

The Politics of American Adventists

by Roger Dudley

Why do Adventists vote (or not vote) the way they do? What can we learn about Adventists and politics? During this presidential election year for the United States, a new book attempts to answer these and other questions, Citizens of Two Worlds: Religion and Politics Among American Seventh-day Adventists. Written by Roger Dudley, professor of Christian ministry in the SDA Theological Seminary, and Edwin Hernandez, assistant professor of behavioral science, the book is the result of a survey conducted on 419 U.S. SDAs and collected during 1988. We trust that the following excerpt of Chapter 8 will generate some reflection and discussion. For more details on the cost and availability of the book, call the Michigan Adventist Book Center at 800-253-3000, or the Andrews University Press at 616-471-3392.

Some years ago the senior author was invited to join the working force in a particular conference. As the conference president chatted with him about the new position, he remarked: "You'll like it here. This state is a good place for Adventists to live." "I'm sure I will" the author replied, "but why is this state good for Adventists?" "For one thing," explained the president, "it's politically conservative."

After the passage of years the senior author cannot remember the other factors, but he has often mused about this one. Are Adventists more conservative than the general public in politics, economics, or social issues? Are they highly likely to vote Republican (or not to vote at all)? Do they espouse capitalism as a desired form of government? Are they "doves" or "hawks"? Do they have a tendency to oppose governmental aid to the needy and downtrodden?

To probe the areas represented by these questions our survey included items on attitudes toward public issues, preference for

political party, political orientation, and recent voting behavior. This chapter will analyze the responses in an attempt to answer the question: What are American Adventists like politically?

Attitudes toward Public Issues

To measure positions held on various current issues we selected 18 statements and asked our subjects to respond to each on a five-point scale from "strongly oppose" to "strongly favor." A list of more than twice this length was originally prepared and because of space limitations, was reduced to the present size by attempting to select a battery of items that would be representative (rather than exhaustive) of the most-debated public concerns of the day.

One major issue that is missing is abortion. After much consideration it was decided not to include this topic because the study focuses on public issues. While abortion certainly has a public face, it is also greatly involved in private morality. It was feared that private morality might become confused with the public issue. For example, some might be morally opposed to abortion but oppose laws prohibiting it on the grounds that government should not interfere in moral and religious issues. Also some might favor laws to restrict abortion generally but permit it under certain circumstances (such as incest or rape). It would have taken several questions to clarify these issues, and space did not permit.

The responses to the various items may be read from the chart below. For ease of interpretation we have combined "strongly oppose" and "somewhat oppose" into an "oppose" category and "strongly favor" and "somewhat favor" into a "favor" category. The extent to which the percentages fail to total 100 percent represents the "uncertain" response.

Statement	Oppose	Favor
United States-Soviet "freeze" on the development of nuclear weapons	10%	72%
Establishment of normal, peaceful relations with Russia	6%	79%
Increased government aid to improve the social and economic position of Blacks and other minorities	24%	52%
Elimination of all racial restrictions in housing, education and employment	7%	81%
The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution which guarantees equality to women	22%	62%
Christians as individuals becoming involved in political action (run for office, work for a candidate, etc.)	35%	41%
Churches as corporate entities becoming involved in political action (e.g., issuing position statements)	70%	14%
A constitutional amendment to permit prayer and/or Bible reading in public schools	47%	38%
Increased spending for national defense	49%	21%
Military aid to the Nicaraguan "Contras"	44%	23%
Government-sponsored insurance for elderly in nursing homes	7%	75%

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Oppose</i>	<i>Favor</i>
Construction of Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) to ward off possible nuclear attack	35%	34%
Appointment of conservative, strict-constructionist justices (such as Rehnquist, Scalia, and Bork) to the U.S. Supreme Court	35%	22%
Control of crime by tougher laws and "stiffer" sentences	8%	81%
Withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations	55%	14%
Registration of firearms	21%	63%
Regarding capitalism or free enterprise as that form of government most in harmony with Biblical Christianity	11%	53%
Capital punishment (the death penalty) for certain classes of dangerous criminals	18%	62%

Conservative-Liberal Trends

In order to perceive some sort of pattern to these findings, let us organize them into a conservative-liberal framework. Nine of the statements are worded as typically "liberal" statements; the other nine as typically "conservative." Below are shown the liberal statements arranged in the order of support suggested above (total responses of "somewhat favor" and "strongly favor"). Statements are abbreviated to their kernel idea.

