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MICHAEL TOMASKY is the executive editor of *The American Prospect*.

DANIEL J. MAHONEY is a professor of political science at Assumption College in Worcester, MA. They spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before participating in a panel discussion on religion and the 2006 midterm elections.

OWENS: On Tuesday, the Democrats retook both houses of Congress in what many are calling a historic midterm election. In what way was religion relevant in this election?

TOMASKY: It obviously wasn't the driving factor or even among the top two or three. I think Iraq was obviously number one—general discontent and a desire to send a message on the part of a lot of independents and even a few Republicans. To me, the most interesting way religion functioned in this race is that a handful of Democrats have used telling about their faith to get elected in certain parts of the country where that works better than it does here.

I looked pretty carefully at the 27 Democrats who won in the House of Representatives, and you can call five of them outright social conservatives. And you can say that a few more than that were comfortable talking about their religious faith and how they see the relationship between religion and politics. I'd say that's a change for the Democratic party from the past 10 or 12 years.

I think the media is making a little too much of the supposed shift because I think a lot of Democrats who got elected are pretty standard issue liberals. A lot of these are fairly economically (not socially) liberal as well. So I think the media overstated it on election night.

MAHONEY: I would agree with almost everything Michael said. I don't think religion played a terribly important role in this campaign. One commentator said the "God gap" was closed a bit in this election, that of weekly church-goers,

something like 51% voted for Republican candidates and 48% voted for Democratic candidates. But I think that has little to do with some fundamental shift among the religious-minded and everything to do with Iraq. I think there's a sense that it's just not healthy to have one-party governance, that the Republican party became too attached to being the permanent governing party, or at least perpetuating its dominance in Congress.

I think a lot of independent voters and some conservative voters felt strongly about that. And I think Michael's right that there's a marginal number of cases. They stand out because they're exceptional considering the past, but in Indiana and a few other places, there are people who were vocally conservative and Christian, pro-life and pro-God and pro-Iraq and that kind of thing. And I think the fact that there are more than one or two people like that in the Democratic caucus is quite striking. But on the whole, I don't think this election was informed by any fundamental, ideological shift. This is still a very divided country, probably a little more center-right than center-left and Independent. I think we're in a holding pattern.

I did see one statistic—I hope this is right—that among the people who voted against same- sex marriage in Virginia, 38% of them voted for Webb. That says something interesting.

OWENS: Regarding this "God-gap," is it really as simple as saying that regular church-goers vote Republican in a vast majority? Or is there some other subtlety in the numbers that that statement doesn't reflect, and if so, has that changed since 2004?

MAHONEY: My guess is that many conservative-minded Christians among independents and Republicans have

voted Democratic this time but are quite likely to vote Republican again if there's a different set of circumstances: if the Congressional Democrats move too far to the left, if Bush gets his act together, if cultural issues play a major role in the 2008 campaign. So again, my sense is that nothing really probably fundamental has changed. The press is constantly raising the question whether or not the Republican party is in bed with evangelicals and conservative-minded Christians. But I think the other side of the coin is that for a long time, the Democratic party has been driven by a growing commitment to secularism. It's an interesting question whether this election suggests that the Democratic party is committed to a more nuanced approach to some of these issues and not simply becoming a voice for public secularism. Certainly, for tactical reasons in certain competitive races in certain parts of the country, Democrats got that message about the limits of a message that works in the Northeast, but I doubt that will go much further down the line.

TOMASKY: I think it depends on what manifestation of anti-secularism you're talking about. If, for example, it's a matter of a Democratic presidential candidate talking about why faith is important to him or her, then I think we will see that in a way that we did not see so much with Kerry. Gore did it a little bit, but a lot of Democratic presidential candidates haven't wanted to talk that way in recent history. But I think we're seeing more talk about symbolic manifestations and trying to wrap sets of issues in scriptural language and so forth. For example, many Democrats have said they're fine with the words "under God" in the pledge of allegiance. On fundamental church-state separation questions, it gets tougher in the Democratic Party. I think many Democrats are strict separationists, even those who talk about their own personal faith, because that's a question of Constitutional philosophy and governance. It's not a religious question, per se. So Democrats are getting more comfortable with religion, but this comfort will have limits. And there is still a God-gap.

MAHONEY: I would feel a lot more comfortable if there were fewer confessional/therapeutic evocations of people's personal relations with Jesus or of their personal religious beliefs and a more serious conversation about the place and limits of religion and religious symbolism in public life. To me, the real issue is whether or not there's a movement toward a common-sense approach and a more robust consideration of the constitutional issues involved in church-state separation. I don't see a whole lot of that; I think the center-right people pander to the evangelical base, and on the left, there's what I would call a growing commitment to a rather ahistorical view of separationism. So there are interesting things going on, but in terms of a civic discourse on these questions, it doesn't seem to be a terribly interesting conversation.

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> **- Daniel Mahoney**

OWENS: This week, Minnesotans elected the first American Muslim to congress, Keith Ellison. Do you think this a harbinger of something more for the future?

TOMASKY: I don't think there's that much significance to it. I didn't follow that race closely, but my understanding is that the district was heavily Democratic and that a Democratic candidate would have to do something extreme to lose there.

MAHONEY: It's a benchmark, but not of major significance.

OWENS: As I understood it, the exit polls say that the majority of Catholics voted for Democrats in this election. How important is that fact?

