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WASHINGTON (ABP)—With many Republicans concerned their party's leading presidential candidates are not sufficiently conservative on social issues, Democrats have what may be their most faith-friendly crop of candidates in recent years.

According to experts in politics and religion, a handful of faith-savvy Democrats—including two who speak fluent "evangelicalese" —may be able to woo religious voters in ways previous Democratic nominees have not.

Barry Hankins, a professor of history and church-state studies at Baylor University in Texas, and Laura Olson, a political science professor at Clemson University in South Carolina, helped Associated Baptist Press analyze the 2008 presidential candidates in terms of faith issues and faith-motivated voters.

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So far, according to polling and fundraising figures, there are three Democratic front-runners. There also may be a fourth waiting in the wings.

One, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, is a cradle-roll Methodist who—despite her caricature among religious conservatives as a rabid secularist—has maintained her faith throughout her adult life.

Another, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, has been received warmly in recent months by evangelical audiences. Obama, an African-American, is a Congregationalist raised in an essentially secular environment in exotic locales around the world. He came to faith as an adult after working with churches on Chicago's South Side and seeing Christianity transform lives and communities.

The last—former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards—is a Methodist raised and baptized as a Southern Baptist who has talked about how his faith

“came roaring back” after his firstborn son was killed. He has said his Christianity motivates his relentless focus on poverty and economic justice.

Democrats’ apparent comfort in talking about their faith—and apparent Republican discomfort with their own candidates—comes from a number of factors, the experts said.

Establishment Democrats began realizing in 2000 and 2004 that they had a religion problem. Polls showed that large majorities of religiously committed people—Catholics and Protestants alike—voted for Republicans. The pro-GOP majorities were even more overwhelming among conservative evangelicals and Catholics. Meanwhile, people with low or no religious commitment voted overwhelmingly Democratic.

Worried the party would be tarred as a bulwark of secularism, Democratic leaders began rehabilitating the party’s image with faith-motivated voters.

Simultaneously, some evangelical leaders have tried to broaden the movement’s political agenda beyond its traditional rallying points of abortion and sexuality. Evangelical leaders are pushing political leaders to apply moral language to supporting environmentalism, fighting poverty, and preventing the spread of AIDS, among other causes.

“There’s a variety of new issues that are being linked to morality and faith and … things of this nature that weren’t thought about in that rubric before,” Olson said.

While many longtime evangelical leaders like James Dobson have resisted drawing attention away from abortion and homosexuality as signature issues, many younger evangelicals seem to be embracing the trend.

“I think they’re interested in issues of peace and justice, and I think that some of those people that might otherwise be attracted to a Republican. I think there is a group of evangelicals that could find Barack Obama pretty

interesting and attractive," Hankins said.

Obama already has reached out to evangelical audiences. Last year, he drew rave reviews as the keynote speaker at the Pentecost 2006 anti-poverty conference, sponsored by the progressive evangelical groups Sojourners and Call to Renewal. In his speech, he called on fellow Democrats and progressives not to cede the mantle of morality to conservatives when fighting for social and economic justice.

"To say that men and women should not inject their 'personal morality' into public-policy debates is a practical absurdity," he said. "If we progressives shed some of these biases, we might recognize some overlapping values that religious and secular people share."

He also told how he came to faith as an adult, describing how working with African-American church members made him realize that his doubts about Christianity didn't bar him from embracing faith in Christ.

"It was precisely because of these doubts that I was able to walk down the aisle of the Trinity United Church of Christ," Obama said. "But, kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side (of Chicago), I felt I heard God's Spirit beckoning me."

Obama also highlighted a conference on AIDS hosted last year by superstar evangelical pastor Rick Warren. Several conservative evangelical leaders publicly criticized Warren for allowing the pro-choice senator to speak at the conference, held at his Southern Baptist Convention-affiliated Saddleback Church in Orange County, Calif. But both Warren and Obama rejected their criticism.

"While we will never see eye to eye on all issues, surely we can come together with one voice to honor the entirety of Christ's teachings by working to eradicate the scourge of AIDS, poverty, and other challenges we all can agree must be met," Obama said in a statement responding to the

criticism.

