

THE CATHOLIC VOTE(S)

By David C. Leege

Pundits are prone to summarize the voting behavior of various groups as though they acted with a single mind—the union vote, the black vote, liberal intellectuals, etc. Seldom is such summary language less appropriate than “the Catholic vote.”

Catholics streamed into the US from many nations and in different historical eras. The earliest Catholics, of English background, were a minority church in Anglican and Puritan religious cultures. To protect themselves from Puritan migrations Catholics advocated the Act of Toleration (1649) which, although short-lived in the Maryland colony, influenced Jefferson's thought and found its way into the First Amendment to the US Constitution. German Catholics had known the state-church settlement to the devastating Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and preferred that villages in the expending frontier of the New World be all Catholic or all Lutheran. The Irish had been persecuted by the English, but they had learned the language, mastered manipulation of British political institutions, and in the US became the natural political and economic brokers for other non-English speaking arrivals. Southern and Eastern European Catholics in the US were often only one step removed from serfdom and knew primarily the feudal order of church hierarchy. In recent times Hispanic and Asian Catholics have escaped economic hopelessness or political persecution by coming to these shores. Given such a plural past, to speak of a Catholic vote is akin to claiming that sauerkraut and spaghetti taste alike. Cultural politics is built on the different identities, norms, and boundaries of such groups. For Catholics in the US, culture is a point of reference, not simply to universal religious beliefs and practices, but to ethno-religious groups.

Catholics and the Larger Society

Even when summed together, Catholics were still a minority church in what Max Weber called a *sect-like religious culture*. The dominant culture derived from ascetic Protestantism, a religious culture that downplayed religious intermediaries and sacramental salvation, and stressed personal access to God and pietistic social behavior. If Catholics were to assimilate, then surely some of this larger culture would rub off.

Yet even the process of assimilation, of sharing in the American dream, is characterized by different ethno-religious histories. Many argue that the G.I. Bill was the turning point, first in educating Catholics at higher educational institutions beyond the local Catholic college, and then in moving them out of the ethnic neighborhood of the large city to the suburbs. Andrew Greeley (1977), however, demonstrates that Irish

Catholics had already surpassed the national norm for attending college before World War I, and German Catholics by the end of that war; Polish Catholics overtook it during the Cold War; Italian Catholics had slightly surpassed it by the Vietnam War; and today both French and Hispanic Catholics remain below the norm for college attendance. According to a recent Carnegie survey of undergraduates, 39% of those enrolled in post-secondary institutions were raised Catholic and 35% currently call themselves Catholic. Part of the educational attainment figure is the consequence of effective parochial schools. Yet studies by the National Opinion Research Center show that, while in 1963 44% of Catholic children were enrolled in parochial school, by 1974 the figure had shrunk to 29%. There is little question that Catholic families in the US value education, whether in parochial or public settings.

Education yields later financial rewards. By 1974, Catholics were second only to Jews among denominational/religious bodies in average family income. Curiously, a decade later, they trailed not only Jews, but also Episcopalians and Presbyterians. This development is probably due to the fact that Catholics had far higher proportions in the lower earning age cohorts under 35: The Baby Boom created a larger bulge among Catholics than among Protestants.

Ironically, although many Catholic ethnic groups continue to prefer larger families, the reality is quite different. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the National Center for Health Statistics noted that Catholics of child-bearing age were having smaller families than Protestants—regardless of whether blacks and Hispanics are included in or excluded from the comparisons. Data analyzed in the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life indicate more Catholics remain single than Protestants, that nowadays Catholics stay in educational institutions longer, marry later, have children later, and have fewer children than Protestants. Catholics accept contraceptives at about the same rate as Protestants. All of these developments are characteristics of assimilation to post-modern capitalist social structures. Exposure to a wider range of cultural and educational values, higher incomes, and smaller families all have political consequences.

Electoral Politics

The election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 was a watershed event in modern Catholic political history. Both Kennedy's campaign statement to the Houston Ministerial Alliance and his subsequent behavior as president removed lingering concerns among Protestants, Jews, and non-religious citizens that Catholics were somehow subservient to the Papacy in temporal matters. At the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Catholic Church adopted a position on church-state relations long advocated by Irish-American politicians, theologians such as John Courtney Murray, and American bishops. In the 1980s, the spirited opposition of prominent Catholic lay persons to efforts by the American bishops to offer social

teachings through pastoral letters reminded all Catholics of the political independence of the laity from the clergy in the US.

There is great irony in the Kennedy election. He received support from about 83% of respondents who call themselves Catholic according to American National Election Studies surveys, and he generated a surge in Catholics' preferring Democratic presidential candidates in the subsequent decade. Nonetheless, Kennedy's election and policies made it possible for Catholics in the Republican party to rise to prominence and for ordinary Catholics to become the target of concerted Republican campaign appeals and voter mobilization drives. Kennedy's election removed the political stigma marking Catholics. It is no coincidence that Ronald Reagan gained majority Catholic support in his elections and peopled the Cabinet room of the White House with a much higher proportion of Catholics than had previous administrations.

Since the advent of the University of Michigan election surveys, Catholic identification has usually been substantially higher than Protestants' identification with the Democratic party, though not so high as Jewish identification. In 1948 Catholic identification with the Democrats was near 50% but dropped to 42% by the second Eisenhower election. It again reached 50% with the Kennedy election and peaked at 62% at the time of the election of Lyndon Johnson in 1964. From there it plunged to 38% in the McGovern race—following the loss of voice for big city Catholic Democratic leaders—but then recovered again to 50% at the time of the first Carter race. The percentage of Catholics identifying themselves as Democrats declined once more into the low 40s during the 1980s, to the current figure of 39%. Yet in the recent period of decline in Democratic identification, there has been no massive increase in Republican identification among Catholics. The increases show in the independent column. This probably reflects the demographic fact that Catholics have a disproportionately younger population: younger citizens, particularly those influenced by the 1960s, are less likely to have fixed social moorings reflected in party identification.

