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TWO FACES OF AMERICAN PLURALISM: POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS

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Abstract: The paper examines the contours, features and developments of two faces of pluralism, as well as their interactions. First of all, based on the analysis of the pluralist theories, it underlines that pluralism is not perceived now only as a particular American school of thought, but mostly as a generic concept with meanings and connotations that vary from one epoch to another. Second of all, it scrutinizes the political pluralism in the United States, more exactly the relationship between constitutional pluralism and party pluralism, as well as the pluralism of interest groups. The religious pluralism is seen both as denominational pluralism and as diversity of religious organizations. The paper shows that, in spite of the common ground in the constitutional provisions and much interference in their development, each of the two faces of pluralism has followed its own dynamics. Next, it focuses on the new religious pluralism, which has nourished controversies regarding its effects on democracy in America. Although prestigious scholars have warned that these new challenges face real perils, the author of this paper sides with those who see them less of a threat than an opportunity for democracy to develop new interactions and participative tools, without abandoning its principles and values.

Key Words: conservatism; constitutional pluralism; democracy; interest groups; liberalism; party pluralism; political pluralism; religious pluralism; Religious Right.

Pluralism is usually seen as a basic characteristic of the democratic regimes. In this very broad meaning, pluralism is proper to all Western democracies and, in the last few decades, to most Central and Eastern European countries, more or less. However, comparative analyses have stressed that the United States (US) has the most relevant experience of pluralism, both in theory and practice. The analyses have also underlined the polymorphous nature of pluralism: the political dimension is intermingled with the social, cultural, ethnic, or religious dimensions.¹

This paper focuses on two faces of pluralism in American society, namely the political and the religious ones. First, a brief history of pluralism in its theoretical aspects is presented, and then the main features and developments of the two faces, as well as their interactions are explored. The approach is an attempt to answer the question: is the new religious pluralism a threat or an opportunity for the American pluralist democracy?

Theories of pluralism

There is no doubt that the precursors of pluralist theories can be found in ancient Greek thought, more exactly in Aristotle's view that the state is a multiple entity that involves separation among its specific activities. This approach inspired the modern principle of the separation of powers, which is often seen as the core of the political pluralism.

However, only in the early 1920s, in England, did pluralism develop into a theory, even if it did not take the shape of a coherent academic school. J. N. Figgis, an Anglican priest, saw his church as a voluntary association, not as a state-enforced compulsory association, and therefore he advocated for religious freedom and the autonomy of religious organizations. H. J. Laski, a legal and political theorist, was the first who introduced pluralism as a political concept, and pleaded for a "pluralistic state," a decentralized one, where the power is diffused to local authorities and autonomous associations as well.²

This version of pluralism came to be connected to the American pluralist tradition, especially thanks to Laski, who appreciated both the vision of the *Federalist Papers* and William James's philosophical view of the "pluralistic universe."³ The British scholar, who was repeatedly a guest lecturer at prestigious American universities, discovered in American federalism the equivalent of political pluralism.

Across the Ocean, in the US, pluralism has been a characteristic feature from the very beginning, its first expression being the Constitution itself, which was based on two principles: separation of powers and federalism. James Madison, in his *Federalist No. 10*, a masterpiece of political thought pleading for the Constitution, anticipated the future theories of pluralism through his approach of "factions," the prototype of interest groups and political parties. Unlike the authors of

these theories, Madison did not consider that factions were necessarily something good, but since their causes lay in human nature itself, they could not be removed; therefore, the only method of “curing the mischiefs” would be to control their effects.

Pluralism started to develop as a new trend in American political science at the beginning of the twentieth century, thanks to those theorists who identified group interests as fundamental factors of economic and political behavior. Arthur Bentley inaugurated this new trend in his book *Process of Government*, published in 1908, before the heyday of British pluralism. He abandoned the traditional juristic political science and pleaded for a new empirically based theory of politics, emphasizing on “activity”, “group”, and “interests” as unifying concepts.⁴

But the so-called pluralist theories were elaborated only at the middle of the century, when pluralism became very popular in American universities. David Truman continued Bentley’s work, giving his own book a title which is very suggestive for this filiation: *The Governmental Process...*, first published in 1951. In this book, considered to be one of the best statements of the pluralist view, Truman elaborated a consistent conception of the role of interest groups in the political process. Using data accumulated in the work of numerous political scientists he passed from the “anatomy” to the “physiology” of what he preferred to call “interest groups,” rather than “pressure groups”, as they were known.⁵

Robert Dahl, the most prolific and outstanding personality of pluralist theories, focused on the relationship between interest groups and government, and searched for an analytical model of pluralist democracy. He identified it in the so-called “polyarchy,” using the ancient Greek word in order to describe a modern system in which the power is distributed among various agents.⁶ Dahl’s view evolved over the decades: if in the 1950s he treated consensus and compromise as being essential for political life, in the 1960s he became much more concerned about the problem of conflict solving; then, in the 1980s, he analyzed the “dilemmas of pluralist democracy.”⁷

It is to be emphasized that the theories of pluralism stimulated a real controversy in American political science, the bulk of literature about these theories being much the same as that of pluralist works themselves.⁸ Some critics, like C. Wright Mills or Herbert Marcuse, rejected pluralist theories by rejecting or criticizing the pluralist system itself. Others expressed objections to these theories, but they had in view the improvement of the system and proposed solutions to amend its functioning. Theodore Lowi, who is regarded as the leading critic, formulated certain “counts” against pluralism as an ideology and theory as well, reproaching it especially for the exaggerated role conferred on groups, which weakened democratic government; his proposals for a

radical reform consisted in what he called “juridical democracy,” based on restoring the rule of law.⁹

The criticisms that faced pluralism have influenced its theorists to reconsider some of their approaches to the pluralist functioning of society. Most of the “new” pluralists are preoccupied now with making distinctions among various types of groups and identifying ways to reconcile private and public interests. But, in spite of attempts to rebuild it, pluralist theory has taken a back seat in the last few decades.

