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December 8, 2009: Are Religious Politics “Undemocratic”?

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Title: Are Religious Politics "Undemocratic"?

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12/8/2009—A few days ago, Sarah Posner, author of *God's Profit: Faith, Fraud and the Republican Crusade for Values* Voters and consistent critic of the religious right, wrote a article for Religion Dispatches in which she chided the Democratic Party for its incessant pursuit of religious voters, *The Fretting About Whether Democrats Are Friendly to Religion*. She was referring to recent polls that suggest that Democrats are viewed, again, as unfriendly to religion. According to Posner, this is not something the Party should worry about because, among other things, there is no reason to be friendly to policy positions you don't agree with. This is a good point. If the only way to be seen as friendly to religion is to cave in on policies, like abortion and gay rights, that the Democratic Party has been committed to, then the Party is obviously better off being seen as unfriendly. You don't want to be anti-religion unnecessarily, but where necessary, there is a sense that you have to be. But there was an undercurrent to the piece that was making a different point. Posner stated that the Democratic Party's giving in to the Catholic Bishops on the Stupak Amendment in the House was "undemocratic". But in what sense could that be true? Posner points out that only a minority of Catholics, let alone every else, supported the Church stand on the place of abortion in healthcare reform. That is true, but irrelevant to the politics of the matter. If the NRA had controlled a bloc of votes in the House debate on healthcare, and had been willing to vote for the final bill, there would have been a rider on gun control. What happened with abortion in the House was the essence of political horse trading. It happened because the vote on healthcare was going to be so close. I'm not saying here that the Stupak Amendment was good policy (I think it is) but there is nothing undemocratic about the way it came about. Liberals are always treating religious motivation as somehow illegitimate in political debate. That really has to stop. In a democracy, you don't get to tell your opponents the permissible reasons for their positions. That is undemocratic. You have to debate the policies.