Such comfort with discussing faith may help both Obama and Edwards, who has been similarly candid about his Christianity. In a Beliefnet interview earlier this year, Edwards said it "is important in my case to have a personal relationship with the Lord."

Edwards focuses campaign rhetoric on poverty and health-care coverage for the poor because "if you took every reference to taking care of 'the least of these' out of the Bible, there would be a pretty skinny Bible. And I think I as a Christian, and we as a nation, have a moral responsibility to do something about this," he said.

Such a comfort with faith may cause Obama—and, perhaps, Edwards—to "siphon off" more evangelicals than Democrats have been able to do in years, experts say.

"You've got Sen. Obama and Sen. Edwards, and both of them … are able to speak 'evangelical-ese,'" Olson said. "I think one of the things that American voters seem to want—and part of why George W. Bush was able to do so well in both of the elections when he was a candidate—is that Americans want someone who seems genuine."

Sen. Clinton may have more difficulty in that regard. She increasingly makes public reference to her lifelong Methodism and gave a highly publicized speech last year in which she tried to open a dialogue with abortion opponents. However, many conservative religious voters retain a strong dislike for her and her husband.

"Evangelicals are not going to cross over (and vote) for Sen. Clinton. I mean, they just aren't," Olson said. "She's a lot more religious than people think she is…. And, yeah, she kind of has tempered on abortion a little bit. But is she going to go over (to) the pro-life side? No."

Nominating Clinton could do more to mobilize the conservative Republican base than any of Republican candidates could, Hankins said.

“If you have Hillary Rodham Clinton getting the Democratic nomination, that could solidify conservatives because they’ll have something to run against,” he said. With “any person who identifies with the Christian right, the opposition to the Clintons is so strong, I don’t think there’s anything that can be done to overcome it.”

One factor that may broaden the outlook of some evangelicals, according to Hankins and Olson, is conservative evangelical leaders’ past embrace of the Iraq war.

“You have younger evangelicals who don’t have a strong Republican identity and, like most of the rest of the population, they either oppose the war or have serious criticisms of the way it has been carried out,” Hankins said. “I think that’s going to be very significant for that group of younger, sort of emerging-church type of evangelicals.”

Whatever the case may be, Olson and Hankins cautioned not to expect any dramatic revolution in the voting habits of the core GOP base come 2008.

“You have this sort of Christian Right sort of evangelical who won’t vote for anybody who’s pro-choice in terms of abortion,” Hankins said.

Olson agreed. “Conservative people of faith—particularly conservative evangelicals— cannot be expected too much to deviate” from past voting patterns, she said. “You are not going to see some kind of sea change in that kind of constituency.”

Middle-of-the-road Protestants and Catholics are the real religious constituency to watch, Olson said. If Democrats can win significant numbers of them back, it could wrap up the election.

“You really need to look at mainline Protestants and Catholics,” she said. “It really isn’t new. Both of these groups have been swing constituencies for 10 to 15 years.”

A final unknown is the role of former vice president Al Gore, who barely lost to Bush in 2000. He has not yet explicitly ruled out a repeat run for the presidency.

Olson called him “the 800-pound gorilla” of the Democratic field. “I think he could win (the general election)—I really, really do—perhaps more than any of the other Democrats in the race now,” she said.

But, she added: “It depends on how much he is allowed to be the authentic Al Gore.”

Olson said Gore could reach many of the same religious voters to whom Obama and Edwards appeal by talking “about how his faith plays into his passion for the environment.”

Hankins, however, said even a rehabilitated Gore, more than offering a sense of hope, would stir up painful memories of 2000. “I’d be surprised if Gore could elicit the same type of excitement that Obama could,” he said.

Still, both experts said, the way the 2008 election is developing means the evangelical right’s dominance in GOP politics is up for grabs.

“I think the Christian Right is to the Republican Party what labor was to the Democratic Party in the ’50s,” Hankins said. “They’re not going to go away. They’re going to be a constituency. They’re going to have some influence.”

In coming decades, conservative religious voices may no longer have the kind of dominance over GOP presidential politics they have enjoyed in recent years, Olson said.

“For it to make a really big difference now is less likely than making a big

difference 10, 15, 20 years from now.”