

Adventist Collegians and the United States Presidential Election of 2008 | BY ROGER L. DUDLEY

The past few months have been an intense and exciting time on the American political scene, culminating on November 4 with the presidential elections. In 1984 and again in 2004, my colleague, Edwin Hernandez, and I surveyed a random sample of Seventh-day Adventists in the United States to determine their political leanings and positions on current public issues. The results from 1984 can be found in our book, *Citizens of Two Worlds*, and for 2004 in *Spectrum*.¹

This year, it was decided to look at a different population—students in Adventist colleges and universities.

We received completed surveys from 1,188 students. The six institutions were scattered throughout the country, thus assuring a national sample. Although the selection of students was voluntary, not random, the findings show that the various poles of political and public opinion were balanced, as was religious thinking.

How They Planned to Vote

The students reflected the country as a whole in their voting patterns. If we look at those planning to vote for Barack Obama or John McCain and disregard the other three options, 57 percent of the students chose Obama



Political rally at Pacific Union College included free apple pie.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HALEY WESLEY

This time, we used a different method—a Web survey. Students from six Adventist institutions participated: Andrews University, Southern Adventist University, Union College, La Sierra University, Pacific Union College, and Walla Walla University. School officials sent e-mails to their students requesting U.S. citizens to open a link and complete the survey, which was constructed using *Spectrum* software.

(Table 1; all numbers have been rounded to .1 percent in the tables). This is somewhat better than his actual national popular vote. It also reverses the pattern in 2004 (Table 2) where, although 75 percent did not vote (perhaps because of age), of the 254 students who did vote, 59 percent favored George W. Bush. Of course, these were not the same students this time, but the shift seems to mark a change in the political thinking of young Adventists.

Table 1*For Whom Do You Plan to Vote in 2008?*

(percent responding)

Barack Obama	38.4
John McCain	28.5
Other	3.5
Undecided	13.2
Don't plan to vote	16.4

Table 2*For Whom Did You Vote in 2004?*

(percent responding)

George W. Bush	13.9
John Kerry	9.5
Ralph Nader	1.2
Didn't vote	75.5

Although we did not survey adult members this year, the collegiate vote also represents a shift from the adult survey four years ago, where 44 percent planned to vote for George W. Bush and only 16 percent for John Kerry. Another interesting development was how the students identified themselves politically (Table 3). More consider themselves Republicans than Democrats. Notice that the largest identification (40 percent) was Independent. This suggests that some Republicans may have voted for Obama, but it was the Independents among collegians who gave him his victory.

Table 3*Politically, Do You Consider Yourself?*

(percent responding)

Independent	39.5
Republican	31.4
Democrat	29.1

All of our past research indicates that Adventists tend to be Republican. In the 2004 study, 54 percent

claimed to be Republican, only 16 percent Democrat, and the remaining 30 percent Independent.

Adventists voted overwhelmingly for Ronald Reagan in 1984. Does our survey of young adults portend a shift in future alliance with political identification and voting behavior? Only time will tell.

Religion and Public Issues

Our interest in this subject, however, is not simply to discover Adventist political thinking. Social scientists of religion attempt to discover how expressions of religion influence various social behaviors, such as family, business, deviance, and, of course, political action. Of our sample, 76 percent claimed that their religious beliefs influenced their voting behavior. Politics and public issues have drawn some of the greatest investigation, especially in election years, when many studies are published in academic journals and books.

One recent example is a book by David Domke and Kevin Coe of the University of Washington, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*.² The authors discuss the fusion of religion and politics in America and the tendency of faith to be used as a political weapon. For a good Adventist perspective on the relationship, see *Adventism and the American Republic*, by Douglas Morgan, or the Dudley and Hernandez book referenced above.³

Were there special religious issues underlying the recent election? A current article by Albert Menendez and Ed Doerr notes that matters of church and state are important to many voters because they affect society and culture in such broad areas as education, family life, health care and medical ethics, and social welfare. Some of the issues the authors explore are school vouchers, faith-based initiatives, abortion, gay marriage, and selection of U.S. Supreme Court justices.⁴

Importance of Current Issues

We selected nine issues and asked the students to rate their importance from "not important" to "most important." In Table 4, we have combined the top two ratings, "very important" and "most important," and listed the issues in descending order of importance.