<u>Favoring "liberal" positions</u>	
Eliminate racial restrictions in housing, etc.	81%
Establish peaceful relations with Russia	79%
Government insurance for elderly in nursing homes	75%
U.S. - Soviet freeze on nuclear weapons	72%
Registration of all firearms	63%
Equality for women (ERA)	62%
Government aid to improve position of minorities	52%
Individual Christians becoming involved in politics	41%
Churches becoming involved in political action	14%

On seven of these nine issues the majority favored the statement — an indication of inclination toward liberalism on the politico-social front. Note that American Adventists are most likely to favor the liberal stance on socio-economic and peace issues and most likely to forsake it on strictly political concerns. The least support was given to churches becoming involved, with 70 percent opposing this item. It is as if the members were saying: "We may agree that some of these positions are good and worthwhile if they are put into operation by 'secular' people, but we are not sure that Adventists should help to make them a reality, and we are quite certain that the church should not take sides." This seems to reflect the historic Adventist stance on separation of church and state. It also echoes the theme that the work of the church is primarily to save sinners and prepare them for the world to come, not to improve their lot in this world. Incidentally, the involvement of churches in the political process has historically been considered a liberal stance, as we have demonstrated earlier, but with the rise of the New Religious Right, conservative have entered this arena en masse. Thus the rejection of this statement by the majority of Adventists should not be seen as political conservatism but as theological separatism.

The fact that government aid to improve the position of minorities gathered only a very narrow majority while at the same time strong support was given to eliminating racial restrictions and providing government insurance for nursing-home care suggests that it is not latent racism that held down the percentage favoring aid to minorities. More likely, this development reflects the Adventist (and generally conservative Protestant) self-help theology with its emphasis on individual salvation. "Each person relates to God

individually, and God helps those who help themselves."

The statement on the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution (ERA) is especially pertinent in view of the current struggle in the Adventist church over the role of women. Questions raised in the struggle include whether women may be properly ordained to the Gospel ministry or not and whether or not they may serve as pastors or elders of local congregations. While the questionnaire statement did not address these issues directly, earlier research has shown that pastors in North America who support the equality of women in the public arena are more likely to affirm their full equality in the ministry of the church.* If the same is true of lay members, the response to this statement may provide some clues as to the strength of support for women in pastoral ministry.

In light of the current relevance to this issue to the church, it may be worthwhile to give a complete breakdown on the support for the statement:

Strongly oppose	13%
Somewhat oppose	9%
Uncertain	16%
Somewhat favor	22%
Strongly favor	40%

It seems obvious that those who take either position are more likely to feel strongly than mildly about it. Thus the polarization in society — and in the church if this statement provides a clue to attitudes concerning women in ministry. The measure of support, then, suggests that women will become more acceptable as ordained pastors (at least in the United States) in the future.

This seems especially likely in view of the age grouping of our sample. Nearly half (48 percent) were over 50 years of age, and a quarter were over 65. Only 28 percent were 35 years or younger. Yet a constant finding in all research is that younger people are more likely to favor the rights of women and minorities than are older ones. If this "more mature" sample is as supportive of ERA as the results indicate, one could predict even higher support as the younger generation moves into leadership roles in the church. However, positions in this issue are not significantly different among different demographic groupings in this sample.

If the remaining nine issues are arranged in a similar manner, the following picture emerges:

<u>Favoring "conservative" positions</u>	
Tougher laws and stiffer sentences on crime	81%
Capital punishment for dangerous criminals	62%
Capitalism in harmony with Bible Christianity	53%
Prayer/Bible reading in public schools	38%
Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars)	34%
Military aid to Nicaraguan "Contras"	23%

Conservative justices on U.S. Supreme Court	22%
Increased spending for national defense	21%
Withdrawal from United Nations	14%

In contrast to the "liberal issues" the majority of Adventists favored only three out of the nine "conservative" issues. The support was much less here, although it must not be inferred that the subjects necessarily opposed these other issues. The "uncertain" response was high on several of them, especially the last five (all over 30 percent). The two most highly favored issues deal with law and order – perhaps reflecting the heavy law orientation prominent among Adventists. The third-favored position deals with approval of capitalism as the economic system most in harmony with Biblical Christianity. This may again reflect the work ethic that grows out of a strong sense of righteous behavior. Majority support for these three statements may also indicate the increasing alignment of Adventism with the American social system – "an alternative to the Republic" in the framework of Bull and Lockhart.

