Religion has played an important part in U.S. presidential politics from the earliest days of the republic. Sometimes religious intolerance has been used as a means to attack candidates as was the case when Thomas Jefferson was attacked as being an atheist in 1800 (doc #3) or when the KKK viciously attacked Catholic candidate Al Smith in 1928, and Protestant preachers warned from the pulpit, “If you vote for Al Smith you’re voting against Christ and you will be damned.” In other elections candidates spoke out for religious tolerance as when John Kennedy addressed the Houston Ministerial Conference in 1960 (doc. #2). Kennedy became the first Catholic to win the presidency. In the Houston speech Kennedy referred to attacks by some on his Catholic faith: “Today I may be the victim, but tomorrow it may be you — until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped at a time of great national peril.”

In recent times religion has had a high profile on the campaign trail. Candidates from Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton to Al Gore and George W. Bush have declared themselves to be “born-again” Christians. In 1988 the Reverend Jesse Jackson was a strong contender for the Democratic nomination for President, preaching and raising money for his campaign from the pulpit. In 2000 Joe Lieberman became the first Jew to be nominated for Vice President. He spoke from the pulpit of an African American church in Detroit saying, “I hope (my candidacy) will enable all people…to talk about their faith and about their religion, and I hope it will reinforce a belief that I feel as strong as anything else – that there must be a place for faith in America's public life.” Apparently most voters agreed with him, as polls showed that 51% felt religion should play a bigger role in public life and only 12% thought it should play a smaller role (Woodward 54-56).

In the 2000 election George W. Bush won by a large margin among white evangelical Protestants and among those who attended church at least once a week. Gore won a large percentage of the Jewish vote and those who attended church once a month or less. The magazine sidebar you will see was part of a Newsweek magazine story entitled “Does God Belong on the Stump?” that was published about two months before the election. It includes Green Party candidate, Ralph Nader, and Reform Party candidate, Pat Buchanan.

> Project the document.

**QUESTION**

Based on these brief quotes, which candidates view religious faith as central to their belief systems?

**SUGGESTED ANSWER**

Based on these quotes, Gore, Bush, Lieberman, and Buchanan view religious faith as central to their belief system.
QUESTION: Based on this information, why might George W. Bush have succeeded so well in attracting the votes of white evangelical Protestants?

SUGGESTED ANSWER: Bush proclaims that he has “sought redemption” in Biblical faith and would create a White House Office of Faith-Based Action. Gore, although proclaiming the strong influence of the church, favored separation of church and state.

EVIDENCE: Evangelical Protestants would relate to Bush’s belief in redemption and would appreciate having a President in the White House who would address their concerns.

QUESTION: Are these quotations complete and accurate representations of each candidate’s position on matters of faith and politics?

SUGGESTED ANSWER: No, these statements are brief one-liners, hardly a complete representation of any candidate’s position.

EVIDENCE: Even though the candidates probably made these statements at one point, a single quotation and a one-line policy sentence cannot be complete explanations of such a complex issue.

CONNECTIONS:

Media Bias
- Consider William Jennings Bryan’s Cross of Gold poster in 1896 (doc. #1) and John F. Kennedy’s speech to the Houston Ministers in 1960 (doc. #2) and compare them with this document. Which candidates appeal to specific religious groups for votes? Which candidates speak out for religious diversity and tolerance? Give examples to support your answers.

FURTHER QUESTIONS:
- Why have sound bites and one-line quotes become so central to media messages about and from politicians?
- Can you think of other examples of how religion has played a part in a presidential campaign?
- Should a candidate’s religious faith be an issue in the campaign? Why or why not?
- Why do all the photos in this sidebar show the candidates looking up?