

The Catholic Vote in Election '96

By John Kenneth White and William D'Antonio

Ever since Ronald Reagan won the presidency 17 years ago, support for Republican presidential candidates by self-described "born-again" evangelical voters has received widespread media attention. When the GOP nominated popular presidential candidates, such as Reagan in 1980 and 1984 and George Bush in 1988, evangelicals overwhelmingly supported these GOP aspirants. But more significantly, evangelicals continued their support even when the Republicans chose now-relatively-unpopular George Bush in 1992 and Bob Dole in 1996.

Another religious group, Catholics, hasn't received nearly as much press coverage, yet it may have even more clout. Catholics constitute a major block in such vote-rich states as New York, Massachusetts, Florida, Illinois, Texas, and California.

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Political strategists have often attempted to discover and turn the “keys” to winning Catholic support. John F. Kennedy’s legendary 1960 presidential campaign, for instance, was premised in part on the idea that by nominating a Catholic, the Democrats could entice Catholic voters to return to the fold after a dalliance with Dwight Eisenhower. That strategy paid off as Kennedy won 78% of the Catholic vote, compared to 22% for Richard M. Nixon.¹ In 1980 Reagan garnered 50% of the Catholic vote (compared to Jimmy Carter’s 42%) by stressing strong anti-Communist beliefs that appealed to ethnic Catholics.²

The Catholic Role in the Cold War Coalition

Ronald Reagan’s strength among Catholic voters reflected the enhanced standing the Republicans gained among Catholics as the Cold War progressed. Throughout this long struggle, the GOP accused Democrats of being “soft on communism.” Catholics, who have long harbored an intense antipathy toward anything that smacked of Communism, became an important part of the Republican Cold War presidential coalition. In 1930, the Pope asked Catholic Americans to pray for the conversion of Russia. After Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Yalta Agreement in 1945, ceding much of Eastern Europe to the Communists, House Republican Alvin O’Konski, who represented an ethnic district in Chicago, expressed the anger many Catholics felt: “The New Deal betrayed and sold down the river Poland, Yugoslavia, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and other small nations, and the President didn’t even blush when he signed their life and liberty away.”³

By 1949, 77% of all Americans saw Communism and Christianity as incompatible—including 81% of Catholics.⁴ During the 1950s, Republicans capitalized on the Democrats’ perceived “softness.” In 1956, the GOP distributed “I Like Ike” buttons in 10 languages along with 500,000 pamphlets entitled *The Republican Policy of*

*Liberation.*⁵ Responding favorably to such appeals, Catholics found an important psychological release: in denouncing Communism they had proved once and for all that they were truly American.

Death of the New Deal Coalition

By 1992, though, the Cold War was over and with it Republican domination of the presidency. George Bush thought the Cold War’s end would win him plaudits, but most voters saw him as lacking vision and purpose. Like the rest of the country, most Catholics were unhappy about the economy. Clinton got 44% of the Catholic vote in a 3-way race in 1992, which helped him win key states such as New York, Illinois, and California.

But Clinton’s win did not presage a return by Catholics to their Democratic roots. During his first two years in office, he handed Republicans an opportunity to make political hay by such proposals as a government-run health care system that proved too complex to understand, and a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to gays in the military. Republican criticisms resonated with many voters in 1994. The 51% of Catholics who voted Republican in the 1994 House races did something most of their parents and grandparents would hardly have dreamed of doing. Back when Franklin Roosevelt was still “Dr. New Deal,” Catholics showed their support by voting for Democratic congressional candidates by overwhelming proportions.

Over the years, consistent Catholic support sustained the Democratic congressional majority. Prominent Catholics rose to high positions in the Congress, notably House Speakers John W. McCormack and Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill. The Catholic exodus of 1994 marked the first time ever that a majority of the group voted Republican. Other Catholic Democrats also suffered in 1994, notably New York governor Mario Cuomo, who lost his bid for a fourth term.