A conservative cause that fails to gain majority support is a constitutional amendment to permit prayer and Bible reading in public schools. This finding is easily explained by the historical opposition by the church to entanglement of the state with religion. Adventists believe in making religion the foundation of education, and they support a massive parochial school system, from the kindergarten to the university levels, to do just that. But they are wary of any government-endorsed religion. In their historic scenario of the lamblike Republic that turns into a persecuting dragon, government-sponsored prayer and Bible-reading in the schools may be the foot in the door that eventually leads to other religious legislation, government control of churches, and persecution for dissenters. The same reasoning may be operating in the meager support for the appointment of conservative, strict-constructionist, justices of the United States Supreme Court. Traditionally, it has been "liberal" justices, rather than "conservative" ones who have championed individual liberties and the separation of church and state.

The other conservative items that gathered only minority support are all military and defense issues. In general, conservatives support a strong defense to protect America from "godless" systems like communism that would destroy its traditional moral and family values. Adventists would have reason to take a similar position except that they have historically been a semi-"peace church." Because of their high regard for the 10 Commandments – of which the sixth prohibits killing – and problems involving Sabbath service, Adventists have tended to eschew service in the military. While the church does not enforce pacifism, it recommends that its young people do not enlist in the armed services and, if drafted, serve in the unarmed medical branches. It is not surprising that given the tension between concern for values threatened by communism and historical noncombatance, majorities neither favored nor opposed the military and defense items, but that large proportions were undecided.

These 18 items were combined into a Public Issues Scale. The conservative items were reversed in scoring so that a high score indicates a more liberal position and a low score a conservative one. The reliability was unacceptably low; due, no doubt, to the fact that many different concepts were being measured, and these varying concepts did not hang together on a conservative – liberal continuum for reasons described above. Therefore, we did not use a unitary scale in our analyses, but, as described in the following chapter, considered individual public issues in relation to the various measured of religion.

Political Party Preference

In addition to attitudes toward public issues we asked three questions requiring the respondent to consider directly his/her relationship to political matters. The first was: "With which political party do you most closely identify?" The answers were as follows:

Democrat	24%
Republican	44%
Independent	12%
No interest in politics	20%

While most Adventists did not consider themselves Republicans, those who did constituted the largest grouping of any political identification. Democrats were considerably behind, doing only a little better than half as well.

Since Republicans are generally considered the more conservative party, and since Adventists in this survey tended to favor more liberal issues, this finding presents somewhat of a puzzle. It seems likely that the Republican party in general may be viewed as the party of stability and status quo – the one most likely to preserve traditional moral and family values. Thus, Adventists may identify with it in general although they feel free to disagree with it on specific issues such as church-state concerns and military build up. It is also important that nearly a third did not identify with either party and that a fifth took no interest in politics. Again, this may reflect the historic trends in the church that lead members to conclude that Christians should not be involved in government at all but dedicate themselves to the spreading of the Gospel.

Political Orientation

Perhaps not all see a connection between a conservative-liberal framework and a choice of political party. So we asked the question more directly: "Which of the following terms best describes your political orientation?"

Conservative	34%
Moderate	37%
Liberal	5%
No opinions	24%

If we compare the 34 percent who rated themselves as conservatives with the 44 percent who identified with the Republican party, it becomes evident that a number of Republicans do not consider themselves to be conservative; a conclusion anticipated in the discussion of the preceding section. The largest grouping claimed to be moderates – a somewhat surprising finding given the almost sacred character of the word "conservative" among Adventists. Only 5 percent were bold enough to claim the "L" word. Here again, nearly a fourth showed unwillingness to engage in the political arena by expressing "no opinions."

Recent Voting Behavior

It is one thing to ask for political opinions or political self-identification. It is another to chart a particular political behavior. Perhaps the behavior by which Americans best reveal their political leanings is voting for the president of the United States. This national rite sweeps the whole nation into its lengthy process and allows for more comprehensive discussion of national issues than does any other event.

Therefore, we asked: "For whom did you vote in the last presidential election?" The choices were "Reagan," "Mondale," and "didn't vote." It might be asked why 1984 rather than 1988 candidates were listed. This is because the questionnaire was constructed and data collection began prior to the 1988 elections and, indeed, even before it was determined with certainty who the candidates would be. While we might have asked: "For whom do you intend to

vote?" we felt that some might be unsure until closer to the election date or might change their minds. The accomplished fact seemed a more stable measure. Also, the Reagan-Mondale contest was clearly perceived in conservative-liberal terms, given the past records and associations of each candidate.