Catholics' partisan choices in presidential voting have been volatile. Data presented in this issue's Public Opinion Report show a secular trend favoring the Republican party in the post-New Deal era, but this trend was sharply interrupted by the Kennedy election and other developments of the 1960s. Historians tell us that this was actually the second time in the 20th century that such a pattern occurred. As Catholics moved in large numbers into the electorate after the turn of the century, they became increasingly Republican in presidential balloting—in part reflecting the hard feelings German Catholics held toward Democrats during WWI, in part because of the pressure put on them to vote Republican by industry and big city Republican machines. This trend was demolished, of course, by the selection of Al Smith to head the 1928 Democratic ticket. Nonvoting Catholics and Republican-tending Catholics turned out in droves for Smith. Catholics became

solid members of the New Deal coalition. Yet their support declined in the 40s and 50s, in a pattern that forecast the 70s and 80s.

Sharply Divergent Party Identification Patterns Among Catholic Groups

A recent analysis of active Catholic parish members that Michael Welch and I did (1989) shows that Catholics' party identification is responsive to their degree of assimilation and, to some extent, their attendant socioeconomic status. Old Catholic ethnic groups, such as English, Scandinavian, and German-Americans, tend toward Republican identification; Eastern Europeans other than Poles, Irish, Italians, and Poles, in that order, are more divided; while French, Hispanic, and black Catholics are considerably more Democratic. Irish Catholics have high socioeconomic status, but perhaps conditioned by the long history of religious stigma, they stayed to identify with the Democratic party longer than socioeconomic status would predict. Stories of the past linger for a long time.

Political and Social Outlook

On measures of ideological self-classification, figures consistently show Catholics as more liberal than white Protestants, but often slightly more conservative than the national average. Michael Welch and I developed a useful religious predictor of liberalism and conservatism. A measure of "foundational"—that is, pre-doctrinal—religious beliefs, it classified respondents along a continuum ranging from religious individualism through integrated to religious communitarianism. Religious individualists interpret the fundamental problems of human existence to which religion responds in a me-centered way; they classify themselves as political conservatives and advocate less role for government in the solution of social problems. Religious communitarians, by contrast, perceive the fundamental problems of human existence in the relationships among people; they tend to be political liberals and welcome collective governmental action. The former see a strong national defense as the answer to foreign relations, while the latter emphasize negotiated settlements and disarmament. There are about twice as many religious individualists as communitarians among active Catholic parishioners.

Furthermore, about one-fourth to one-third of all people who call themselves Catholics on national surveys have limited or no religious involvements. Recent analyses of National Election Studies data by Leege, Kellstedt, and Wald (1990) have found that religiously inactive Catholics' political positions often approximate the liberal positions of respondents with no religious affiliation. That is, religiously inactive Catholics are very liberal.

Looking to the '92 Elections/Leege continued

On family policy and issues of lifestyle change, Catholics are often in the forefront of opposition to change—e.g., opposition to readily available abortion—at the same time that most Catholics appear more tolerant than white Protestants on sexual ethics questions. Catholic bishops may teach a unified position on social questions, but many factors may cause Catholics to respond to teachings in different ways. I found (1988) that, while Catholic parishioners granted to the Pope and bishops the responsibility of offering social teachings, they reserved the right to respond according to their own consciences. The least legitimacy was attached to church teachings on personal sexual ethics. Greeley (1981) found that Catholics who perceive of God through maternal, nurturant images were more likely to be tolerant on social issues and liberal on public policy, while Welch and I (1989) found that Catholics who perceive God through strict, judgelike images are less likely to be socially tolerant and more likely to be politically conservative.

In another study, Michael Welch and I (1991) found that an apparent paradox in public policy positions and sociopolitical attitudes could be explained by examining a Catholic's religious reference group. Many Catholics practice devotional behavior similar to evangelicals—frequent private prayer and Bible reading, a Christocentric faith with openness to the direct works of the Holy Spirit, active faith-sharing and personal witness. When Catholic and evangelical leaders speak with one voice—e.g., abortion and premarital cohabitation—evangelical-style Catholics take the conservative position against each. When, however, Catholic leaders speak in the “seamless garment” agenda against capital punishment and nuclear arms, evangelical-style Catholics ally themselves with these liberal positions—against the position of evangelical leaders. When evangelical leaders speak clearly and there is no evident Catholic position—e.g., public school prayer, teaching creationism, censoring textbooks—the parishioners support the conservative position. Evangelical-style Catholics are also the Catholics most likely to indicate that religion offers guidance for their political activity.

Up for Grabs

While nativists and progressives often charged Catholic priests with instructing the faithful on political matters, political cue-giving is less common today in Catholic than in evangelical Protestant settings. Lyman Kellstedt, Kenneth Wald, and I (1990) found the perception of political cues from

religious leaders quite common across a wide range of social issues among evangelicals. With the exception of abortion and matters of sexuality, far fewer Catholics than evangelical Protestants report such cues, though mainline Protestants are least likely to perceive cues. Evangelicals are far more likely than Catholics to view political cuegiving as legitimate behavior by religious leaders. Contemporary Catholics, in short, are hardly a kept flock.

Today, the Catholic vote is highly pluralistic. This reflects Catholics' various ethno-religious pasts, their varied faithstyle presents, their volatile presidential preferences, and their current location among the educated, productive, consuming mainstream. Catholics are an electorate up for grabs. And, with the group freed from the cultural stigma of being seen to stand apart in American life, there is no longer a “Catholic vote.”

References

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