In close connection with this decline, major changes in the interest groups approach have occurred lately. Being developed initially through the theories of pluralism, this approach evolved towards a distinct field of research. According to Baumgartner and Leech, in the 1980s and 1990s, a new literature emerged, more quantitative and systematic, characterized by greater scientific precision, focusing on the internal operations of the groups, rather than their external activities.¹⁰ Whereas scholars once aspired to create complete political theories based on interest groups, now narrower studies have become more common.

In spite of these avatars, the pluralist theories define one of the structural paradigms for understanding American political life. They have also proved to be very influential abroad, mostly thanks to the high value they give to democratic principles and governance. As Gregor McLennan asserted in mid 1990s, pluralism was no longer perceived as a particular American school of thought, but mostly as a basic concept in social sciences, namely a “generic” concept, with connotations and implications that vary from one epoch to another; in the postmodernist context, the new pluralism is better defined by words like “dilemma,” “ambivalence,” or “paradox.”¹¹

Political pluralism

Generally speaking, political pluralism refers to the existence of multiple centers of legitimate power and authority. When Sartori examined the political level of pluralism he asserted that it meant “the diversification of power,” and then, to be more precise, he referred to the existence of a “plurality of groups” and “party pluralism”. Also relevant, he stated that party pluralism was preceded by “constitutional pluralism,” consisting in the division of power and the checks-and-balances doctrine.”¹² Although this remarkable approach was intended to design a general framework for analyzing party systems and not some specific system, it obviously has a methodological value for exploring American political pluralism.

The American Constitution is based on two principles, both relevant for pluralism: the separation of powers and federalism. “Checks-and-balances” is the concept elaborated by the Founding Fathers in order to describe the government whose legislative, executive, and judicial

branches, without being completely separated, check and balance each other, and also prevent the abuse of the governmental power. Consequently, the principle of the separation of powers inheres in the substance of the American Constitution, although it is nowhere made explicit in its text. Some scholars believe that the American system is more accurately described by Richard Neustadt's formula: "separated institutions sharing power,"¹³ since the governmental process usually requires joint action.

Federalism, the other basic principle, highly valued by Laski, the early pluralist, consists in the division of powers between the national government and several subnational governments. For nearly a century and a half the dominant paradigm was that of "dual federalism," expressing the fact that there were two sovereigns – the national government and the state governments – each of them having specific powers and functions. *New Deal*, the program initiated by President F. D. Roosevelt, inaugurated a new paradigm – that of "cooperative federalism", in which the two levels did not have separate spheres of action, but rather intermingled ones. In the recent decades, the states and other subnational governments have become more innovative than ever before, and so have contributed to the strengthening of the pluralistic shape.

Party pluralism has developed in this specific constitutional framework. The history of party politics in the US is essentially the story of two parties alternating control of the government. Beyond the force of tradition, there are a few other reasons for this persistence: the American electoral system, which is a "single-member, plurality" system (not a "proportional," nor even a "majority" one); the public funding of electoral campaigns, which favors the two major parties; and also the capacity of the two parties to remodel their issues from a stage to another in various ways, including that of assuming issues supported by the "minor" parties. Actually, the two-party system has always been challenged. "The third parties," as the other parties are often described by this generic term, have had an important impact on American politics, even if their existence has been of short standing. The rise of these minor parties springs from the need to support an alternative political agenda, often as an expression of the protest against the system, as well as from the wish to launch a different, charismatic, presidential candidate. As "third partyism" has been a debatable issue in the US, the political scientists have identified the arguments for and against this phenomenon. On the one hand, third parties allow for a greater diversity of opinion, beyond that of Democrats and Republicans, thus contributing to a successful representative democracy, while they can also provide useful solutions to political problems on the local and regional level. On the other hand, third parties can be composed of political extremists, who sometimes support anti-democratic attitudes; they may also impact elections by producing an

outcome contrary to the popular feeling, as it happened in the 1992 and 2000 presidential elections.¹⁴

Traditionally, the “lack of ideological coherence” has been identified as a distinctive feature of the American parties and also one of their weaknesses.¹⁵ The size of the American nation, its extraordinary cultural and ethnic heterogeneity, and the diversity of interests that need to be represented are but a few reasonable explanations for this characteristic. However, as Beck and Sorauf have shown, in the past decades both major parties seem to have become “more ideological,” thanks to an increased concern about specific issues and ideologies. At the same time, the electorate seems to be more interested in its ideological self-identification, in terms of the liberal – conservative dichotomy.¹⁶ No doubt, the two major parties share the same basic values of democracy and republicanism, but they diverge on specific policy issues. The differences appear especially in the platforms they adopt every four years at their national nominating conventions and in the speeches of their candidates for presidency. Generally speaking, Democrats support the idea of an active government, which is involved in solving the nation’s problems, while Republicans are critical of such a role, on the grounds that “big government is the problem,” as Ronald Reagan asserted. The following synthesis of their positions is relevant for the subject of this paper:

“Thus, compared with Republicans most Democrats favor higher levels of government spending on aid for the poor and homeless, education, medical care, public housing, and the like. On the so-called social issues, Democrats tend to favor less government intervention in people’s moral, religious, and intellectual lives, while Republicans favor policies that allow greater government involvement in such matters as limiting or outlawing abortions, prohibiting the exhibition of obscene films and art, and encouraging prayer in the public schools.”¹⁷

It follows that, all in all, while the Democratic Party’s ideological orientation can be described as liberal, the Republican Party’s view is conservative. However, both American liberals and conservatives are divided among themselves, as they agree on basic principles, fundamental goals and many issues, but disagree on other issues or the specific means to promote their positions. This pluralist diversity characterizes the academic world, the public in general, and, consequently, the parties. While the welfare or social liberals, whose conception took shape in F. D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, believe that an active government is necessary to secure for everyone an equal chance to freedom, the neoclassical liberals (or libertarians) believe that the government must be limited in order to

keep the freedom.¹⁸ In the case of conservatives, an even more conspicuous diversity has generated many tensions and disagreements. Ball and Dagger have identified four kinds of conservatism in the US today: traditional conservatism (inspired by Edmund Burke's thought), which supports the preservation of the social order consisting in a network of interdependent people; individualist conservatism (associated with Ronald Reagan's politics), which advocates free-market; neoconservatism, which occupies a position between the first two; and the Religious Right movement, which shares certain values with the other three, but is distinct in many respects.¹⁹

But can we conclude that the American party system is a genuinely pluralist one? On the one hand, in spite of the limitations that a two-party system can have in representing interest diversity, the presence of the third parties has proved to benefit pluralism. On the other hand, as we have discussed, both major parties are quite heterogeneous, since they articulate and aggregate a large variety of interests, which are expressed in various tendencies ranging on a spectrum from liberalism to conservatism.

Still, another question arises when we refer to the issue of interest representation in a pluralist system: what is the role of interest groups in this process? First of all, unlike parties, which are fully devoted to political activity, interest groups can focus both on political and nonpolitical activities. Therefore, an organized interest group can be described the way David Truman did, namely as "a potential political organization". Moreover, unlike parties, which are committed to electoral activity by nominating and supporting their own candidates for public office, interest groups are only indirectly involved in this process, their main purpose being to influence those who hold office. Thus, beyond various definitions, the key word in describing interest groups is "influence."

Interest groups started to develop in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, when the rapid industrial development and the arrival of many immigrants favored the creation of numerous associations whose main purpose was to support their members' occupational interests relating to government. Afterwards, the interest groups' universe has had a complex evolution, often described by appealing to the "wave" metaphor. In the recent decades almost all American literature on interest groups refers to their "explosion" and tremendous diversity. Discussing this diversity, Baumgartner and Leech have demonstrated that, although the trade associations remain an important part of the system, other types of groups are increasingly important. In a comparative study of the types of associations, they found that in 1959, for example, trade associations represented 39% of the groups, while in 1995, only 18%; in contrast, the growth of various types of organizations in the nonprofit sector (health, social welfare, cultural, educational, public affairs, or religious groups) is quite impressive: from 31% in 1959 to 59% forty years later.²⁰

The interest groups have used many ways to influence American politics, focusing either on an “inside” strategy of lobbying public officials or an “outside” strategy for shaping public opinion, or both. As many surveys conducted in the past few decades have indicated, legislative or administrative lobbying, as well as working with mass media are the most important tactics.²¹ Lobbying, which is highly regulated in the US, refers to the activities aimed at influencing policy-making in the legislative and the executive branches as well; it can be “direct”, focusing on Congress or the President and the administrative agencies, or “indirect”, based on the so-called “grassroots” mobilization.²² Most politically active groups use lobbying to make their interests heard and understood by the policymakers or the general public. Some groups have their own lobbyists, while others hire lobbying firms to represent them at the national or state level. Many groups have built real networks for grassroots mobilization; when a larger support is needed, they address public opinion, especially through mass media, by launching media or public relations campaigns.

Although electoral activities are reported as being not very important to their organizations, American interest groups have generally been involved in the electoral process by using various means. Political Action Committees (PACs), organized for the purpose of raising and spending money to elect and defeat candidates, are the specific form through which substantial parts of the resources for financing electoral campaigns are gathered. The effect of PACs contributions on the officials’ behavior and on the political climate is a controversial issue. According to Hall and Deardorff the impact of PACs contributions and of lobbying contacts on the legislators should be tested jointly. Although the contributions have little direct effect on the legislative process, they can operate in an indirect way: they might simply serve as a signal that the group has policy objectives in common with the legislator or, more than this, they could “buy access.”²³