Table 4*Current Issues: Very/Most Important*

(percent responding)

State of the economy	91.2
Human rights and justice	88.1
Separation of church and state	82.5
The war in Iraq and Afghanistan	70.6
Inflation	68.8
Protecting the environment	65.4
Universal health care	54.7
Appointment of Supreme Court justices	46.4
Constitutional amendment	
Prohibiting same-sex marriages	39.6

effort to save souls for heaven rather than work to make the present world a better place to live. The fact that young educated Adventist adults placed human rights and justice high on the scale of importance (88 percent) may indicate a shift from vertical to horizontal emphases in the Church.

The emphasis on separation of church and state is noteworthy because it trumps areas such as the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, inflation, the environment, and health care. If we look at only the top rating (most important), it even edges out the economy, 44.5 to 43.7 percent.

One of the anomalies of American Adventism is that, although the Church is a leading voice for separation of church and state, the majority of Adventists have identified with the Republican Party and important Republi-



Andrews University students Andre Weston, Andrew Gerard, Ryan Choi, and Ethren Lichtenwalter, the Obama team, await their turn to debate.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANDREWS UNIVERSITY

In choosing the state of the economy, students reflected the major concern of voters in the United States at this junction. Exit polls on election day revealed that 62 percent of those who voted—the highest percentage—considered the economy the most important issue. Students share the concern with other citizens because the economy will no doubt affect their ability to get loans and grants and pay college bills.

It may seem surprising that the subject of human rights and justice was placed second on this list since it seems to be a departure from typical Adventist thinking. Although Adventists have taken a leadership role in religious liberty, they have been less involved in other areas, such as civil rights and gender equality.

As for social justice, Adventists have resembled Evangelicals in general, who see the gospel primarily as an

can leaders have sought to bridge that separation in areas such as promotion of partisan candidates from the pulpit, tax support for religious schools, and government support of social services that discriminate in hiring practices and seek to proselytize those whom they serve. Perhaps the results of the survey indicate that the students are seeking less ambiguity.

Although the appointment of Supreme Court justices ranked second to last (only 11 percent of our respondents rated it most important), many thoughtful observers considered it the most important issue in the election. The next president will probably have an opportunity to appoint two or three justices. In the past, several of the current justices have made decisions that erode religious rights—for example, to protect the rights of believers in the workplace to observe their

faith by not needing to work on their holy days. The issue of whether justices will rule strictly on the Constitution or favor individual rights and liberties has deep roots in religious faith and practice.

From the viewpoint of the conservative Religious Right, no issue had more significance this election than constitutional amendments or legislation that prohibit same-sex marriages. Thus, it is probably significant that the students rated this concern last—less than 15 percent for “most important.” About one-third said it was not important at all. I should note that Adventists who consider this issue important probably favor such legislation.

Although our survey did not deal with California’s Proposition 8 (which would restrict marriage to one man and one woman), several Adventists leaders and organizations strongly promoted the measure and urged California Adventists to vote for it. We should note, though that Adventists who did not vote in favor of Proposition 8 or students who did not consider this a major issue do not necessarily approve of same-sex marriage. These Christians may believe that the Bible limits marriage to one man and one woman and that homosexual behavior according to the Bible is a sin. However, they do not believe it is legitimate for government to legislate behavior based in religion or attempt to force the values of a particular religious preference on the general public.

The same is true of the abortion issue. Here the students were asked to state their personal position (Table 5). In considering abortion, most students rejected the extremes of “abortion is entirely the woman’s choice” and “abortion is not acceptable under any conditions” to choose the middle ground: “abortion is acceptable in extreme circumstances such as rape, incest, and threat to the mother’s life.” This stance adheres most closely to the Church’s published guidelines.

