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Consultant Helps Democrats Embrace Faith, and Some in Party Are Not Pleased

By [DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK](#)

As [Democrats](#) turn toward the 2008 presidential race, a novice evangelical political operative is emerging as a rising star in the party, drawing both applause and alarm for her courtship of theological conservatives in the midterm elections.

Party strategists and nonpartisan pollsters credit the operative, Mara Vanderslice, and her 2-year-old consulting firm, Common Good Strategies, with helping a handful of Democratic candidates make deep inroads among white evangelical and churchgoing Roman Catholic voters in Kansas, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Exit polls show that Ms. Vanderslice's candidates did 10 percentage points or so better than Democrats nationally among those voters, who make up about a third of the electorate. As a group, Democrats did little better among those voters than Senator [John Kerry](#)'s campaign did in 2004.

"Everybody is looking at the specific steps that had value in those states, and the compass points to her and the efforts she helped lead out there," said Burns Strider, an evangelical Christian who directs religious outreach for House Democrats and was recently hired to play a similar role for Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) if she runs for president.

Mr. Strider said he was speaking only in the context of his current House role and declined to comment on the work with Mrs. Clinton.

Ms. Vanderslice's success in 2006 is a sharp rebound from her first campaign, in 2004. She was hired, at age 29, to direct religious outreach for Mr. Kerry in his presidential campaign and was then quickly shoved aside, a casualty of a losing battle to persuade him to speak more openly about his Catholic faith, even if it meant taking on the potentially awkward subject of his support for [abortion](#) rights.

The midterm elections were a "proof point" for arguments that Ms. Vanderslice had made two years before, said Mike McCurry, a Democratic consultant and former spokesman for President [Bill Clinton](#) who worked with Ms. Vanderslice on the Kerry campaign. For the Democrats, Mr. McCurry said, Ms. Vanderslice and her company "were the only ones taking systematic, methodical steps to build a religious component in the practical campaign work."

Democratic officials in several states said Ms. Vanderslice and her business partner, Eric Sapp, pushed sometimes reluctant Democrats to speak publicly, early and in detail about the religious underpinnings of their policy views. They persuaded candidates to speak at conservative religious schools and to buy early commercials on Christian radio. They organized meetings and conference calls for candidates to speak privately with moderate and conservative members of the clergy.

In Michigan, they helped the state's Democratic Party follow up on these meetings by incorporating recognizably biblical language into its platform. In Michigan and Ohio, they enlisted nuns in phone banks to urge voters who were Catholic or opposed abortion rights to support Democratic candidates, with some of the nuns saying they were making the case in religious terms.

But Ms. Vanderslice's efforts to integrate faith into Democratic campaigns troubles some liberals, who accuse her of mimicking the Christian right.

Dr. Welton Gaddy, president of the liberal Interfaith Alliance, said her encouragement of such overt religiosity raised "red flags" about the traditional separation of church and state.

"I don't want any politician prostituting the sanctity of religion," Mr. Gaddy said, adding that nonbelievers also "have a right to feel they are represented at the highest levels of government."

To Ms. Vanderslice, that attitude is her party's problem. In an interview, she said she told candidates not to use the phrase "separation of church and state," which does not appear in the Constitution's clauses forbidding the establishment or protecting the exercise of religion.

"That language says to people that you don't want there to be a role for religion in our public life," Ms. Vanderslice said. "But 80 percent of the public is religious, and I think most people are eager for that kind of debate."

More than 80 percent, in fact, say they are Christian, according to polls, but Ms. Vanderslice grew up in the other 20 percent, in Boulder, Colo. She joined an evangelical Bible study group at Earlham College, a Quaker campus in Richmond, Ind., and says she was born again one day while singing the hymn "Here I Am Lord."

"God's love was so much stronger than any of my doubts," she said, acknowledging that like some other young evangelicals she still struggles with common evangelical ideas about abortion, homosexuality and the literal reading of Scripture.

She was baptized by full immersion in Rock Creek in Washington, D.C., while working with Sojourners, an evangelical antipoverty group. She entered politics by working with a group advocating debt relief for the developing world, once participating in a rally organized by a coalition that included the [AIDS](#) activist group Act Up.

During the 2004 campaign, that tenuous relationship provided the grist for William Donohue, an outspoken conservative Catholic, to denounce her as “an ultra-leftist who consorts with anti-Catholic bigots,” calling Act Up “anti-Catholic.”

Ms. Vanderslice wanted to fight back. She argued that the Kerry campaign should rebut the charges as part of a broader articulation of the Democrats’ religious convictions. But she was overruled by other advisers, who argued that doing so would inflame conservatives while entrapping Mr. Kerry in debates about homosexuality and abortion, said the Rev. Robert F. Drinan, 86, a liberal priest and former congressman who was an adviser to Mr. Kerry. “She was a little bit overzealous,” Father Drinan said.

She and Mr. Sapp, 30, a Presbyterian minister’s son and a fellow evangelical with a divinity degree from Duke, set out to test the rejected ideas. They organized workshops in which Democratic candidates practiced delivering short statements about their faith or their moral values. They urged Democrats to meet with even the most staunchly conservative evangelical pastors in their districts.

They persuaded candidates not to avoid controversial subjects like abortion, advising those who supported abortion rights to speak about reducing demand for the procedure. And they cautioned against the approach of many liberal Christians, which is to argue that Jesus was interested only in social justice and not in sexual morality.

“The Gospel has both in it,” Mr. Sapp said. “You can’t act like caring about abortion and family issues makes you a judgmental fool.”

Most of all, they told Democratic candidates not to try to fake it, advising those of non-Christian faiths or no faith at all to talk about the origins of their sense of ethics.

“People want to know are you on your knees?” Ms. Vanderslice said. “Are you responsible to something that is bigger than yourself?”

Some [Republicans](#) dismissed the consultants’ work this fall as incidental to issues like the Iraq war or corruption. “The overwhelming desire to change trumped,” said Carlo LoParo, a spokesman for J. Kenneth Blackwell, the losing Republican candidate for Ohio governor.

Others argued that the consultants had advised candidates who were already unusually open about their religion. Senator-elect Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, for example, is well known as a practicing Catholic who opposes abortion rights. And Gov.-elect Ted Strickland of Ohio not only supports abortion rights but is also an ordained Methodist minister.

Still, Prof. John Green of the University of Akron, a pollster who studies religion and politics, said the consultants also helped clients less known for their religious credentials, like Senator-elect Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm of Michigan and Gov. Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas. “They were pretty successful,” Professor Green said.

David Welsh, pastor of the Central Christian Church, a center of conservative Christian activism for decades in Wichita, Kan., said he was not surprised that Ms. Vanderslice had won a few evangelical voters with messages about helping the poor or reducing abortions.

But Mr. Welsh added, “It will be interesting to see how it goes out in the heartland between Fifth Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard once the war is no longer the issue.”