



## Altar call: The Democratic Party's religious rhetoric as image repair discourse

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### ABSTRACT

In 2004, Senator Barack Obama declared, “We worship a mighty God in the blue states.” During the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns, Obama and other Democratic candidates attempted to prove that Republicans do not have a monopoly on religious campaign rhetoric by invoking God, quoting scriptures, and attending forums on faith. These efforts to find political salvation can be seen as an attempt at apologia by Democrats who defended their Party from a perception of being godless or anti-religion. This study analyzes the religious-political rhetoric of the 2004 and 2008 Democratic presidential candidates in order to evaluate and critique the various strategies used to repair the Party's image on religious matters.

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During the 2004 election, commentators and strategists argued that Senator John F. Kerry needed to talk about religion even more to defeat President George W. Bush, who frequently and effectively invoked religious terms in his speeches. A 2004 Pew Research Center poll indicated that while 52% of respondents felt the GOP was religion-friendly, only 40% thought the Democratic Party was (Davidson, 2004). In order to reach out to religious individuals, the Democratic Party held its first caucus for “people of faith” at its convention in Boston, and, the week before the convention, the Party hired a Disciples of Christ minister as a senior adviser on outreach to religious voters. Not surprisingly, religious issues and language surfaced in the 2004 election as both Bush and Kerry courted faith-based voters. Despite the attempts by Kerry and other Democrats, the so-called “God gap” continued and may have made the difference in the election as Bush won nearly two-thirds of voters who attend church more than once a week and Kerry won nearly two-thirds of those who never attend church (Foust, 2004).

In the midst of the 2004 election, as Democrats were struggling to demonstrate their political religiosity, a young state congressman from Illinois delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. Barack Obama, who was in an easy race for election to the U.S. Senate, delivered a speech that energized the crowd and made him a political rock star. The speech propelled him into the national spotlight and launched him toward the path of winning the presidency just four years later. During that keynote address, Obama attempted to shed the image that Democrats were irreligious. He declared, “We worship a mighty God in the blue states” (Obama, 2004, p. 80). Although his speech failed to push Kerry to victory, four years later Obama seemed determined to once again prove that Democrats were religious. As he out-God-talked his fellow Democratic candidates and then his Republican opponent, Obama found the political salvation that had alluded Kerry. Presidential primaries are not merely about picking the candidate to represent the party in the general election, but also a chance for the party to define itself. This process occurs as candidates debate which issues the party should focus on and even which position the party should support on various issues. As voters in the party cast their votes, they are helping to shape the party and define it for the general election contest. Thus, if a party's presidential candidates start infusing religion

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into their messages – and especially if the party's voters select a candidate who utilizes such religious-political rhetoric – it offers insights into understanding the image the party wishes to create for itself. As Democratic presidential hopefuls in 2004 and 2008 sought political redemption in the ballot box, many turned to God—and thus helped shape a new Democratic Party image.

Much of the Democrats' religious-political rhetoric during these recent elections not only attempted to demonstrate the sincerity and religiosity of Democrats, but also to shed the image that Democrats are irreligious or even anti-religion. Thus, the discourse has been an attempt to repair the Democratic Party's image when it comes to religion and religious issues. The success of religious-outspoken Democrats like Obama warrants further attention toward the overall Democratic strategy of utilizing religious-political rhetoric. In particular, the notion of religious-political rhetoric as image repair discourse should be explored to determine how Democrats have framed religion during recent campaigns and what strategies they have employed to shed the image of being irreligious. This study will use Benoit's (1995) work on image repair discourse to consider Democratic religious-political rhetoric in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. As the Party's presidential candidates sought the top office in the nation, they also worked to overcome the crisis of a Party image that threatened to keep the White House out of reach.

## 1. Literature review

Although religion and politics are often considered taboo topics for polite dinner conversation, many commentators and politicians have noted the important role religion plays in modern political campaigns. Yet, scholars have not sufficiently explored the intersection of religion and politics. As Darsey and Ritter (2009) argued, it is “clear the enormous amount of work there is to be done on religion in U.S. public discourse and the great need for that work” (p. 571). Religious-political *apologia* remains particularly understudied. Numerous scholars have analyzed self-defense rhetoric as a unique and important type of discourse (e.g., Foss, 1984; Gold, 1978; Hearit, 1995; Miller, 2002; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Although much of the attention has been to political scandals or even religious rhetoric, questions of religious-political rhetoric have not been considered. Typically, scholars have considered responses of individuals and organizations to self-created image problems in the wake of scandals. However, *apologia* could emanate in any situation where the rhetor(s) feel their image needs improved because of a flaw perceived – rightly or not – by others. As Ware and Linkugel (1973) explained in their influential piece that sparked scholarly attention to the topic of self-defense rhetoric, *apologia* is predicated by the “questioning of a man's [sic] moral nature, motives, or reputation” (p. 274, emphasis in original). The questioning of a candidate's religious beliefs or commitments clearly fits within the forms of *kategoria* (accusation) that could spark *apologia*.

Perhaps the dominant perspective for considering self-defense rhetoric is Benoit's (1995) typology of image repair strategies. Benoit (1995) outlines five general strategies, with twelve subcategories, for repairing a damaged image. These strategies are: denial (simple denial, blame shifting), evade responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions), reduce offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation), corrective action, and mortification. Scholars have employed this framework to explore the *apologia* efforts of several politicians seeking to survive a scandal, including Bill Clinton after various scandals (Blaney & Benoit, 2001), George Allen after making a racist remark (Liu, 2008), Dick Cheney after his hunting accident (Theye, 2008), George W. Bush on Iraq (Benoit, 2006), and Bush after Hurricane Katrina (Benoit & Henson, 2009; Liu, 2007). Although often used to consider how to repair one's image after scandalous behavior, the framework can also be used to examine the rhetorical efforts to rebuild one's image in other situations. This study explores the religious-political rhetoric of recent Democratic presidential candidates as image repair discourse designed to change their image as irreligious or anti-religious.

## 2. Can I get a witness?

Ryan (1982) argued that in order to understand *apologia*, one must first consider the *kategoria* since the two are a “speech set” (p. 254). Such consideration provides insights into “the apologist's motivation to respond” and why the apologist chose to respond in “the nature” that they did (p. 254). The polls outlining the so-called “God gap” demonstrate the image problems that developed for Democrats. With Republicans receiving the support of most frequent churchgoers and with Republicans being viewed as much as much more religion-friendly than Democrats, the Democratic Party faced a clear religious image problem during recent presidential elections. Adding to these woes – and likely helping cause them – were the attacks the Democratic Party received concerning religion. For instance, George H. W. Bush attacked the Democrats during the 1992 campaign for not showing reverence for God: “The other party took words to put together their platform, but left out three simple letters: G-O-D” (Wood, 1992, p. 727). Similar charges – especially from conservative religious leaders like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson – created a consistent conservative mantra that the Republicans were the faithful party. Some criticism of the Democratic image on religion even came from within their ranks. For instance, Al From, then-Chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, argued during the 2004 primary season, “We went for years in the Democratic Party without recognizing God, and we pay a price for that” (Swarns & Cardwell, 2003, p. 9). Facing a “God gap” that commentators and political strategists claimed cost Democrats key elections, the Democratic Party and many of its presidential hopefuls sought during the 2004 and 2008 campaigns to repair the Party's religious image.

For this analysis of Democratic presidential candidates' rhetoric in the 2004 and 2008 campaigns, 708 speeches were collected from the FDCH Political Transcripts database and the CQ Political Transcripts database. Additionally, this analysis

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