Table 5

Views on Abortion
(percent responding)

Abortion is entirely the woman’s choice.	29.0
Abortion is acceptable in extreme circumstances such as rape, incest, or threats to the mother’s life	52.8
Abortion is not acceptable under any conditions	18.2

Although the collegians take life seriously, they recognize the complexity of the issue and leave it as a gray area. Although we did not ask our respondents whether abortion should be made illegal, we can assume that those who chose the first two options would not support such legislation. Even among the 18 percent who believe abortion is never acceptable, not all may favor a government prohibition since opponents generally use religious reasoning, as noted under same-sex marriage above.

Religious Behaviors and Attitudes

After exploring voting behaviors and attitudes toward current public issues, we turn to the religion of the students. Since non-Adventist students attend Adventist colleges and universities, some have wondered how many of our respondents are members of the Church. We did not directly ask for religious affiliation, but two questions are helpful. Almost 89 percent reported that at least one of their parents was an Adventist sometime during the first twelve years of their life. At least some of the remaining 11 percent may have become members subsequent to that age.

We also asked how long each of the respondents had been a member of the Adventist Church. No one failed to answer this question, and only 5 percent responded that they had belonged to the Church less than one year. We are confident we have captured the views of Seventh-day Adventist college and university students.

Table 6 lists five religious practices and asks how often the respondent participates in each. Options were “seldom or never,” “less than weekly,” “at least weekly,” and “daily under most circumstances.” In the table, we combine the top two—weekly and daily—and show the percentage in that category. Almost nine-tenths pray daily. The percentage drops off somewhat beyond that point, but the 64 percent who study the Bible are more numerous than those found in research for the world church. All in all, these figures indicate that the collegiate group is at least as active in devotional practices and sharing activities as are members of the church-at-large.



**Question in
the back at PUC
political party.**

Table 6

Weekly/Daily Participation in Religious Activities
(percent responding)

Pray privately	89.3
Study Bible	64.3
Read religious books /journals	49.6
Family worship	40.0
Volunteer work for church	29.4

The students in our survey attend church regularly (Table 7). About 88 percent are present at least 50 percent of the time, and the fact that two-thirds go at least once a week puts students ahead of most church members. Surveys have consistently shown that on average only about 50 percent of most congregations are present on any given Sabbath.

Table 7

Church Attendance
(percent responding)

Rarely or never	5.9
Once every month or two	6.4
Two or three times a month	21.2
At least once a week	66.5

Perhaps because of being away from home congregations and in a collegiate setting, the students are not as active locally. Less than one-fourth (24.4 percent) hold an office or other service position in their home congregations. One of the challenges that youth ministry faces is integration of Adventist college/university graduates into local congregations, where their talent and energy could be a huge plus for those churches.

Religious faith is important to this group, however (Table 8). Notice that 89 percent declared their religious faith either quite important or extremely important. Only about 3 percent said it was not really important. That faith, of course, takes different expressions (Table 9). Asked how they would self-identify their religious orientation, 24 percent were fundamentalist or conservative and 22 percent liberal. The majority (53 percent) took the middle position, or moderate. Notice that this is religious not political orientation. However, much social science research has found a relationship between the two.

Table 8

Importance of Religious Faith
(percent responding)

Not really important	3.1
Somewhat important	7.7
Quite important	24.9
Extremely important	64.3

Table 9*Self-Described Religious Orientation*

(percent responding)

Fundamentalist	1.2
Conservative	23.2
Moderate	53.2
Liberal	22.4

One factor that differentiates religious worldviews is an understanding of the Bible's inspiration. These views may range from the very conservative position of inerrancy, through a position that emphasizes the identification of biblical principles and their application to current situations, to the liberal understanding that places the Bible on the same level as other historical works. We selected an oft-used question from social science and posed it to the students (Table 10).

