

Do Adventist Voters Lean Left or Right?

Seventh-day Adventists in the United States present an unusual political profile.

by Roger L. Dudley and Edwin I. Hernandez

DID THE 1992 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS have any special interest for Seventh-day Adventists? Another way to ask the question is: Were there religious issues underlying the campaign? Consider some interesting facts:

In the general elections on Tuesday, November 3, 1992, Governor Clinton received 43 percent of the popular vote to 38 percent for President Bush (the other 19 percent voted for Ross Perot). Of course, Clinton won the election. But suppose the whole electorate had been composed of conservative Christians? According to an election analysis by the *New York Times*, among Caucasians who claimed to be born-again Christians, Clinton received

only 23 percent of the vote and Bush garnered 61 percent.¹ A landslide re-election victory for the president!

Certainly, conservative Christians have been drawn to the Republican Party as the best vehicle for establishing their values in the laws of the nation. The political arm of this group is generally known as the New Christian Right (NCR) and is exemplified by the Christian Coalition, led by television evangelist and one-time presidential candidate, Pat Robertson. NCR was a power at the Republican nominating convention in Dallas—injecting planks into the party platform on religion, abortion, marital stability, and school prayer.²

Another religious issue lurking beneath the surface of the campaign was the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). If passed by Congress, this act would have restored the protections of the “free exercise” clause of the First Amendment, which were greatly weakened in the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Smith vs. Oregon*. RFRA was generally op-

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posed by leaders of NCR who felt that it might be used as a justification for abortion. President Bush then threatened a veto, so the appropriate committees did not bring the bills to the floor for a vote. On the other hand, Clinton pledged to sign RFRA if it passed Congress.

We do not know how Adventists voted in 1992 (although we hope to investigate this question in the near future). Did they consult their conservative religious values and vote Republican? Did they consider religious liberty issues and go Democrat? Or did they choose a separatist position and not vote at all?

While the number of Adventists voting for the President is not yet known, we do think we have some idea of what policies of the new administration Adventists will support or oppose. This article shares with you information we have gathered on Adventist attitudes toward a wide range of public issues.

A National Study

To collect the necessary data we designed an 82-item Religion and Public Issues Survey. Since our main purpose was to compare various religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with positions on public issues, the survey contained a number of scales to measure different aspects of religiousness. Since this article is limited to a description of the public stance of American Adventists, only that part of the survey will be described here.³

The Public Issues scale consisted of 18 statements on public issues, with responses on a five-point continuum from strongly oppose to strongly favor. A list of more than twice this length was originally prepared and, because of space limitations, was reduced to the present size by attempting to select a battery of items that would be representative (rather than exhaustive) of the most-debated public concerns of the day. In addition, re-

spondents were asked their preference for political party, their political orientation (conservative, moderate, liberal), and how they voted in the 1984 presidential election (data collected in the summer of 1988). Standard demographic questions were also included.

The sample was created by drawing 800 households by a random sequential method from the mailing list of the North American Division edition of the *Adventist Review*, the general church paper of Seventh-day Adventists. While this journal is published weekly and sold by yearly subscription, church administration subsidizes the sending of the first issue of every month on a complimentary basis to every Adventist household in the United States as far as the list is complete. Some 250,000 names are on the monthly list.⁴

Copies of the questionnaire, letters of appeal and instruction, and a stamped envelope addressed to the researchers were mailed to the 800 households.⁵ Of these, 419 completed usable instruments, resulting in a response rate of 56 percent. The following analyses are based on these 419 subjects.

Attitudes Toward Public Issues

To measure positions held on various current issues (in 1988), 18 statements were finally selected. One major issue that is missing is abortion. After much consideration it was decided not to include this topic (a mistake to be corrected in the future) because the study focuses on *public* issues.⁶

The responses to the various items may be read from Table I. For ease of interpretation we have combined *strongly oppose* and *somewhat oppose* into an *oppose* category, and *strongly favor* and *somewhat favor* into a *favor* category. The extent to which the percentages fail to total 100 percent represents the *uncertain* response.

Conservative-Liberal Trends

In order to perceive some sort of pattern to these findings, they can be organized into a conservative-liberal framework. Nine of the statements are worded as typically "liberal" statements; the other nine as typically "conservative." Below are shown the liberal statements arranged in the order of support suggested above (total responses of "somewhat favor" and "strongly favor"). Statements are abbreviated to their kernel idea.