As a matter of fact, the general evaluation of the role that interest groups play in the functioning of the American system implies a balance between the pros and the cons. On the one hand, interest groups have been accepted as inevitable and indispensable in American society, and their contribution to a democratic pluralist functioning of the political system cannot be denied and ignored: they have stimulated the representation of various categories of people before the government and have facilitated political participation; also, in the process of influencing the policy-makers, they have provided useful information and expertise. On the other hand, there are certain inequalities among groups regarding the capacity of mobilizing material and human resources to organize themselves and to be efficient in supporting their interests; likewise, the so-called “hyperpluralism,” that is the existence of too many groups that compete against one another and exert not only influence but sometimes pressure on government, as well as the impressive growth of lobbying

activities involving huge amounts of money contribute to the fragmentation of the political order.²⁴

It is to be underlined that the nature of the relationship between interest groups and government is one of the important features that make the difference between the US and the European countries. As discussed before, American pluralism is characterized by a competitive system of interest groups, without peak associations that could speak on behalf of an entire sector. On the contrary, the existence of peak associations at the national level, regular consultations between government and interest groups, especially unions and business associations, often concluded by tripartite pacts, are seen as a significant dimension of the European corporatist tradition.²⁵

Religious pluralism

Like political pluralism, religious pluralism is usually seen as having both a descriptive and a normative meaning. While the descriptive meaning has mainly to do with the existence of various religious groups and organizations, with different beliefs and behaviors, the normative meaning concerns encouragement and protection of religious diversity as a positive feature of a community. It follows that religious pluralism is not just another expression for religious diversity. In their attempts to give a proper definition of this face of pluralism scholars have focused on its various features and dimensions, among which “interaction” or “competition” are often highlighted. In this respect, for Banchoff, religious pluralism refers to “the interaction among religious groups in society and politics,”²⁶ while for Norris and Inglehart it is both “a diversity of beliefs, values, and practices among communities of different faiths, as well as patterns of competition among religious organizations for adherents”.²⁷

Like in the case of political pluralism, the basis of religious pluralism was laid in the American Constitution. It is to be underlined that this fundamental law says nothing at all about God; in fact, the only mention of religion is a negative one, which prohibits any religious test for holding public office (Article VI). The essence of the Founding Fathers’ view on this matter consisted in the constitutional commitment to religious freedom, understood as freedom for all religious traditions, and also as freedom from religion of any sort. This commitment, coupled with the nonestablishment of religion clause, was more specifically expressed in the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” Although some critics said that the negative approach remained the salient feature, most scholars identified here the favorable framework for a unique type of religious pluralism. Over the course of more than two centuries, the two principles raised a “wall of separation” protecting the

state from religion and religion from the state, and also stimulated the development of an impressive diversity, competition and interaction of churches and religious organizations.

It is well known that nations have followed different patterns of the church-state relationship. In their comparative study of church – state policy in the US, the Netherlands, Australia, England, and Germany, Monsma and Soper identified three models: “the strict separation model,” which is specific to the US and traces its roots to the Enlightenment liberal view; “the established church model,” which was formally adopted in England; and “the pluralist or structural pluralist model,” which is exemplified by the Netherlands.²⁸ A question arises, though, over whether the pluralist model is different indeed as compared to the separation model. According to the authors, under the third model society is understood as made up of autonomous spheres having distinct activities; religion is seen “not as a separate sphere with only limited relevance to the other spheres, as the liberal strict separationists do, but as having a bearing on all of life.”²⁹ Their point emerges clearly in the analysis, and they conclude that the pluralistic model of aid to all religious schools and organizations has been associated with fewer tensions among these groups, in comparison with the separation model, which neither benefit nor burden religion.³⁰ However, the authors admit that all countries included in their study are “religiously pluralistic.”³¹ It seems that asserting the existence of various pluralistic arrangements could lead to a more accurate description of this diversity of church-state relationship in the world. Moreover, the US is often regarded as having the highest degree of pluralism; according to Peter Berger, in this country, “religious pluralism attained its most unconstrained and exuberant version, giving birth to the denomination as the religious voluntary association par excellence.”³²

The European tradition operated with two organizational forms of religion, namely the “church,” into which people were born, and the “sect,” a body separated from an established church, which some people decided to join. Going beyond this dichotomy, Americans developed “denomination,” as a third form, which is a voluntary association benefitting by religious freedom and equality of treatment in a competitive environment. Denominationalism, often described as “the great American religious invention,”³³ functions not only at the national level, but, which is more significant, at the local level, through the congregations. It is in this characteristic that Casanova identified the fundamental difference between Europe and the US: while European churches have remained anchored in the territorially based national church and local parish, the American denominations work as congregational voluntary associations.³⁴

Against this background, a great religious diversity has been developed in the US. When the nation was founded, this diversity was institutionalized only as denominational pluralism within Protestantism. Step by step, other religions have been incorporated in the system: not only the Catholic, but also the Jewish, and, recently, the Buddhist, the Muslim religion and so on. According to the findings of a 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on religion and public life, religious affiliation in the US is very diverse and extremely fluid.³⁵ While about 16% of American adults say they are unaffiliated with any faith, more than one-quarter (28%) have abandoned the faith in which they were raised. The survey confirms that the US is becoming a “minority Protestant country” since the number of Americans who report that they are members of Protestant denominations stands at about 51%. Catholicism gathers 23.9% of Americans, which means about half the number of Protestants; also significant, among the foreign-born population, the number of Catholics is almost double than that of Protestants.