Table 10*Understanding of Bible Inspiration*

(percent responding)

Actual Word of God, to be taken literally, word for word	11.8
Inspired Word of God; must be interpreted in historical and cultural context	83.3
Ancient books of stories, legends, and moral teachings	5.0

The large majority takes a middle position that respects the integrity of the Word, but recognizes that it came through humans and is not a result of verbal inspiration. This seems to accord most closely with the writings of Ellen White, especially as found in *Selected Messages*, Book 1 and in the *Introduction to The Great Controversy*. Only about 5 percent see the Bible as a purely human document.

Religion and Politics

As noted above, this project is interested in finding out whether variations in religious practice and understanding are related to how an individual may vote or be concerned with various public issues. One way to discover this is through regression analysis. In regression, we take one variable, such as voting intentions, and

correlate it with a number of other variables, such as religious attitudes and practices, called independent variables. Of course, we could do that one at a time, but since there is considerable overlap among the religious variables, we could not tell how voting might relate to the group as a whole.

Regression removes overlap. First, it picks the religious variable that has the highest correlation with the voting variable and enters it into an equation. Then it recalculates and takes the next highest correlation, having removed any overlap between the two. It continues to do this until a certain level of statistical significance is reached. It stops when no other variable can contribute statistically to the equation. Table 11 displays such a regression.

Table 11*Regression on Intention to Vote for McCain or Obama*

Variable	Multiple Correlation	Beta
Religious orientation	.354	.376
College standing	.392	.392
Years as a church member	.405	-.102
Participation in family worship	.415	.096

In Table 11, the dependent variable is the question, "For whom do you plan to vote for in November?" But to sharpen the focus, we removed the "undecided," "other," and "don't plan to vote" options, so we are looking at the choice only between McCain and Obama. The religious variables to choose from are the devotional practices, church attendance, important of faith, religious orientation, and (as a control) certain demographic variables.

This regression is highly significant from a statistical standpoint. But after entering four religious and demographic variables the process is completed. None of the other variables can add anything to the prediction in the presence of these four, although some might if isolated. The multiple correlation rises as each variable is entered until it reaches the maximum of .415. The beta column shows the relative strength of each predictor in the presence of the other three.

Here we notice that religious orientation is by far the best predictor. Since it runs up from fundamentalists to

Andrew Gerard (Team Obama) debating with Bradley Sica (Team McCain) at Andrews University.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANDREWS UNIVERSITY

liberals and the voting plan has McCain and Obama as 1 and 2, we may interpret the results thus: the more the respondent leans toward the liberal side religiously, the more likely the vote for Obama. This wouldn't be surprising if the orientation were political, but the fact that those who are more liberal (and moderate) in religious matters were more likely to vote for Obama opens a new field of thinking and study.

From the second entry, it can be seen that those farther along in college were more likely to vote for Obama. The third predictor is negative. This means that those with fewer years as Adventists are more likely to vote for Obama. Finally, those more regular in family worship lean toward Obama, but this predictor does not add much to the equation.

We did not use the viewpoint of biblical inspiration as a regression predictor because the different options are not arranged in an ascending order. Here, though, we can use a cross tabulation and determine significance by the use of Chi square (Table 12).

Table 12

Voting Intentions and Biblical Inspiration
(percent responding)

Candidate	Word for Word	Interpret in Context	Human Document
McCain	12	87	1
Obama	9	81	10

Since we know how many planned to vote for McCain and Obama, and how many for each candidate picked each of the three options for inspiration, we can construct a six-cell table. The raw figures would be difficult to interpret because each candidate has a different total, so they are changed to percentages and rounded off to the nearest whole percentage. The inspiration options have been abbreviated for space reasons, but the full wording is in Table 10. Now it can be seen that Obama voters were more likely to see the Bible as an old book of stories and McCain's supporters to view it as the actual word of God, to be taken literally, word for word. Of course, the great majority of both sides went for the middle position.

We also did an additional series of nine regressions using current issues as dependent variables and the religious variables as predictors. All nine of these regressions were statistically significant, which means it is highly likely that a relationship does exist. However, in some cases the relationship is so weak as to be of no practical importance. Thus, in the following descriptions, we will report only those where the multiple correlation reaches at least .20.