On seven of these nine issues the majority favored the statement—an indication of incli-

nation toward liberalism on the politico-social front. Note that American Adventists are most likely to favor the liberal stance on socio-economic and peace issues and most likely to forsake it on strictly political concerns. The least support was given to churches becoming involved, with 70 percent opposing this item. It is as if the members were saying: "We may agree that some of these positions are good and worthwhile if they are put into operation by 'secular' people, but we are not sure that Adventists should help to make them a reality, and we are quite certain that the church should not take sides." This seems to reflect

Adventist Attitudes Toward Public Issues

	Oppose	Favor
• United States-Soviet "freeze" on the development of nuclear weapons	10 percent	72 percent
• Establishment of normal, peaceful relations with Russia	6 percent	79 percent
• Increased government aid to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minorities	24 percent	52 percent
• Elimination of all racial restrictions in housing, education, and employment	7 percent	81 percent
• The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution which guarantees equality to women	22 percent	62 percent
• Christians as individuals becoming involved in political action (run for office, work for a candidate, etc.)	35 percent	41 percent
• Churches as corporate entities becoming involved in political action (e.g., issuing position statements)	70 percent	14 percent
• A constitutional amendment to permit prayer and/or Bible reading in public schools	47 percent	38 percent
• Increased spending for national defense	49 percent	21 percent
• Military aid to the Nicaraguan "Contras"	44 percent	23 percent
• Government-sponsored insurance for elderly in nursing homes	7 percent	75 percent
• Construction of Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) to ward off possible nuclear attack	35 percent	34 percent
• Appointment of conservative, strict-constructionist justices (like Rehnquist, Scalia, and Bork) to the U.S. Supreme Court	35 percent	22 percent
• Control of crime by tougher laws and "stiffer" sentences	8 percent	81 percent
• Withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations	55 percent	14 percent
• Registration of all firearms	21 percent	63 percent
• Regarding capitalism or free enterprise as that form of government most in harmony with biblical Christianity	11 percent	53 percent
• Capital punishment (the death penalty) for certain classes of dangerous criminals	18 percent	62 percent

the historic Adventist stance on separation of church and state. It also echoes the theme that the work of the church is primarily to save sinners and prepare them for the world to come, not to improve their lot in this world.

Despite this general feeling on the part of the membership, officials of the church have made recent forays into the realm of position papers on public issues. A good example is the statements released at the quinquennial World Session of the General Conference held in Indianapolis in July of 1990. They dealt with bans on selling assault weapons to civilians, pornography, affirmation of the family, homelessness and poverty, ecology, the Christian response to AIDS, and chemical use, abuse, and dependency.⁷ Incidentally, the involvement of churches in the political process has historically been considered a liberal stance, but with the rise of the New Christian Right, conservatives have entered this arena *en masse*. Thus the rejection of this statement by the majority of Adventists should be seen not as political conservatism but as theological separatism.

The fact that government aid to improve the position of minorities gathered only a very narrow majority while at the same time strong support was given to eliminating racial restrictions and providing government insurance for nursing-home care suggests that it is not latent racism that held down the percentage favoring aid to minorities. More likely, this development reflects the Adventist (and generally conservative Protestant) self-help theology with its emphasis on individual salvation. "Each person relates to God individually, and God helps those who help themselves."

The statement on the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution (ERA) is especially pertinent in view of the current struggle in the Adventist Church over the role of women. Questions raised in the struggle include whether women may be properly ordained to the gospel ministry and whether

they may serve as pastors or elders of local congregations. While the questionnaire statement did not address these issues directly, earlier research has shown that pastors in North America who support the equality of women in the public arena are more likely to affirm their full equality in the ministry of the church.⁸ If the same is true of lay members, the response to this statement may provide some clue as to the strength of support for women in pastoral ministry.

In light of the current relevance of this issue to the church, it may be worthwhile to give a complete breakdown on the support for the statement.

The Equal Rights Amendment

Strongly oppose	13 percent
Somewhat oppose	9 percent
Uncertain	16 percent
Somewhat favor	22 percent
Strongly favor	40 percent

It seems obvious that those who take either position are more likely to feel strongly than mildly about it. Thus the polarization in society—and in the church if this statement provides a clue to attitudes concerning women in ministry. The measure of support, then, suggests that women will become more acceptable as ordained pastors (at least in the United States (in the future).