Immigration has been the main source of religious pluralism in the US from the very beginning. The more so in the recent decades, when most new-comers are non-Europeans and are also very diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, language, and, of course, religion. The new religious pluralism is, no doubt, a result of globalization, but it has also contributed to this process. At the beginning of the new millennium, thanks to the largest wave of immigration in the nation’s history “American religious pluralism is expanding and incorporating all the world religions.”³⁶ As the Pluralism Project, based at Harvard University, has been documented for over a decade, the American religious landscape has gradually transformed; the transformation is visible both in the appearance of various religious centers and the participation of religious communities in public affairs.³⁷ Beyond the obviously increasing religious diversity, Diana Eck has identified an important signal of its public recognition, as a proof of the commitment to pluralism: in the 1990s, public officials and institutions began to refer to “churches, synagogues, and mosques,” while also issuing congratulatory proclamations for a new set of holidays.³⁸

A genuine religious pluralism has to be related not only to the religious diversity, but also to the people’s religiosity. While the secularization theory was a kind of conventional wisdom for many in the twentieth century, the US was seen as being exceptional among developed countries, thanks to a higher rate of religious membership and activity. However, recent surveys and analyses have revealed a mixed picture. By considering the cross-national evidence of religiosity in post-industrial nations, Norris and Inglehart concluded that, in spite of being “one of the most religious countries in the world,” the US “should not be excluded from any consideration of the dynamics of secularization.”³⁹ This evaluation is consistent with the findings of a cross-national report issued

by the General Social Survey presenting a comprehensive analysis of global religious trends: the pattern of changes varies across countries, indicators, and periods; in the US, the religious change over the last half century “has clearly been in the secular direction, but the pattern is complex and nuanced,” and this nation still remains “more religious than most other countries.”⁴⁰

Religious pluralism involves not only the existence and activity of diverse religious institutions and denominations, but also the existence and activity of numerous religious organizations having as main goals the advancement of religion or the support for specific religious-related issues. The religious groups have played a significant role in the post-war history of the US. The civil rights movement is the greatest example of the victories that the religious groups and the religious lobbyists won in the 1960s. While at that time the most active groups (not only the religious ones) were those dedicated to liberal causes, in the next two decades the conservative groups grew into strong counter-movements. According to Jack Walker, the New Christian Right – a complex of organizations centered on Moral Majority –, grew up as a real national movement, similar in some ways to the civil rights movement.⁴¹ Founded in 1979, this Christian organization pleaded for a traditional vision of family life and stood in opposition to the women’s movement, as well as to legalized abortion and the gay rights movement. Although Moral Majority was dissolved ten years later, elements of its organization were transferred to the Christian Coalition of America, which has achieved a status of a major force on Capitol Hill. Founded in 1989, the new structure described itself as “one of the largest conservative grassroots political organizations in America” assuming the mission to represent the pro-family point of view before local councils, school boards, state legislatures and Congress, and also to provide information as well as political training to the pro-family community.⁴²

Thanks to the very active presence of these organizations, the Religious Right has been acknowledged as one of the basic versions of today’s conservative ideology in the US. Like other varieties of conservatism, the Religious Right pleads for less government intervention in the economy; however, a more active government is required in other respects, with significant moral implications, in order to restore the traditional or family values. Some Christian conservatives have strongly supported specific causes such as initiating constitutional amendments for affirming that the US is a Christian (or Judeo-Christian) nation, or for banning abortion and gay marriage.⁴³ The Religious Right’s view has often been described as being an expression of fundamentalism in the US. Roy Macridis is very firm in formulating his arguments for such a characterization: attachment to traditional values and religious practices, and aversion to modernity.⁴⁴

Nowadays religious conservatism is not only a very sound voice in the public sphere, but also the preferred congregations' theological orientation. According to the National Congregations Study, based on two nationally representative surveys conducted in 1998 and then in 2006-07, 58% of congregations characterized themselves as theologically conservative, while only 9% described themselves as theologically liberal, while the rest chose "right in the middle." Disagreements have mainly to do with issues like the status of the Bible, the role of women, the inclusion of homosexuals and so on. However, ideological conflict usually happens not at the congregation level, but rather at the denominational level.⁴⁵ Generally speaking, in terms of beliefs and practices, Americans who place a high value on religion in their lives or who are very active religiously tend to be more politically conservative than other people. This relationship is not necessarily mirrored in the partisan identification of religious groups. While most Mormons and members of the evangelical Protestant churches identify themselves with or lean toward the Republican Party, most members of the historically black Protestant churches, as well as the majority of non-Christian faiths, including Jewish, Muslims, Buddhists or Hindu, identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party.⁴⁶

We could identify here an argument for the conclusion that, although the two faces of pluralism – political and religious – have a common ground in the Constitutional provisions, and their developments have interfered in many respects, each of them has followed its own dynamics. Like other groups, the religious ones are based on the voluntary principle, compete with one another and use similar strategies and tactics, but they have focused on specific issues and have developed specific interactions inside or outside their universe.

New religious pluralism – a challenge to American democracy

When Alexis de Tocqueville traveled around America in early 19th century, he was impressed to discover that separating the church from state actually made religion stronger, rather than weaker. He found that, although religion was not directly involved in governing the society, it had to be considered as being the "first of political institutions," on the grounds that it served for maintaining the democratic republic.