The 1996 Catholic Vote

1996 Produces a Different Catholic Coalition

At first blush, 1996 represents a return of "prodigal" Catholics to the Democratic Party. Fifty-five percent of all Catholics cast a Democratic ballot in the House contests while just 41% voted Republican—a big shift from the two-point Catholic GOP majority in 1994. Even white Catholics voted 51% Democratic. Still, they continued their Republican shift. In 1992, white Catholics went 14 points more Democratic than Republican in House races; in 1996 they were just six points more so, even though Bill Clinton was doing what no Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt had done—win a second term. At the same time, white Protestants retained their historic Republican ties by voting 25 points more Republican than Democratic.

White Catholics supported Clinton in 1992 and 1996 but by margins that hardly approached the overwhelming majorities given to Democrats in the past—including Kennedy, Johnson, and Humphrey in the 1960s (see Table). (White Protestants remained strongly Republican, giving both Bush and Dole comfortable pluralities.) When all Catholics are considered, Clinton's margin over Dole increased to a decisive 15 percentage points. This support proved crucial in such important states as Pennsylvania, where Clinton received 53% of the Catholic vote; Illinois, 54%; and California, 54%. Despite the flight of some white Catholics to the GOP, Catholics constituted one-third of Clinton's vote in 1996.

Bill Clinton's coalition among Catholics differed markedly from that assembled by FDR. Economic issues remain important to Catholics (as to nearly everyone else), but the economy is no longer a demarcation line separating Catholics from Protestants. Surveys show that, unlike in the 1930s, there is now little differ-

ence in income and education levels attained by white Catholics and white Protestants. An historic divide had been bridged, and white Catholics had become decidedly more Republican than previously. Surveys also report that more than 90% of Protestants now say they would vote for a Catholic for president.⁶

The nature of the Catholic coalition has changed, especially through the influx of Hispanic voters. Hispanic Catholics gave the Clinton-Gore ticket a margin of roughly three to one over Dole-Kemp. Many may have been encouraged to cast a Clinton ballot because of some Republicans' tough anti-illegal-immigration stance. Back in 1994, California voters passed Proposition 187, which banned all state spending on illegal immigrants. The measure proved popular, winning 59% support at the polls. But whereas whites gave it 64% backing, 69% of Hispanics disapproved.⁷ The Republican-controlled 104th Congress followed the course of the earlier California action, passing a tough anti-immigration law.

The result was a Hispanic Catholic backlash: Clinton's support among this strategically placed Catholic population rose 11% from his 1992 posting. Even staunchly pro-Republican Cubans cast aside their hatred of Communism and Fidel Castro to give Clinton 40% of their vote, support that proved crucial in Clinton's capture of Florida.⁸

A Different Issues Mix in 1996

Equally important is the changed issue mix that shapes presidential elections in the post-Cold War era. During the Cold War, Republicans won by sitting on a three-legged stool whose supports were the economy, foreign policy, and defense. In 1992, that stool collapsed and in 1996 it was replaced by what the Clinton White House called M2E2—

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a shorthand formula standing for Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment. Clinton stressed these issues, and they were a powerful inducement to Catholics.

Exit polls conducted by Voter News Service (VNS) indicated the M2E2 formula appealed to Catholics. The economy and jobs mattered the most to Catholics, followed by Medicare/Social Security, education, taxes, and the deficit. Only the last two issues worked for Dole: of Catholics who said taxes were most important, Dole won 73% of the vote; likewise of those who mentioned the deficit, 54% backed Dole. Interestingly, just 4% named foreign policy as an important factor in their voting decision and of this minuscule number, 48% backed Dole and 45% supported Clinton.

