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Mixing religion with politics

Candidates elect to begin talking about their faith

WASHINGTON — Maybe the Democratic presidential candidates are paying attention to opinion polls showing that voters genuinely want to know about politicians' religious beliefs.

Certainly, there's been a lot of talk about God and religion recently from the major contenders for the Democratic nomination.

Numerous major daily newspapers have run prominent stories about the candidates' religious influences. Religion has even come up in the context of former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean's explanation of his support for the state's civil unions law and in a National Public Radio debate among six of the candidates.

In that Jan. 6 debate, Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman (who has since withdrawn from the race) said that too often members of his own party "feel uncomfortable talking about faith or try to exclude faith or expressions of it from the public square."

Lieberman, who as Al Gore's running mate in 2000 became the first Jew on the presidential ticket of a major national party, warned that because "religion matters to people ... we've got to talk about it. Otherwise the Republicans will convince people they've got some sort of a monopoly on values and faith."

Polls by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and Zogby International point in that direction, too.

A Zogby poll taken in December found that 60 percent



Democratic presidential candidates Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts and Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut wave prior to a Jan. 29 debate in Greenville, S.C. Kerry is Catholic and Lieberman — who has since dropped out of the race — is Jewish.

of likely voters think it's important for a president to believe in God and be deeply religious.

Last July, a Pew poll asked voters whether they think it's proper for journalists to question politicians about the influence of religious beliefs on their opinions. Fifty-seven percent said it is proper, even though 58 percent of the people polled said their own religious beliefs seldom, if ever, affect their voting decisions.

The Pew poll also found that Americans tend to think the Republican Party is friendlier toward religion than is the Democratic Party. Nearly two-thirds of white respondents to the poll described the Republican Party as friendly toward religion, compared to just 41

percent who perceive the Democratic Party that way.

Much of the religion-related reporting about candidates was triggered when Dean, previously the least likely candidate to discuss his religious influences, recognized that "faith is important in a lot of places, but really important in the South," as he told reporters Jan. 2.

Dean describes himself as a Congregationalist. He is a member of Burlington's First Congregational Church, a United Church of Christ affiliate. He was baptized Catholic, having a Catholic mother and Episcopalian father. He was raised Episcopalian, but left that church in 1982 to become Congregationalist after a municipal dispute with the Epis-

copal diocese over land for a bike path. He and his Jewish wife have raised their children Jewish.

He acknowledged that despite his New Englander's reticence to talk about such things, his experience on the campaign trail has led him to recognize that it's important to discuss his religious beliefs with voters.

Dean may not have done himself any favors with some voters, however, when he didn't stop at simply describing his decision to support Vermont's civil-unions law as stemming from the Christians' call to reach out to those who have been left out in society.

People who object to the civil-unions law as a conflict with

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