

ELECTIONS

The role of religion in American politics

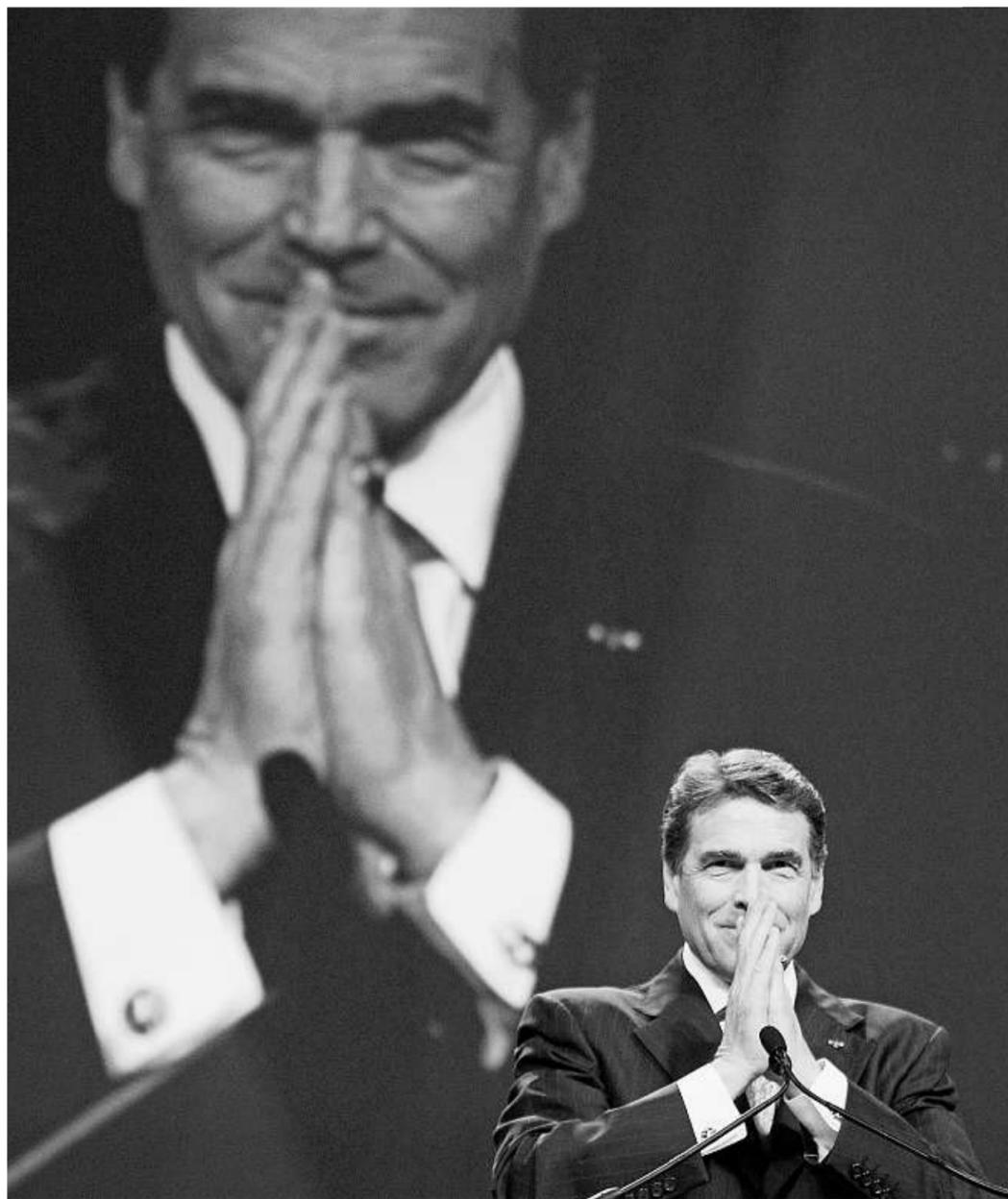
By William Martin

As Americans grapple with the nation's most difficult economic challenges in decades, it might seem surprising that religion and the culture wars have played such a prominent role in the current presidential campaign. But we shouldn't be surprised. Though issues and tactics have varied, religion has always been a factor in American politics.

