clearly that sense of movement that Robby talked about I think reflects the fact that something new was either born or revived in our politics. I also have to say these are the two best folks to do this. John Green is one of the great established scholars in this area. If you Google the words religion, politics and data, you enter the online church of John Green.

And Robby is one of the finest young scholars in this area, he's done some great work on it, and I'm very glad to be here.

I'm going to begin with a quotation from C.S. Lewis, make one general observation and I want to go to a couple of things in the data. When I read this report, I was reminded of something C.S. Lewis once said about politics. Lewis, of course, writing as a Christian said the following. He said, "Most of us are not really approaching the subject in order to find out what Christianity says; we are approaching it in the hope of finding support from Christianity for the views of our own party." And I think when you look at this data, there's a lot of that going on here on both sides.

The Shifting Religious Fault Lines

I think a second point, and I know Mike and I agree on this one, is that to a very significant degree, the core divisions of religious Americans are no longer primarily defined by theological issues. The splits in the broad sense are political. The friendly, or usually friendly, arguments among believers over back fences or kitchen tables or barbeques focus not on the virgin birth, the real presence of Jesus in the eucharist, or even whether Jesus is the Savior, infant baptism or the nature of the hereafter. More often, they are about issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and also about attitudes toward government.

Now this has led to a peculiar kind of ecumenism in our country. Historically, the defining religious divisions in our politics were first between Protestants and Catholics, also between Christians and Jews. Muslims have arrived on our shores in significant numbers only relatively recently. In largely homogeneous Protestant communities there were also fierce feuds among denominations, particularly in the South between Methodists and Baptists. As in so many things in our history, racial divisions affected all groups and many Protestant denominations split along regional lines in this. But on the whole, social and theological differences between denominations and faith traditions mattered a great deal. Those old divisions have largely passed away. Now conservative Catholics, Protestants and Jews tend to ally together against more liberal Catholics, Protestants and Jews. American Muslims have been a swing group, although since the Iraq War, they've tended to vote Democratic. Grant Wacker, a professor of Church History at Duke Divinity School, once said that one of the most remarkable changes of the 20th Century is the virtual evaporation of hostility between Protestants and Catholics. I don't think that's because Baptists have come to have great respect for tridentine theology, he said, it's because they see Catholics as allies against graver problems. There's a large reconfiguration going on now. Wacker was speaking mostly of religious conservatives but his words apply also to the religious moderates and progressives referred to in this study.

We talk a lot about issues such as gay rights and abortion and those issues are important, but I think the unspoken split, the overlooked schism, if you will, is over attitudes toward the role of government in dealing with major social challenges: poverty, the environment, health care, and other questions. The argument is not primarily over the individual's obligation to charity, it's hard to read the Old and New Testaments without thinking that there is a special obligation to the poor, but there is a powerful dispute over what modern government, as against individuals, should do to lift up the poor. There's contention over

the relative importance of social and individual responsibility; if religious progressives tend to criticize government for being insufficiently generous toward the poor, religious conservatives argue that too much government assistance promotes dependency. And I think you see that kind of split in this survey.

Key Findings of the Surveys

I want to point to a couple of specific findings and perhaps elaborate on a couple in the survey. Some of them are not surprising, although I found it intriguing that indeed, as we expected, the majority of the religious conservatives were Evangelical Protestant, but 35% were Roman Catholic. The largest plurality of the progressives were Mainline Protestant, but 17% of them were Roman Catholic. The religious conservatives, not surprisingly, were much more literalist, if I may use that term, in their attitudes toward scripture. I'm glad that John pointed this out.

I think it's very interesting that the conservative religious activists are much more anti-abortion than the progressive activists are pro-choice on the other side. Indeed, only 26% of the progressives think abortion should be legal in all cases. I found that a significant finding. Similarly, I would underscore not where the majority of religious conservatives are on torture but the fact that there is very significant opposition to torture among those who call themselves religious conservatives. And although we don't have the data, I have a suspicion that the religious conservatives have more qualms about torture than the rank and file, the overall number of conservatives in the country. I found that interesting. The role of government and taxes – I'm still on page 2 – underscores what I said earlier.