The first of these deals with the importance of universal health care. Table 13 displays the four significant predictors. Since the beta for gender is negative, men were more likely to place importance on this issue than women. On religious orientation, the more moderate and liberal the students were, the greater the emphasis on health care. That mirrors the political orientation of

congressional representatives. The higher the individuals on the college ladder, the more likely they were to emphasize this issue. Family worship is also a predictor, but a rather weak one.

Table 13

Regression on Importance of Universal Health Care

Variable	Multiple Correlation	Beta
Gender	.153	-.169
Religious orientation	.200	.149
College standing	.231	.112
Participation in family worship	.245	.085

Table 14 shows the relationship of importance of same-sex marriage on the religious variables. Since three of the betas are negative, the interpretation is that those who consider it more important tend to be more conservative religiously (which means they probably oppose it), are males, and take more literal views of Scripture. On the positive beta, they tend to consider their faith more important.

Table 14

Regression on Importance of Prohibition of Same-Sex Marriages

Variable	Multiple Correlation	Beta
Religious orientation	.215	-.154
Importance of religious faith	.238	.087
Gender	.253	-.084
Views on biblical inspiration	.261	-.069

Table 15, which deals with the importance of Supreme Court appointments, contains the most significant predictors of any regression. Among negative relationships, importance is related to conservative religious orientation (linked to the finding on same-sex marriage, this probably means that the respondents favor strict constructionists), sparser church attendance (strange), and holding that religious beliefs influence voting behavior. On the positive side, the students are more advanced in their college program, spend more time

volunteering for church work, are female, and participate more often in family worship.

Table 15

Regression on Importance of Supreme Court Appointments

Variable	Multiple Correlation	Beta
Religious orientation	.142	-.133
College standing	.188	.097
Volunteer church work	.216	.128
Church attendance	.235	-.126
Gender	.245	.076
Religion influences voting behavior	.253	-.064
Family worship	.260	.064

Table 16 presents the regression on the importance of protecting the environment. Those who emphasize this issue tend more to the moderate/liberal side in religious orientation, are farther advanced in their studies, and are more regular in family worship.

Table 16

Regression on Importance of Protecting the Environment

Variable	Multiple Correlation	Beta
Religious orientation	.202	.219
College standing	.218	.077
Participation in family worship	.229	.072

A different and somewhat reverse regression is shown in Table 17. Here we took the question of whether the respondent's religious beliefs influenced voting behavior, correlated it with the nine current issues, and came up with four significant predictors. Those who do make the connection tend to place more emphasis on the subjects of abortion, separation of church and state, and laws to prohibit same-sex marriage. However, they place less emphasis on inflation.

Table 17*Religious Beliefs Influence Voting Behavior*

Issue	Multiple Correlation	Beta
Views on abortion	.180	-.154
Separation of church and state	.202	-.089
Prohibit same-sex marriage	.218	-.092
Inflation	.230	.073

We don't know which side the respondents take in these issues, but the inclusion of abortion and same-sex marriage suggests that they oppose them. If so, it is rather curious that the response also emphasizes separation of church and state. However, past research on religion and politics has shown that humans are not necessarily logical; they sometimes choose options that are logically incompatible.

For the interest of readers, we have included tables on certain demographic variables, such as length of time as an Adventist (Table 18), college standing (Table 19), and ethnic background (Table 20). Also, our sample was 57 percent female, a little less than the percentage of women Adventist members in the North American Division, which was recently reported at 62 percent. We have not attempted to provide breakdowns of questions on these demographic groups because we lacked time and space. Also, our commitment to the colleges and universities that granted us permission to survey their students prevents us from reporting results by institution.

