

The year of the churchgoer

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Soccer moms, NASCAR dads and Reagan Democrats should step aside because 2004 is shaping up to be the year of the churchgoer. A recent Union-Tribune article highlighted that Democrats are shaping their convention language to incorporate plenty of faith talk.

Is targeting people of faith wise for Democrats? If San Diego County is indicative of the nation as a whole (and residents here, more than other California cities, tend to mirror the rest of the country), such a move will be ineffective and could backfire in a worst-case scenario.

The July KPBS/Competitive Edge Research poll (the results can be found at www.cerc.net) sketches a picture of San Diegans and their attitudes regarding religion's influence on politics. First, despite the increased media focus on the insertion of religion in politics, only 36 percent of us believe that religion plays too large a role in politics. Instead, 42 percent believe religion interacts with politics an appropriate amount and another 22 percent believe it plays too small a role.

But the story is drastically different among self-identified liberals. Seventy-two percent of "very liberal" residents feel that religion is much too involved in politics. San Diegans who identify themselves as "somewhat liberal" agree, with 45 percent of that group responding that politics and religion are too closely tied. Among the crucial bloc of swing voters who tend to be "in between or unsure" of their ideology, 28 percent feel there is too much religion in politics and 53 percent feel there is just the right amount.

These numbers are a mixed bag for Democrats. While pitching religion may appeal to some swing voters, it also could alienate their liberal base, causing them to stay home on Election Day or to peel away from the party and vote for independent Ralph Nader or "go Green."

The reason churchgoers hold such an appeal to strategists of both parties is that they regularly turn out to vote. The survey finds that 32 percent of county residents go to a religious service on a weekly basis, which exactly parallels national numbers. An overwhelming 85 percent of these San Diegans say they are registered voters. On the opposite end of the spectrum, 26 percent never attend services at all and just 76 percent of them are registered to vote. Being on the right side of that 9 percent difference can work wonders at the polls.

The second problem for Democrats is that appealing to regular church attendees and

convincing them to vote Kerry/Edwards is liable to go against the ideological grain. Unfortunately for Democrats, most churchgoers identify themselves as conservatives. Of people who attend church more than once a week, 59 percent say they are ideologically conservative, compared to just 18 percent who identify themselves as liberals. Even among less staunch attendees – folks who only go to a service once a week – 55 percent call themselves conservative and 30 percent identify themselves as liberal. Parenthetically, this represents a tectonic shift from the 1950s and 1960s when many church attendees were advocates for politically charged causes such as civil rights, which were more often associated with liberals.

In a year when the national polls show a highly polarized electorate, it might be tempting for Democrats in their convention this week to try to reach outside their traditional constituencies and poach some extra votes from Republican territory. If their goal is to give Kerry a boost, it may be too late. Looking at national poll numbers, Bush has consistently scored much higher on morality/character questions than Kerry. The most recent Fox News poll has Bush doing a better job than Kerry on the country's moral climate, 46 percent to 34 percent. The use of religious language and themes in their convention is unlikely to be enough to turn that trend around with religious voters.

Locally, the KPBS/Competitive Edge numbers show Democrats have significant ground to make up among folks who are more religious. But any attempt to do so will be like swimming upstream as they risk alienating their liberal base. The numbers in San Diego County indicate that Democrats might be better off spending their time, effort, and money on other issues and other constituencies.

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