I'm also glad John called attention to the fact that the conservative activists tend to go to religious services more than once a week; yet the vast majority of progressive activists go to church at least once a week. The only group in the electorate I think that has the same level of church attendance as conservative activists are African American Christians, for whom I think the church plays a similarly important social and political role in their lives. Not surprising, but I was surprised by the degree of it, the conservative activists tilt very male, 59% of them are male. The progressive activists tilt slightly female.

It should trouble leaders of all religious communities that this is a pretty old group; 81% of both kinds of activists are over the age of 50. Now maybe some of that is a measure of activism, but I think there's something interesting about how old they are. The conservative activists are even older than the progressive activists, the Sixties generation, if you will, the 50 to 65s a little larger on the progressive side. Both of these groups are highly educated; 70% of the conservative activists and 89% of the progressive activists at least graduated from college and you've got an awful lot of post-graduate degrees among the progressive activists. I'm curious, and it's a question to you folks, as to whether this might be partly a reporting problem. This was a mail survey voluntarily answered. I'm wondering if there's a bias in favor of college graduates who may be more inclined to send a survey back to a bunch of researchers than other folks, that they may trust you a little more, in this case rightly so, but perhaps not in all cases with people doing surveys.

And then one more split: 25% of the conservative activists are from rural areas or small towns, so that's much higher than the rest of the country. The progressives tend to be overwhelmingly suburban or from cities. Again, not a shock, but I think an important finding.

The Challenge of Finding Common Ground

And lastly, I just want to ask, "Is there any way these guys could ever get together and agree on anything?" Maybe the answer is no and we should leave it at that. I was thinking about my friend, the late Father Philip Murnion, a friend of some folks in the audience here. He once said a very interesting thing. He spent time as a child on welfare, and he said that in his day poor children could count on three basic forms of support: some money from government, love and nurturing within the family, and moral guidance from churches and neighbors who lived in relatively safe and orderly communities. Now, he argued, poor children are under threat in all three spheres. Government help is in danger, many of the poorest children live in difficult family situations, and moral order and physical safety, not to mention the availability of jobs, has collapsed in many of our poorest neighborhoods. It does seem to me that social justice requires economic support from government, a concern for family life, and serious efforts to strengthen community institutions and restore public order. I speak here as somebody on the progressive side of this divide. It's possible that religious progressives could find their vocation in insisting that society needs to grapple with each of these issues, that the heart of their arguments might be two principles: that compassion is good but justice is better; and while government certainly cannot solve all problems, what government does and fails to do still matters enormously. Thank you.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you. Thank you, E.J. Let me call your attention to a few reasons why this survey data is so very important especially today. About two years ago, the story goes that two Senators were having lunch in the Senate dining room, one a Democrat, one a Republican. The Republican said to the Democratic Senator—a point he could not put to him today but he could two years ago—"You know, the problem with you Democrats is you don't understand religious people. You don't understand religious believers. You don't even understand religion. In fact, I will give you a twenty-dollar bill if you can cite the Lord's Prayer." The Democratic Senator looked at him and he said, "You're on." So he said, "Let's bow our heads," and the Democratic Senator said, "Now I lay me down to sleep…" The Republican pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and said, "I didn't think you could do it." [laughter] There's a woeful lack of knowledge on these topics in this town, and it is being corrected and it will be corrected certainly by this data, and that's one of the reasons why it's important.