Table 18*Time as Member of Adventist Church*

(percent responding)

Less than one year	5.3
1 to 5 years	6.8
6 to 10 years	13.3
More than 11 years	74.6

Table 19*College Standing*

(percent responding)

Freshman	20.2
Sophomore	17.6
Junior	20.1
Senior or fifth year	28.4
Graduate Student	13.7

Table 20*Ethnic Background*

(percent responding)

Asian/Pacific Islander	8.6
Black, African American	4.2
Black, West Indian	3.2
Hispanic	13.5
White	59.7
Multiracial	7.4
Other	3.4

Conclusions

Seventh-day Adventists in the United States have typically considered themselves conservative, especially on values issues. Since the Republican Party has assumed the mantle of conservatism, especially since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, Adventists have tended to think of themselves as Republicans and vote for Republican candidates. Conservatives have especially advocated "family values" such as heterosexual marriage and respect for life—values dear to the Adventist heart.

This survey may indicate that younger, well-educated Adventists are beginning to move away from this position. Our participants are still more likely to be Republican than Democrat, but the larger number see themselves as Independents and the majority planned to vote for Obama, who is considered one of the most liberal U.S. senators. This indicates a change already bringing out cries of distress from some of the Church's conservative members. Much research in the past, however, has shown that college education has a liberalizing effect, so such a trend might not be too surprising.

This movement is seen not only in the voting statistics but also in the emphasis placed on important current issues that have religious implications. Although some of the students remain quite conservative, more are interested in broader concerns such as human rights and justice and separation of church and state than in more specific moral issues such as abortion and homosexual marriage.

For those who worry that the younger generation is losing the "historic faith," this survey should set minds at ease. Adventist students hold their faith to be very

important, they attend church at least as regularly as their elders, and they are quite diligent in prayer and Bible study. They tend to be moderate rather than extremist in their religious understandings, and they take a balanced view of biblical inspiration in line with the Church's most authentic teachings.

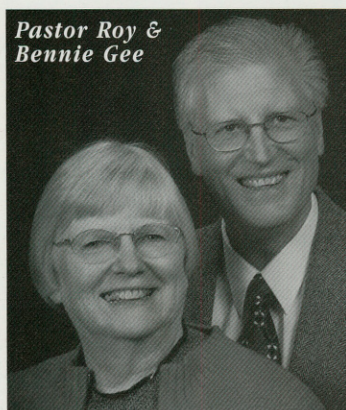
We have not found strong relationships between political voting and attitudes toward public issues with religious variables on many of the issues, but there were enough to draw some conclusions, even though they fall far short of completely explaining the variance. Basically, those whose religious orientation tends toward moderate/liberal tended to favor Obama, have a less literal understanding of the interpretation of Scriptures, and care more about universal health care. They also tend to be less concerned about Supreme Court appointments and prohibiting same-sex marriages, more concerned about protecting the environment, and farther along in their studies. In a word, respondents who were more moderate religiously were also more moderate politically. ■

Notes and References

1. Roger L. Dudley and Edwin I. Hernandez, *Citizens of Two Worlds* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1992); and Roger L. Dudley and Edwin I. Hernandez, "Where Church and State Meet: Spectrum Surveys the Adventist Vote," *Spectrum* 32.4 (fall):2004.
2. David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
3. Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).
4. Albert J. Menendez and Edd Doerr, "Church-State 08," *Liberty*, Nov./Dec., 2008.

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"Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live together in unity!"
PSALM 133:1



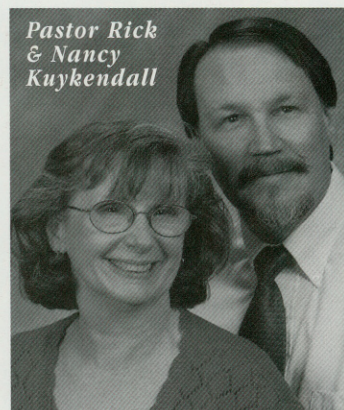
Pastor Roy & Bennie Gee

"A Safe Place for God's Grace"

10:45 a.m. Sabbath



710 Auburn Ravine Road,
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Pastor Rick & Nancy Kuykendall

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