Only about 60 percent of the Adventists voted (probably not worse than the nation at large) with Reagan at 46 percent outpulling Mondale (15 percent) three to one. Either all the Republicans voted, or a fair share of the Democrats and independents went for Reagan. The latter certainly seems likely.

Why did Adventists who favored "liberal" causes and who identified themselves as moderates vote for Reagan, the conservative candidate, especially when he supported actions that would seem to bridge the separation of church and state (e.g. school prayer amendment, ambassador to the Vatican, etc.)? Several reasons may be suggested.

For one thing, Reagan swept the country at large, winning the electoral votes of all but two states. Adventists are certainly influenced by surrounding opinions and tended to agree with their fellow Americans. For another thing, other factors probably played a larger factor than religion in the Adventist vote. The economy had risen from its earlier slump, and many members were doing quite well financially. The incumbent always has a large advantage in such

cases. Moreover, Mondale let it be known that he felt a tax increase was necessary. Adventists may well have voted their pocketbooks rather than their principles.

Also, Reagan was a master of articulating traditional moral and family values. These would be shared by most Adventists, many of whom might not consider by what means such values would be or could be integrated into public life. Given two different candidates and a different social ferment, the election might not have been so one-sided, although, in view of the political-party identification, it is likely that the Republican would still have drawn a plurality of Adventist votes. And it is well to remember that a sizable minority (39 percent) of Adventist members did not vote at all, apparently preferring to abstain from the political process.

Now that we know what American Adventists are like religiously and politically, we are ready for our major research task. How does the first quality influence the second? Do variations in religious belief, experience, and practice relate to variations in political attitudes and behaviors?

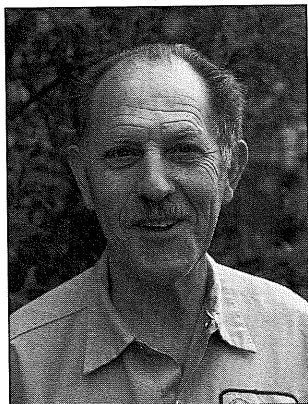
**Roger L. Dudley, "Pastoral Views on Women in Ministry,"
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currently involved in the sixth year of a 10-year study of 1,500
young people for factors of retention in the denomination.*

President Bush President Bush

by Carl Fletcher

George Bush has been working at Andrews University since 1971. No, not as an undercover agent for the CIA, but as foreman of the heating and air conditioning department, and president of the Cass County Foster Parents Association. Although he's not as tall as his famous namesake, George Herbert Walker Bush, who lives in the White House, George Marion Bush, is around the same age, has a big family and holds many of the same traditional values. He has also been involved on a national project-placing a satellite on the moon - when he was employed for radar research by NASA in the '60s. During that decade he also inspected riot-torn property, as his namesake recently did in Los Angeles, when George worked at Ohio State University during their riots.



George Bush

Having the same name as the American president has also brought this Andrews employee quite a bit of notoriety. For instance, he's been interviewed by four newspapers, finding his name in print alongside other famous celebrities such as Donald Duck and Mary Tyler Moore. He has also received many phone calls from young people asking for advice, and has had the Secret Service escort his daughter, Sandra, on a private tour of President Bush's jet.

When George places a long distance call he notices a reverent tone when he mentions his name. Once when George Bush was head

of the CIA, our George telephoned one of Bush's major critics and noticed that the critic's wife lost her breath when he told her his name.

Since he's used to presidential treatment, we asked the head of Andrews heating and air conditioning department just what policies he would have during this election year if he was running for president.

George says he would change America's world role from police man to missionary. "I believe God wants us to Christianize the world and not police it," he says.

On the domestic front he would introduce some of his Christian beliefs. "God created us all equal so I would give everyone civil rights. I would ban abortion, protecting the rights of unborn children," he adds.

In the inner cities he would control drug traffic by introducing bigger fines and longer prison sentences for drug dealers. Another major strategy would be to strengthen the family unit by using tax revenue to help poor families.

George does not believe that the economy has any major problems, but he would work to promote factories and new products.

He wouldn't try to stop corruption in Congress because "there's no way to stop it."

"Apart from that I don't really have many other policies," he adds.

So we asked him which party he supports and which presidential candidate he'd be voting for this year.

"I don't believe in making my political affiliations public," George said, "but I support the president because he's our leader and because I believe he's doing a good job."

It just happens to be a coincidence that his name is George Bush.

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