This seems especially likely in view of the age grouping of this sample. Nearly half (48 percent) were over 50 years of age, and a quarter were over 65. Only 28 percent were 35 years or younger. Yet a constant finding in all research is that younger people are more likely to favor the rights of women and minorities than are older ones. If this "more mature" sample is as supportive of ERA as the results indicate, one could predict even higher support as the younger generation moves into leadership roles in the church. However, po-

sitions on this issue are not significantly different among different demographic groupings in this sample.

Favoring Liberal Positions	
	Percent
• Eliminate racial restrictions in housing, etc.	81
• Establish peaceful relations with Russia	79
• Government insurance for elderly in nursing homes	75
• U.S.-Soviet freeze on nuclear weapons	72
• Registration of all firearms	63
• Equality for women (ERA)	62
• Government aid to improve positions of minorities	52
• Individual Christians becoming involved in politics	41
• Churches becoming involved in political action	14

If the remaining nine issues are arranged in a similar manner, the following picture emerges.

In contrast to the “liberal issues” the majority of Adventists favored only three out of the nine “conservative” issues. The support was much less here, although it must not be inferred that the subjects necessarily *opposed* these other issues. The “uncertain” response was high on several of them, especially the last five (all over 30 percent). The two most highly favored issues deal with law and order—perhaps reflecting the heavy law orientation prominent among Adventists. The third-favored position deals with approval of capitalism as the economic system most in harmony with Biblical Christianity. This may again reflect the work ethic that grows out of a strong sense of righteous behavior. Majority support for these three statements may also indicate the increasing alignment of Adventism with the American social system—“an alternative to the Republic in the framework of Bull and

Lockhart.”⁹

A conservative cause that fails to gain majority support is a constitutional amendment to permit prayer and Bible reading in public schools. This finding is easily explained by the historical opposition by the church to entanglement of the state with religion. Adventists believe in making religion the foundation of education, and they support a massive parochial school system, from the kindergarten to the university levels, to do just that. But they are wary of any government-endorsed religion. In their historic scenario of the lamb-like republic that turns into the persecuting dragon (Revelation 13), government-sponsored prayer and Bible-reading in the schools may be the foot in the door that eventually leads to other religious legislation, government control of churches, and persecution for dissenters.¹⁰ The same reasoning may be operating in the meager support for the appointment of conservative, strict-constructionist justices to the United States Supreme Court. Traditionally, it has been “liberal” justices, rather than “conservative” ones who have championed individual liberties and the separation of church and state.

Favoring Conservative Positions	
• Tougher laws and stiffer sentences on crime	81
• Capital punishment for dangerous criminals	62
• Capitalism in harmony with Bible Christianity	53
• Prayer/Bible reading in public schools	38
• Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars)	34
• Military aid to Nicaraguan “Contras”	23
• Conservative justices on U.S. Supreme Court	22
• Increased spending for national defense	21
• Withdrawal from the United Nations	14

The other conservative items that gathered only minority support are all military and defense issues. In general, conservatives support a strong defense to protect America from “godless” systems like communism that would destroy its traditional moral and family values. Adventists would have reason to take a similar position except that they have historically been a semi-“peace church.” Because of their high regard for the Ten Commandments—of which the sixth prohibits killing—and problems involving Sabbath service, Adventists have tended to eschew service in the military. While the church does not enforce pacifism, it recommends that its young people do not enlist in the armed services and, if drafted, serve in the unarmed medical branches. It is not surprising that given the tension between concern for values threatened by communism and historical noncombatance, majorities neither favored nor opposed the military and defense items, but that large proportions were undecided.

An interesting finding that we are not able to develop in this paper is that ethnic minorities tend to be more liberal on public issues than are Caucasian Adventists, even though they are generally more conservative on religious matters.

Political Party Preference

In addition to attitudes toward public issues, we asked three questions requiring the respondent to consider directly his or her relationship to political matters. The first was: “With which political party do you most closely identify?” The answers were as follows:

While most Adventists did not consider themselves Republicans, those who did con-

Democrat	24 percent
Republican	44 percent
Independent	12 percent
No interest in politics	20 percent

stituted the largest grouping of any political identification. Democrats were considerably behind, doing only a little better than half as well.

Since Republicans are generally considered the more conservative party, and since Adventists in this survey tended to favor more liberal issues, this finding presents somewhat of a puzzle. It seems likely that the Republican party in general may be viewed as the party of stability of the status quo—the one most likely to preserve traditional moral and family values. Thus, Adventists may identify with it in general although they feel free to disagree with it on specific issues such as church-state concerns and military build-up.