Over the centuries, the importance of religion in the American society has been preserved: "organized religion has played a vital role in virtually every major political issue in the history of the United States."⁴⁷ In our days, religion remains a powerful force in influencing Americans' opinions, behaviors, and finally their participation in public life. However, the new religious pluralism has nourished real controversies around the need to rethink the relationship between religion and politics.

For a discussion about these new challenges let us see now the most important instruments that religion is using in order to influence politics. At the congregations' level, involvement in politics is not a preferred activity and generally it has not increased in the recent years, except for participation in voter registration, which more than doubled, from 8% in 1998 to 18% in 2006-07. Combining data of two surveys, the National Congregation Study has made a hierarchy of selected political activities: 17% of the congregations distributed voter guides (about half of them came from Religious Right organizations); 9% marched or demonstrated; 6% lobbied elected officials; 5% invited political candidates to speak. In terms of issues, congregations who marched, demonstrated, or lobbied elected officials were focused on abortion, poverty, and homosexuality, as well as international matters.⁴⁸ The increased attention for electoral activities is somehow surprising, when we compare this hierarchy with that of the tactics used by various types of interest groups, which have reported legislative or administrative lobbying and working with mass media as being on the first places.⁴⁹ It seems that the congregations' focus on new voters could be explained through an increasing concern for attracting membership and support in an increasing competitive environment.

It is also to be underlined that the preferences for certain activities are different at the national level. Religious groups pay much attention to lobbying when they act in Washington, D.C. No doubt, as Daniel Hofrenning argued, there are certain differences between the "secular lobbyists," who prefer an insider strategy and develop a close relationship with lawmakers, and the "religious lobbyists," who emphasize outsider tactics, rallying the grassroots and protesting at the gates of power.⁵⁰ Therefore, religious lobbyists often prefer to be called "advocates" in order to convey their distance from secular lobbyists, and to use "advocacy" instead of "lobbying" for describing their work. Although the differences between the two words are not always clear, it is usually acknowledged that advocacy has a broader meaning, which covers not only the lobbying activities aimed at influencing policy-making in the legislative and executive branches, but also a range of other activities designed to advance specific goals, causes or cases, through education or mobilization of constituencies.

It explains why the authors of a recent study on "lobbying for the faithful," conducted by the Pew Research Center have chosen to mention "religious advocacy groups" as a subtitle.⁵¹ First of all, the study found that the number of organizations engaged in "religious lobbying or religion-related advocacy" in the American capital has increased fivefold in the past four decades, from fewer than 40 in 1970 to more than 200 today. Also significant, these organizations reflect the religious pluralism in this country, even if the share of each group does not exactly mirror the population's religious affiliation: many of them are Roman Catholic (19%)

and evangelical Protestant (18%); Jewish organizations also have a significant presence (12%), as do the mainline Protestant (8%) ones; notably, the number of Muslim groups is about the same as the number of mainline Protestant groups. Another relevant finding refers to the issues agendas, which include about 300 policy concerns. Although, historically, religious advocacy focused mainly on domestic affairs, today it is almost equally involved in international affairs; among the domestic issues which seem to be more prominent are: the church-state relationship, civil rights and liberties, bioethics and life, family and marriage, poverty, health care, immigration and so on. Finally, it is to be mentioned that these groups spend at least \$390million a year on efforts to influence national public policy.

Are these intensified religious lobbying or advocacy activities, coupled with the increasing religious pluralism, a matter of concern for those interested in the future of American democracy? It is not uncommon for scholars who discuss the implications of lobbying for democratic ethics to reach the critical conclusion that lobbying distorts the legislators' allocation of effort in favor of those groups that can spend more on this kind of operations.⁵² However, such criticisms are aimed at various kinds of lobbying, not especially at its religious variety. At the same time, the ambivalent view of interest groups and lobbying is applicable to this case too: beyond the controversial aspects, the religious groups and their activities have contributed to a better representation of various categories of faith and to an intensified participation of people in the policy-making process.

As the involvement of religious groups in the electoral process has increased in the recent years, their voting preferences and behaviors have become a relevant topic for analyzing the elections' outcome, or for electoral predictions. The more so as some religious groups, especially those belonging to the Religious Right, have proved to be particularly active in the presidential elections. First, in the 1980s, the Moral Majority was widely credited with supporting Ronald Reagan. Then, in the 2000s, the Christian Coalition helped George W. Bush to be elected; consequently, one of the first moves of the new President was to create an Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives mainly to work with religious groups.