Texas found itself in the middle of the drama early on this time around. Gov. Rick Perry launched his campaign just a week after hosting a large and widely publicized public prayer rally for evangelical Christians right here in Houston's Reliant Stadium. As his campaign lost traction, Perry focused increasingly on such evergreen culture-war issues as abortion, gays in the military and same-sex marriage. More recently, conservative evangelicals have begun to rally around Rick Santorum's candidacy, prompting a group of evangelical heavyweights to call an emergency meeting in — where else? — Texas to discuss a possible GOP candidate endorsement. The evangelical leaders did in fact endorse Santorum.

Another early story line is the quiet but persistent concern among some Christian conservatives about the Mormon faith of GOP candidate Mitt Romney and former candidate Jon Huntsman. A Pew Research Center poll last fall found that Republican voters who say Mormonism is not a Christian religion are less likely to back Romney for the party's presidential nomination. A 2010 Pew poll found that nearly one in five Americans believed President Barack Obama is a Muslim. Further, questions about his religion and moral values continue to be political fodder in the blogosphere.

These are all well-worn story lines in American politics. In earlier elections, Roman Catholic candidates Al Smith in 1928 and John Kennedy in 1960 had to address voter anxiety about their religious affiliation — the latter at a famous meeting with clergy in Houston.



Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

Gov. Rick Perry participated in a prayer rally at Reliant Stadium before launching his presidential campaign.

And casting doubt about the religious orthodoxy of one's opponent has a long history in this country.

It is tempting to concur with the writer of *Ecclesiastes* that "there is nothing new under the sun." Yet if we look closely, it is possible to identify a few larger shifts in the role religion plays in American electoral politics.

For much of the 20th century, fundamentalist, evangelical and Pentecostal Christians were often reluctant to get too involved in elections; they worried that worldly politics would stain their souls. But that began to change in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of new conservative religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority and Pat Rob-

Religion continues on B9



Houston Chronicle

John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, engaged in a question-and-answer session on religious issues with Protestant ministers in Houston during his 1960 campaign.

CHARITY



Barrie Maguire

Striving to offer care to the poor

By Dr. David L. Callender

You probably have read or heard about the story in the Houston Chronicle reporting criticism of the University of Texas Medical Branch's policies regarding care for indigent patients ("Report hits UTMB over charity care," Page A1, Jan. 13). The news report is based on the follow-up to a 2009 study, "Clearing the Fog," which claims UTMB's charity policy may violate state law and alleges that UTMB does not consider financial means when deciding who receives free health care. I am writing to set the record straight.

We are proud of the care we have provided for 120 years to people who cannot afford to pay for our services. We wish we could care for everyone in need, but the harsh reality is that we cannot. As is the case with most nonprofit hospitals, the amount of free care we are able to provide has continued to drop, in direct response to the ever-growing number of medically un- and underinsured, shrinking reimbursements and rising health care costs. And, for us, there was the additional impact of Hurricane Ike.

In accordance with the state's definition of charity care, UTMB provided \$130.9 million in uncompensated care in fiscal year 2010. This information was documented in our official reports to the University of Texas System, the Texas Legislature and other state agencies. In addition, we continue to provide much-needed services to county residents through a variety of innovative programs,

Charity continues on B9

CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The future of our community lies in improving education

By Rich Kruger and Anna Babin

The future of our community and our nation begins in our classrooms. There is no denying that we have work to do in this critical area. A quick review of the most recent data reported by Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the international educational testing organization, shows that the U.S. ranked 13th in college graduation rates out of 34 countries surveyed. Only eight countries had lower high school graduation rates and, equally disappointing, U.S. students had mediocre scores on the core subjects of reading, science and math.

How do we improve the

classroom success of our youth, help them aspire to college and prepare them to compete successfully in a highly competitive global marketplace? One answer

is certain: start early.

Between birth and age 6 is a critical time for a child's brain development and for achieving the milestones that provide a solid

foundation for learning. The National Dropout Prevention Center Network reports that children who participate in quality early education typically perform better in school and have a higher rate of high school graduation than those students who did not.

That's why it is especially important that every child in our community receives a quality early education. But for many parents leading lower income families, providing quality day care for their children is neither easy nor affordable. Meanwhile, these children, who often face other obstacles like hunger and poverty, would benefit most from an

inspiring learning environment early in life.

Recognizing that quality early education experiences would make a positive lasting difference for children, United Way of Greater Houston, with the generous support of ExxonMobil, created United Way Bright Beginnings in 2002. Now in its 10th year, this innovative early childhood program combines high-quality teacher training with developmentally appropriate curriculum, equipment and supplies to create engaging, hands-on learning environments for children.