The Closing of the God Gap

Another reason why it's important though is this. Let me just call your attention to a few things that I pulled out of my files just yesterday after reading this report. In 2002, the very respected social science journal *The Public Interest* published a cover story called "Our Secularist Democratic Party," which received a lot of attention in the press. It cited that the leading, growing movement in the Democratic Party were seculars. And then right after

that, Amy Sullivan writing in *The Washington Monthly*, June 2003, wrote a very important essay that got a lot of attention called "Do the Democrats Have a Prayer?" And then a book followed from that. And then in January 12, 2004, our friend Frank Foer of *The New Republic* wrote a piece called "Beyond Belief," which was about Howard Dean's religion problem. At that time Howard Dean was a leading candidate for presidency, and he called Howard Dean the most secular candidate to run for President in modern history. And that was in *The New Republic*. And then in February 2008, E.J. and John Green and Amy Sullivan and Ross Douthat had a press conference right here at the National Press Club called "Is the God Gap Closing?" Well clearly, from this data, it is not only closing, it is closed. And of course, with the election of President Obama and his comfortableness with using God language in the campaign, it satisfied the concerns of a lot of people. And this data does the same.

Evolving Positions and Concerns of Evangelicals

Let me just try to address two issues. What does this data say about Evangelicals and their evolving positions and concerns in the public arena? And then I'll call attention to something that I think is actually lacking in the study, which is of utmost importance. What are the size of these two groups? How big are they? Name for me one liberal progressive mainline mega church in America where 25,000 people attend every Sunday. Who is the Rick Warren of the liberal mainline Protestant world? In other words, I'm intending no offense by this, but liberal Protestantism has been dwindling the last several decades and we're looking at the data of how they vote. And then we look at religious conservatives and how they vote. Are we comparing apples and oranges or are we comparing a lot of apples with an orange? One of the questions we must ask today is, "What is the growing end of religion in American life and what part of that growing end is involved in public life?"

Now, I think it's true to say from this data, it seems to indicate that Evangelicals are not turning into liberal Democrats…. There has been a fiction of widespread Evangelical desertion of the Republican Party and Evangelicals are becoming liberal. I would say from this data, that this assertion needs to be challenged. It doesn't seem to be happening. Yes, Evangelicals have been expanding their social, cultural and political agendas; i.e. Rick Warren and Rick Hybols and others. They've been expanding the agenda of concerns of religious conservatives and Evangelicals into issues concerning poverty and the environment. But this does not mean that the other important issues have been abandoned. Clearly this data shows that they have not abandoned the social, cultural and moral issues that they find to be actually more urgent. In fact, I was struck that on page 20 of the study, it says that "more than 7 in 10, 71%, conservative activists say that religious people should stay focused on social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, but only 1% say that religious people should shift their focus to issues of poverty and the environment."

I cannot tell you how many phone calls I've had from members of the press who have said, "Evangelicals have given up on these other issues and they're all concerned about the environment." And I said, "No, they're concerned about the environment but they haven't given up on those other issues," and of course this data shows that to be clearly the case. There are clearly important changes afoot in the wider Evangelical movement but they do not spell a collapse of traditional commitments in the political and social arena that equates

to an exodus to the Democratic Party, which some people thought might be the case, especially with the election of President Obama.

Campaign Activities of Conservative Activists

Now on page 17, another thing that is important that comes out is this, and I'll just call your attention to the footnote on page 17 which says that religious conservatives and Evangelicals were more involved, and E.J. pointed this out, on state-wide congressional elections. Now this is very fascinating because Evangelicals in the past have seemed to always rely on figureheads to tell them what to do, and now this indicates that the wider religious conservative movement has become more decentralized and more localized and more concerned about state wide issues, which was not the case in the past. And I think that footnote is very important. Is it the case that Evangelicals have become decentralized, less dependent on what their so-called leaders say and more on local issues that concern them on the local level? E.J. indicates in his comments that this shows that maybe they've been in the field for a long time, 30 years from now, and then I think he indicated they've been there a little bit longer than progressives. That surely is not the case. The National Council of Churches and the mainline Protestant churches have been involved in politics for many, many decades, even before Evangelicals and fundamentalists got involved in politics.

A Warning to the Religious Left

Now I just want to say as a challenge and in conclusion, in light of this data, I would like for just once, just once, only once, I would like to hear someone, an academic or maybe a *Washington Post* editorial columnist warn the religious left in this country to be careful lest they commit idolatry by hitching their wagon and their hopes to the Democratic Party as they've so often warned religious conservatives regarding the Republic Party. Just once. Thank you.