The 2008 presidential election was interesting from another angle. The Democratic Party made efforts to attract religious voters, and particularly to change the traditional pattern of the so-called "attendance gap": the more often people attend religious services the more likely they are to vote the Republican candidates. Barack Obama succeeded in attracting a larger share of the vote from some religious groups than the 2004 Democratic nominee had received, for example: among black Protestants, minority Catholics as well as minority Protestants. However, the attendance gap remained about the same: the new Democratic

candidate has benefited by less support from the religiously observant white Catholics or white Protestants; even so, he succeeded to attract more votes than the 2004 candidate from the white evangelical Protestants – a core constituency in the Republican electorate – particularly the younger members.⁵³

The 2012 presidential election brought a renewed attention to the religion - politics relationship. The Republican nomination competition called the public attention to a specific matter, namely: how relevant is the religious affiliation of the candidates? Much has been written about the potential impact of Mitt Romney's Mormon religion. At the beginning of the competition, it was thought that his faith could be of particular concern for white evangelical Protestants, although the Mormons have had a strong Republican identity. But, according to a survey conducted in November 2011, one year before the election, Romney's Mormon faith is a factor only in the primaries, not in the general election.⁵⁴ This finding was then confirmed by his nomination as the candidate of the Republican Party. Presidential vote has proved that the basic religious contours of the electorate have been maintained, in spite of some minor changes: according to the national exit polls, traditionally Republican groups, such as white Protestants (especially evangelical) and white Catholics, voted mostly for Romney, while traditionally Democratic groups such as black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, Jews and the religiously unaffiliated voted overwhelmingly for Obama. The "attendance gap" has also been maintained: people who regularly attend religious services gave their strongest support to the Republican candidate, while those who assert that they never attend worship services or attend them only a few times a year were the strongest supporters of the Democratic candidate.⁵⁵

Are all these developments reasons for concern about an excessively deep involvement of religious groups in politics? At the beginning of the 1990s, Roy Macridis was wondering how lasting the influence of the American evangelical Protestants will be, and warned that "In their emphasis on traditionalism, their rejection of critical inquiry, and their goal of propounding their own moral and religious values, they are beginning to weigh heavily on the political agenda of the country."⁵⁶ Later on, at the mid 2000s, Samuel Huntington strongly voiced the concern that increasing diversity was a threat to the core Anglo-Protestant identity of the US: "A multicultural America will, in time, become a multicreedal America, with groups with different cultures espousing distinctive political values and principles rooted in their particular cultures."⁵⁷

However, many arguments in favor of these new developments in religious pluralism have been identified as well. For Peter Berger "both Protestant and non-Protestant religious institutions can, today, serve to bring about and solidify democracy"; a threat to democracy could come only from the religious ideologies which aim at establishing a totalitarian

regime.⁵⁸ The editor of the volume dedicated to exploring the new religious pluralism and the democratic responses to its challenges characterizes this phenomenon as being “less a threat than an opportunity to democracy.”⁵⁹ An opportunity, indeed, for developing new interactions and participative tools for more and more groups, in a more diverse and complex society, but without abandoning the American commitment to democratic values and principles.

Concluding remarks

From a theoretical perspective, pluralism defines one of the structural paradigms for understanding the American system, which proved to be very influential abroad, mostly thanks to the high value it gives to democratic principles and governance. In our days, pluralism is not perceived as a peculiar American school of thought, but mostly as a generic concept with meanings and connotations that vary from one epoch to another.

In practice, pluralism refers to multiplicity and diversity in politics, society, culture, ethnicity, religion and so on. But it does not simply mean another word, since it requires certain attitudes and behaviors: recognition of multiplicity and diversity, tolerance towards differences, and even encouragement of participation in public life, for interaction or competition. In spite of the controversies regarding pluralist theories it is hard to find arguments for denying the pluralist grounds of American reality.

Generally speaking, political pluralism means the existence of multiple centers of legitimate power and authority. Specifically, in the US, it means: constitutional pluralism, based on the division of power and federalism; party pluralism, consisting in a two-party system and the existence of the third parties, as well as of various ideologies ranging on a spectrum from liberalism to conservatism; and also pluralism of interest groups, including a large variety of political and non-political entities which act for influencing policy-makers and public opinion.

Like in the case of political pluralism, the basis of religious pluralism was laid in the American Constitution, which expressed the commitment to religious freedom, as well as the non-establishment of religion clause. The church-state separation model has stimulated the development of denominational pluralism, often described as a great American invention, and also of numerous religious organizations having as main goals the advancement of religion or the support for specific religious-related issues.

Although the two faces of pluralism – political and religious – are grounded in Constitutional provisions, each of them has followed its own dynamics. Like any other groups, the religious ones are based on the voluntary principle, compete with one another, and use similar strategies

and tactics, but they have focused on specific issues and have developed specific interactions inside or outside their universe.

Religion has always been a powerful force in American politics. However, the new religious pluralism of the recent decades has nourished real controversies around the need of rethinking the relationship between religion and politics. The intensified religious lobbying or advocacy activities, as well as the increasing involvement in the electoral process, are sometimes a matter of concern for their effects on American democracy. From another perspective, this new shape of pluralism could be seen more as an opportunity, than a threat to democracy, for developing new interactions and participative tools, in an increasing diverse and competitive environment.

Notes:

¹ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and party systems: A framework for Analysis*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 15, identified three levels for conceptualizing the term pluralism, namely: cultural, societal, and political. See also Stanislaw Ehrlich and Graham Wootton, eds., *Three Faces of Pluralism: Political, Ethnic and Religious* (Westmead: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1980); Gregor McLennan, in *Pluralism (Concepts in Social Thought)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) distinguished three types or levels of pluralism: methodological, socio-cultural, and political.

² Paul Q. Hirst, ed., "Introduction", in *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G.D.H. Cole, J.N. Figgis, and H.J. Laski* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-47.

³ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1909).

⁴ Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Bloomington Ind.: The Principia Press, 1949).