It is also important that nearly a third did not identify with either party and that a fifth took no interest in politics. Again, this may reflect the historic trends in the church that lead members to conclude that Christians should not be involved in government at all but dedicate themselves to the spreading of the gospel.

Political Orientation

Perhaps not all see a connection between a conservative-liberal framework and a choice of political party. So we asked the question more directly: “Which of the following terms best describes your political orientation?”

If we compare the 34 percent who rated themselves as conservatives with the 44 per-

Conservative	34 percent
Moderate	37 percent
Liberal	5 percent
No opinions	24 percent

cent who identified with the Republican party, it becomes evident that a number of Republicans do not consider themselves to be conservative; a conclusion anticipated in the discus-

sion of the preceding section. The largest group claimed to be moderates—a somewhat surprising finding given the almost sacred character of the word *conservative* among Adventists. Only 5 percent were bold enough to claim the “L” word. Here again, nearly a fourth showed unwillingness to engage in the political arena by expressing “no opinions.”

Recent Voting Behavior

It is one thing to ask for political opinions or political self-identification. It is another to chart a particular political behavior. Perhaps the behavior by which Americans best reveal their political leanings is voting for the president of the United States. This national rite sweeps the whole nation into its lengthy process and allows for more comprehensive discussion of national issues than does any other event.

Therefore, we asked: “For whom did you vote in the last presidential election?” The choices were “Reagan,” “Mondale,” and “didn’t vote.” It might be asked why 1984 rather than 1988 candidates were listed. This is because the questionnaire was constructed and data collection begun prior to the 1988 elections and, indeed, even before it was determined with certainty who the candidates would be. While we might have asked: “For whom do you intend to vote?” we felt that some might be unsure until closer to the election date or might change their minds. The accomplished fact seemed a more stable measure. Also, the Reagan-Mondale contest was clearly perceived in conservative-liberal terms, given the past records and associations of each candidate.

Only about 60 percent of the Adventists voted, with Reagan, at 46 percent, outpulling Mondale (15 percent) three to one. Either all the Republicans voted, or a fair share of the Democrats and independents went for Reagan. The latter certainly seems likely.

Why did Adventists who favored “liberal” causes and who identified themselves as moderates vote for Reagan, the conservative candidate, especially when he supported actions that would seem to bridge the separation of church and state (e.g., school prayer amendment, ambassador to the Vatican, etc.)? Several reasons may be suggested.

For one thing, Reagan swept the country at large, winning the electoral votes of all but two states. Adventists are certainly influenced by surrounding opinions and tended to agree with their fellow Americans. For another thing, other factors probably played a larger factor than religion in the Adventist vote. The economy had risen from its earlier slump, and many members were doing quite well financially. The incumbent always has a large advantage in such cases. Moreover, Mondale let it be known that he felt a tax increase was necessary. Adventists may well have voted their pocketbooks rather than their principles.

Also, Reagan was a master at articulating traditional moral and family values. These would be shared by most Adventists, many of whom might not consider by what means such values would or could be integrated into public life. Given two different candidates and a different social ferment, the election might not have been so one-sided, although, in view of the political-party identification, it is likely that the Republican would still have drawn a plurality of Adventist votes. And it is well to remember that a sizeable minority (39 percent) of Adventist members did not vote at all, apparently preferring to abstain from the political process.

Conclusions

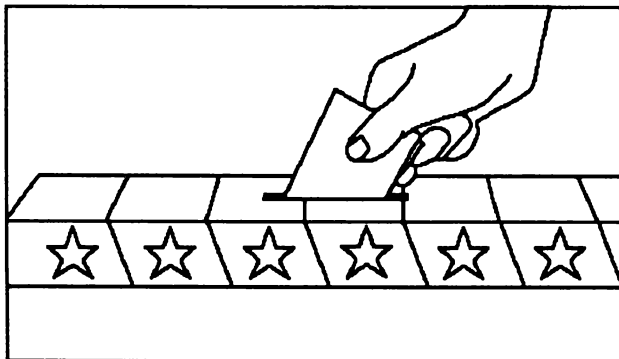
Adventists then present an unusual—perhaps unique—case among religious groups in the United States. As they face political issues and decisions, at least three

religious factors play a part in their attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, these three tend to be contradictory so that Adventist positions on public issues and political actions do not fit neatly into a conservative-liberal typology, but may seem inconsistent.