At a time when we often hear about what's wrong with education, the United Way Bright Beginnings

program is an example of what's right. United Way Bright Beginnings students score higher on standardized achievement tests in nonverbal reasoning and problem solving. They also consistently perform better than their peers on 12 of 16 standardized tests.

As we know, educators play a pivotal role in developing the leaders of tomorrow.

The National Institute for Early Education Research says the biggest role a teacher can play is as an authority figure, someone who will guide children down an educational path that will give them a strong foundation for a quality primary and

Education continues on B9



Dave Rossman / Houston Chronicle

Nasario Rocha and Joshua Rodrigues dress like butterflies to celebrate the Bright Beginnings program.

OUTLOOK

THE ENVIRONMENT

Bayous provide connections for our city

By Michael Skelly

The New Year is a great time to think about the future of Houston, our sprawling, wonderful city. A city is not simply a collection of people or a group of buildings. Instead, a city is an enormous web, connecting us with both friends and strangers.

A key difference between a town and a city is the presence of strangers. In a town, you pretty much know everyone, and everyone knows you. In a city, you know a few people, and how you feel about the place is affected as much by the strangers you don't know as it is by the friends you do.

A city's geography creates a city's connections. In our city, the automobile creates our geography. Ribbons of concrete connect us as far as a tank of gas can take us. And while we see many strangers and the occasional friend out on the highways, we don't exactly connect with them, except for the occasional sigh of gridlock solidarity.

No doubt we will build even more roads over the coming years, but while we expand our city's paved infrastructure, a far more exciting development is occurring at the human scale.

Groups and individuals from across Houston, under the common name of Bayou Greenways, are creating parks, greenways and trails along our bayous. Houston has hundreds of miles of bayous that connect our city from north to south and east to west.

The sprawl of our city is matched by the sprawl of our waterways. The flat geography that expands our highways into the horizon also gives us our meandering bayous with their slow, graceful crawl to Galveston Bay. If you

add up Brays, Buffalo, Greens, Halls, Hunting, Sims, Spring and White Oak, we have 183 miles of bayous inside the city alone, and if you include the rest of Harris County, our bayou mileage reaches 376 miles.

I spend many of my weekends exploring the bayous. Whenever I bring folks to White Oak, Brays or Sims, the reaction is always, "Wow! Am I still in Houston?" Our bayous connect us to nature with the unexpected flash of a striped mullet fish, a snapping turtle sunning on a log, or a spindly legged egret wading along the bayou's edge. But just as importantly, we connect with our fellow city dwellers. Our bayous are places to experience all the people of our city, both neighbors and strangers. We see strangers who have been separated from us by concrete barriers, and we encounter our neighbors in a new setting and from a new perspective.

Our bayous connect us with people all across the huge melting pot that is Houston, from the Ship Channel to West Chase along Brays Bayou, from the University of Houston-Downtown to Jersey Village along White Oak Bayou and from downtown to George Bush Park along Buffalo Bayou. The bayous make connections between our far-flung neighborhoods, between old and young, between rich and poor, between fifth-generation Houstonian and recent immigrant. Cutting through every neighborhood in Houston, the bayous are blind to race, color, religion, disability or national origin.

Bayou Greenways is drawing such broad support because Houstonians want more nature in our city, and we understand the power of public places to bring



Eric Kayne / Houston Chronicle

A white heron flies over Buffalo Bayou. Houston's complex of bayous provides a connection to nature for the city's residents.

people together. By highlighting Houston's unique threads of nature, we believe we can reverse the entropy of our urban sprawl. We want a connected city, and we know that Bayou Greenways will give us a renewed sense of place.

We all appreciate the water management capabilities, the natural beauty and the transportation opportunities of bayous. But because Bayou Greenways transcends parks, waterways and trails, these greenways have the potential to become one of our most powerful threads weaving together our city's social fabric.

Nature has provided us the opportunity to stitch more tightly together a city whose diversity and geography know no limits. For many years we turned our backs on our bayous. But nature stayed true with the constancy of purpose singular to water flowing to the sea.

We are not nearly as good at reclaiming nature as we are at conquering her, so the task ahead will be challenging. But ours is an energetic and creative city. Bayou Greenways will require legions of volunteers, the faith of many strong financial backers, and the leadership of our public officials. Our bayous await our collective action. Let's take up nature's challenge and weave the Bayou Greenways thread for the next generation of Houstonians.

Skelly is president of Clean Line Energy Partners.



Julio Cortez / Houston Chronicle

Above, bicyclists follow the trail along Buffalo Bayou on the Terry Hershey Park Hike and Bike Trail. Below left, an alligator swims in a bayou near Clear Lake. Below right, turtles sun in Greens Bayou.