MAHONEY: I suppose it's important. On the one hand, it's not surprising to me that the Republicans' support among Catholics would go down given the political dynamics of the country right now, especially the discontent over the wisdom of going to war with Iraq and the conduct of the war. On the other hand, in some places the church mobilized strongly on certain issues; in Wisconsin, the Catholic vote was 60% against same-sex marriage. I think among Catholic Americans there's a serious political and cultural split between the church- going and those who are nominally Catholic. I think the nominally Catholic have been far more Democratic over the years than the regular, church-going Catholics. I don't know the data, but my guess is the more conservative-minded, church-going Catholics, like evangelical Protestants, remain more Republican. But again, because of the contingencies of this election, I wouldn't place too much weight on that. I think Republicans have a very good chance of repeating what they did in 2004 with the Catholic vote. I'm skeptical about the idea that there is such a thing as the "Catholic vote"; I think the cultural split in the United States is replicated within the Catholic community.

TOMASKY: I think that's true of a lot of groups we've talked about. The Catholic vote is back and forth a good bit, and I think it's different this year. I think it's different this year than in presidential election years, particularly with a presidential candidate who was Catholic and who didn't marry his second wife in the Catholic church, things like that. I think that brought out certain tendencies in Catholic religious leadership that, combined with some intelligent tactics on the Republican side, resulted in what we saw in the Catholic vote in 2004. This time I don't think the Catholic vote was that different from any other particular vote—it's basically about Iraq and sending Bush and the White House a message.

Going into 2008, it'll be different. I think there's a somewhat different dynamic in the Catholic vote during a presidential election than in mid-term elections. I've been looking at Pennsylvania, where I think there is a sizable, traditional Catholic voting bloc. The fact that the Democratic party was smart enough to nominate a more than nominally pro-life Democrat with the Casey name made the difference, because culturally conservative Catholics who might have been a little closer to the traditional Democratic social profile and who were ambivalent about Iraq could say well, we could vote for Casey. If you had had a Northeast liberal running against Santorum, Santorum would have done a whole lot better, even this year. Of course, next door in New York, which also has a very large Catholic group, you've got Hillary Rodham Clinton. She's pro-choice but she swept the Catholic counties.

OWENS: Rick Santorum is well-known as an outspoken conservative Christian leader in Congress who was vocal in his calls to intervene in Terri Schiavo's case and promoting both anti- poverty legislation and anti-abortion legislation. And he was ousted by Bob Casey. Local context is important in all of these elections, but is there any sense in which you think the voters in that case were rejecting the

sort of outspoken religiosity that Dan mentioned before: the profession of one's faith, speaking about faith routinely, as a basis for policy? Was his defeat in any way a rejection of that style of politics?

MAHONEY: I don't think Santorum practiced that confessional mode of religion in public. I think he saw himself as the closest thing to something like a conservative-minded Christian Democrat in contemporary politics, which means on a lot of welfare state issues, he wasn't a typical libertarian-minded Republican. Obviously his views on abortion and on the Terri Schiavo case are deeply informed by his Catholic faith, but he did try to make these arguments in a more natural-law idiom. He was also a profoundly polarizing figure and hated at the national level, I think, by people on center-left and lefter. But he got elected in '94 and he was swept in. He was reelected in 2000 with 52% of the vote. This time around he ran against someone who at least on a couple of core issues was not all that different from Santorum, so I don't think we can say his defeat is a definitive repudiation of a certain model of politics. I think it was always uphill for somebody like him in Pennsylvania. He was swept in '94 and got lucky in 2000. The fact that he made himself so visible on so many polarizing issues certainly meant that the Democrats were interested in nationalizing that election. So yes, it hurt him on one level, but he also had volunteers from all over the world come in, conservative activists and people who were really committed to him.

TOMASKY: He was regarded with special scorn by national liberals. His was the name that stood out because of some of those comments about bestiality and so on. But again, this was an election in a blue state, not a deep blue state, but it has been a blue state in the last two presidential elections, and his support for the administration was just too down the line for people. In that sense Pennsylvania really is a Northeastern state. And I think a lot of the pattern that you saw in this election, which doesn't have anything, again, to do with religion was that in Northeastern states, people looked at Republican office holders and said, I don't care how many times you've broken ranks with them, enough. That was Lincoln Chafee, obviously, but the two Republicans in New Hampshire as well.

MAHONEY: Well, Lincoln Chafee, of course, always broke ranks. But Nancy Johnson would be a very good case, really terrific congresswoman, generally popular with her constituents, very middle of the road, somebody who should have been reelected. I think you're exactly right: people simply said, "We're not

voting for Republicans." If you look at the country, taking out the Northeast and California, the national vote is very, very competitive.

OWENS: Whatever else one could call Santorum, a hypocrite is not one of them, and voters seem to feel ambivalent about hypocrites in Congress who say one thing and do another. Do you feel like this is a question of human nature, or are people now more willing to punish people who transgress some sort of professed norms, whether religious or moral, than they were pre-Clinton? This could be turned on any number of politicians in both parties, of course. Santorum and some other people are immune from that kind of criticism even though they're disliked by religious people who dislike their particular views. Is there anything to be said about democracy in this election that's notable?

TOMASKY: I think there's a lot of hypocrisy in the Mark Foley affair, because you hear all this talk about why he was allowed to go into the page's residence and so on. A lot of people who normally denounce homophobia in public life were beating that bandwagon. Then Jerry Studs dies, and he's celebrated as a trail-blazer. So I think there's a lot of hypocrisy on both sides. I think that issue, revealed at that time, lent itself to partisanship. The Republican problem is that if you're going to be partisans of public virtue, you are particularly vulnerable to high-level hypocrisy. It's profoundly embarrassing and it leaves a bad taste in people's mouths.

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