⁵ David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

⁶ Robert A. Dahl and Charles Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953).

⁷ Robert A. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982).

⁸ For an analysis of the avatars of pluralist theories, see Liliana Mihut, *Despre pluralism in America* (Bucuresti: Editura Enciclopedica, 1997).

⁹ Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1969).

¹⁰ Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech, *Basic interests: the importance of groups in politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 66.

¹¹ McLennan, Conclusions.

¹² Sartori, 13-18.

¹³ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: Wiley, 1960), 33.

¹⁴ Karen O'Connor, Larry J. Sabato, *American government: continuity and change* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 452-453.

- ¹⁵ See Nigel Bowles, *Government and Politics of the United States*, Second Edition (Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 20, 46.
- ¹⁶ Paul Allen Beck, Frank J. Sorauf, *Party politics in America*, Seventh Edition (HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1992), 435.
- ¹⁷ Austin Ranney and Thad Kousser, "Politics in the United States", in *Comparative Politics Today: A World View*, eds. Gabriel A. Almond, G. Bingham Powell, Jr., Russell J. Dalton, Kaare Strøm (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 735.
- ¹⁸ Terence Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political ideologies and the democratic ideal*, Seventh Edition (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 81.
- ¹⁹ Ball and Dagger, 106-120.
- ²⁰ Baumgartner and Leech, 110-111.
- ²¹ Jack L. Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 109; See also Baumgartner and Leech, 152.
- ²² For a more elaborate approach to the definition of lobbying and its regulation see Liliana Mihut, "Lobbying – A Political Communication Tool for Churches and Religious Organizations", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 10 issue 29 (Summer 2011): 64-86.
- ²³ Richard L. Hall and Alan V. Deardorff, "Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy", *American Political Science Review*, 100, 1 (February 2006): 69-84.
- ²⁴ Allan J. Cigler, Burdett A. Loomis, eds., *Interest Group Politics*, Fourth ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995), 398.
- ²⁵ See Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Chapter 9 analyses interest groups under the "pluralism vs. corporatism" paradigm.
- ²⁶ Thomas Banchoff, "Introduction", in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.
- ²⁷ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Uneven Secularization in the United States and Western Europe", in Banchoff, 50.
- ²⁸ Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper, *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies* (Lanham, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 10.
- ²⁹ Monsma and Soper, 11.
- ³⁰ Monsma and Soper, 218.
- ³¹ Monsma and Soper, 12.
- ³² Peter L. Berger, "Pluralism, Protestantization, and the Voluntary Principle", in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.
- ³³ José Casanova, "Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism", in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68.
- ³⁴ Casanova, 73.
- ³⁵ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "US Religious Landscape Survey. Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, February 2008), 5-6, <http://pewforum.org> (accessed September 21, 2011).
- ³⁶ Casanova, 71.

- ³⁷ See Diana L. Eck, "American Religious Pluralism: Civic and Theological Discourse", in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, ed. Thomas Banchoff, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 244.
- ³⁸ Eck, 260.
- ³⁹ Norris and Inglehart, 40, 50.
- ⁴⁰ Tom W. Smith, "CNR 30 Religious Change around the World", Cross-National Report (Chicago, NORC, 2009), 6, 15, <http://www3.norc.org/GSS+Website/> (accessed December 18, 2011).
- ⁴¹ Walker, 37.
- ⁴² See the website of the Christian Coalition of America, <http://www.cc.org> (accessed October 29, 2011).
- ⁴³ Ball and Dagger, 119.
- ⁴⁴ Roy C. Macridis & Mark Hulliung, *Contemporary Political Ideologies: Movements and Regimes*, Sixth Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 238; see also Ball and Dagger, 116.
- ⁴⁵ Mark Chaves, Shawna Anderson, and Jason Byassee, "American Congregations at the Beginning of the 21st Century." A Report from the National Congregation Study, 2009, 13-14, <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/> (accessed December 17, 2011).
- ⁴⁶ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "US Religious Landscape Survey. Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, June 2008), 85, <http://pewforum.org> (accessed September 21, 2011).
- ⁴⁷ Daniel J.B. Hofrenning, *In Washington But Not of It: The Prophetic Politics of Religious Lobbyists* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 1.
- ⁴⁸ Chaves et al., 18-20.
- ⁴⁹ See again Note 21.
- ⁵⁰ Hofrenning, 123-128.
- ⁵¹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Lobbying for the Faithful: Religious Advocacy Groups in Washington, D.C." (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, November 2011), <http://pewforum.org> (accessed December 1, 2011).
- ⁵² See Hall and Deardorff.
- ⁵³ John C. Green, Scott Clement, "Much Hope, Modest Change for Democrats: Religion in the 2008 Presidential Election" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, August 11, 2010), <http://pewforum.org> (accessed September 21, 2011).
- ⁵⁴ See Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Romney's Mormon Faith Likely a Factor in Primaries, Not in a General Election" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, November 23, 2011), <http://pewforum.org> (accessed November 29, 2011).
- ⁵⁵ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "How the Faithful Voted: 2012 Preliminary Analysis" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, November 7, 2012), <http://pewforum.org> (accessed November 9, 2012).
- ⁵⁶ Macridis & Hulliung, 241.
- ⁵⁷ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? Challenges to American National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 340.
- ⁵⁸ Berger, 28.
- ⁵⁹ Banchoff, 13.

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