D. Fahleson / Chronicle



Carlos Antonio Rios / Chronicle

Religion has long history as U.S. election issue

Religion from page B8

ertson of the Christian Coalition.

These leaders argued that Christians have a duty to vote and participate in the democratic process. "Get saved, get baptized and get registered to vote," Falwell urged his evangelical audiences. That charge continues to resonate in this year's elections.

Even more recently, some have observed subtle but significant shifts taking place among evangelical voters — especially young evangelicals. Issues such as environmental steward-

ship, poverty and immigration have begun to gain traction with evangelical voters. Even old-guard leader Richard Land, the conservative public policy chief for the Southern Baptist Convention, is warning Republicans that a hard-right position on immigration — deporting millions of illegal immigrants — could be dangerous politically as well as morally.

Battles over abortion, gay rights and other culture war issues are unlikely to go away anytime soon. But clearly the ground is shifting as new

issues come to the fore and new voices enter the public square.

That's why the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy has invited a

number of leading thinkers — from varied sides of the political spectrum — to come to Houston on Wednesday for a free public symposium to consider these matters.

The role of religion in our elections is too significant to ignore.

Martin is the senior fellow for religion and public policy at Rice University's James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy in Houston. Information and registration for the Baker Institute symposium on Religion in the 2012 Elections can be found at ifn.org/symposium.



Matt Rourke / Associated Press

Rick Santorum waits to speak in South Carolina during a stop on his campaign for the presidency.

Striving to offer charity care to indigent patients

Charity from page B8

such as St. Vincent's Clinic, managed and staffed by UTMB; a Multishare Plan that enables small local business owners to offer their employees affordable health care benefits; and a Community Health Program that helps economically disadvantaged patients manage their chronic diseases.

Like most organizations that deliver charity care, we make our general policies public and provide contact information for individuals who think they may qualify for or have questions about charity care. Our practices are consistent with the requirements of Senate Bill 1731 ("Health-care Transparency"), the American Hospital Association's Hospital Billing and Collection Practices and other health care industry guidelines.

It is important to note that charity qualification guidelines can be complex. Each patient's situation is different, and we make decisions on a case-by-case basis consistent with our policy and considering several factors. These include the nature and severity of the patient's medical condition, his or her county of residence, whether he or she has been our patient before, and the potential relevance of the case to our training programs. Financial status is a consideration, but not the only one, and the first thing we do is help patients determine whether they might be eligible for financial assistance from other government or social service agencies.

These criteria apply to all potential charity patients, whether they seek treatment on their own or are referred to us by another provider.

As national news coverage has illustrated, ensuring equitable access to care goes far beyond the efforts of a single institution or the collective efforts of providers in a single region. We will continue working with our community partners to more effectively address the needs of our most vulnerable residents. We will also continue working with state and national leaders to create policies aimed at ensuring equitable access to care. And, we will continue to manage our limited charity care dollars in a way that provides the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people.

Callender is president of the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

Education investment will benefit the entire community



Dave Rossman / Houston Chronicle

Nia Gordon attends a symbolic butterfly release at the unveiling of the Bright Beginnings program.

Education from page B8

secondary education.

Bright Beginnings is committed to helping teachers enhance their professional abilities. The University of Houston Institute for Urban Education, which has evaluated the program since inception, reports that Bright Beginnings has helped nearly 300 teachers receive child development associate certificates and associate degrees in early childhood and more than 20 United Way Bright

Beginnings teachers have received bachelor's or master's degrees in early childhood education.

This investment has not only benefited hundreds of teachers and thousands of children, but will ultimately help create a more skilled and successful work force in the future. A 2006 study by the Bush School of Government and Public Service found that every \$1 invested in high-quality prekindergarten programs in Texas returns \$3.50 per student to the community.

No matter how you look at it, from an individual, community or economic perspective, early childhood education is critical to developing strong families, safe communities and a thriving economy.

United Way Bright Beginnings is one of the many ways our United Way is tackling key issues and helping to make Houston a better place to live. The United Way embraces the entire circle of life in our community, providing help and hope to children

and youth, families and neighborhoods, seniors and people rebuilding their lives. We thank each of you who has given to United Way and helped make this work possible. If you haven't made a gift to this year's campaign, we hope you will strongly consider doing so.

Kruger, the United Way 2011-12 annual campaign chairman, is president of ExxonMobil Production Company; Babin is president and CEO of the United Way of Greater Houston.