Adventists generally have traditional moral values. They believe in family, prayer, and Bible reading. They tend to oppose abortion and are generally against pornography and homosexuality. They reject communism with its inherent atheism. These are conservative positions and have been most strongly entrenched in the Republican party. Thus pluralities of Adventists identify themselves with this party and vote for its candidates. They also tend to favor those social forces that seem to support these values, such as strong, toughly enforced laws and capitalism.

Adventists oppose government interference in religion. They believe in separation of church and state. Given their eschatology, especially in their interpretation of the United States as the two-horned beast of Revelation 13, they have always been champions of religious liberty. This leads them to be suspicious of government-sponsored prayer, to give high regard to the first amendment to the constitution, and to generally oppose "morality" legislation even though they might agree with the values behind it. This factor may incline them to certain "liberal" positions and even, in some cases, to support Democratic candidates.

The tension between these two factors may



be illustrated by the "Seventh-day Adventist Guidelines on Abortion," voted on October 12, 1992, at the Annual Council of the General Conference.¹¹ The statement makes plain that "abortion is one of the tragic dilemmas of human fallenness," and that "abortions for reasons of birth control, gender selection, or convenience are not condoned by the church." It definitely presents a high and sacred view of life. On the other hand it affirms that "the final decision whether to terminate the pregnancy or not should be made by the pregnant woman after appropriate consultation. . . . Any attempts to coerce women either to remain pregnant or to terminate pregnancy should be rejected as infringements of personal freedom." Here we see the conservative pro-life balanced with the liberal pro-choice.

Adventists tend to be separationists. Their kingdom, like that of their Lord, is not of this world. They are citizens of heaven. Much in Adventist literary history has encouraged them to refrain from the political arena. Therefore, many do not vote, do not identify with any political positions, and do not participate in attempting to change the social order. Since this world is doomed to destruction, they prefer to concentrate on the next one.

These three factors are present in the experience of every Adventist. Their relative strength and the resulting mixture are influenced by variations in their religious orthodoxy, experiences, and practices. The pieces must be fitted together in a way that makes sense in the life of each individual.

At least that's the way it has been. Have changes in the religious liberty outlook and the insurgency of the New Christian Right moved Adventists farther from moral order issues and closer to freedom issues? Only future research will provide the answer. What is clear is that Adventists live in society. If faith is to have any value, it must give some guidance as to how the Christian is to relate to that society.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *New York Times* (November 5, 1992), Sec. B, p. 9.
2. See Carlos Medley, "Putting God on the Ballot," *Adventist Review* (December 10, 1992), p. 4.
3. For a complete description of all the findings, including an analysis of religiousness and theological and ethical implications, see Roger L. Dudley and Edwin I. Hernandez, *Citizens of Two Worlds: Religion and Politics Among American Seventh-day Adventists* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1992), 332 pages.
4. While the North American Division includes both Canada and Bermuda, public issues are somewhat different in these countries. Therefore, Canadian and Bermudian addresses were eliminated from the sample, and only households in the United States were selected.

Since several members may comprise a household, the instructions accompanying the questionnaire contained a further sample selection procedure. Recipients were told that the survey must be completed by a baptized member of the Adventist Church who was at least 18 years old. In case more than one member of the household met these criteria, the one whose birthday came first in the calendar year was to complete the questionnaire.
5. Two additional mailings followed several weeks apart. Each included another questionnaire and another stamped envelope. It was found that 52 of the letters were undeliverable due to incorrect addresses, thus reducing the sample to 748.
6. While abortion certainly has a public face, it is also greatly involved in private morality and might become confused with the public issue. For example, some might be morally opposed to abortion but against laws prohibiting it on the grounds that government should not interfere in moral and religious issues. Also some might favor laws to restrict abortion generally but permit it under certain circumstances (such as incest or rape). It would have taken several questions to clarify these issues, and space did not permit.
7. Neal C. Wilson, "SDA Position Statements: GC Leaders Target Concerns for the Adventist Church," *Adventist Review* (July 26-August 2, 1990), pp. 10-12.
8. Roger L. Dudley, "Pastoral Views on Women in Ministry," *Adventist Review* (June 4, 1987), pp. 17-19.
9. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
10. See Dudley and Hernandez, Chap. 4, "Adventism and Politics in Historical Perspective."
11. "Guidelines on Abortion," *Adventist Review* (December 31, 1992), pp. 11, 12.