This new issues mix has extended the gender gap among Catholics. The gender gap, which first became evident in Reagan's 1980 win, has become an enduring feature of contemporary American politics. Even though Catholic men were more supportive of

Democrats' Support Among White Catholics Compared to White Protestants Has Been Constant Over the Past Five Presidential Elections

	Democratic	Republican	Third Party	Democrats' Margin, Catholic v. Protestant
1980				
White Catholics	40%	51%	7%	+9
White Protestants	31	63	6	
1984				
White Catholics	42	57		+14
White Protestants	28	71		
1988				
White Catholics	43	56		+9
White Protestants	34	66		
1992				
White Catholics	42	37	22	+9
White Protestants	33	47	19	
1996				
White Catholics	48	41	10	+12
White Protestants	36	55	8	

Source: Exit polls by CBS News/*New York Times*, 1980, 1984, and 1988; by Voter Research and Surveys, 1992; and by the *Los Angeles Times*, 1996.

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Clinton in 1996 than in 1992, Catholic women were even more heavily Democratic—backing Clinton by an extraordinary 27 percentage point margin.

The 1996 VNS exit poll shows that Clinton won a majority of Catholic voters in all age categories, but he was particularly strong with ages 18-29 (57% to 30% for Dole) and those 65 and older (53% to 39%). Even more striking was how well Clinton did with first time Catholic voters, whipping Dole 65% to 32%. Clinton ran well ahead of Dole among Catholics earning under \$50,000 a year, and among those with less than a college degree. Among college graduates and postgraduates, Clinton and Dole ran neck and neck.

This same exit poll also reveals a significant correlation between alternative lifestyles and voting behavior. Working Catholic women were strong Clinton backers: 60% to just 32% for Dole. But Catholic women not in the paid labor force were less Democratic, going for Clinton by 50% to 40%. The data reveal a significant “marriage gap” among Catholics. Among those married (64%), the race was relatively close: 48% for Clinton; 42% for Dole. But among Catholic singles (36%) it was no contest: 59% backed Clinton; just 30% voted for Dole.

Not surprisingly, abortion proved to be a demarcation line in voting. Of those who believed that abortion should be “always legal” or “mostly legal,” 68% and 55% respectively voted for Clinton. But among those who believed abortion should be “mostly illegal” or “always illegal,” Dole won the most votes: 48% and 57% respectively. Fifty-nine percent of all Catholic voters said in 1996 they believe abortion should be “always legal” or “mostly legal”; only 37% said it should be “mostly illegal” or

“always illegal.” A 1992 Gallup survey reported that just 13% of all Catholics and 22% of Catholics who go to mass weekly said abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.⁹ When candidate Clinton proclaimed that abortion should be “safe, legal, and rare,” he expressed the sentiments of a majority of Catholics on this sensitive issue.

Commonweal Catholics

The portrait of the Catholic vote that emerges from the 1996 elections suggests an interesting mix of demographics and social factors: women, Hispanics, young and first time voters, Catholics with working class and middle

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class backgrounds, all gave Clinton sizeable winning margins over Dole. College graduates and Catholics with higher incomes split their support. In the future, Hispanics, now 11% of the Catholic total, are sure to grow as migration from Latin America continues.

Clinton's M2E2 are traditional Democratic issues. But is there not also something Catholic about them? Catho-

lics have long shared with Jews a special concern for community. The 1996 elections suggest that M2E2, along with family leave and other issues that focus on using government to carry out social responsibilities, may have more appeal than the Christian Coalition's agenda which emphasizes using government to control individual behavior.

We close with the observation that in 1996 Catholics constituted 29% of the total votes cast, while those who identified themselves as part of the conservative Religious Right were only 17%. Dole won 65% of the vote of the Religious Right, but just 37% of the Catholic vote. And while the Religious Right made up 27% of Dole's vote, the Catholic vote was 32% of Clinton's winning total.

Endnotes

¹Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 335.

²“Portrait of the Electorate,” *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1996, p. 28.

³Quoted in Robert D. Ubracio, Jr., “Bread and Butter Politics at the Factory Gate: Class versus Ethnicity in the Polish-American Community during the 1946 Congressional Elections,” unpublished paper.

⁴Survey by the Gallup Organization, July 22-28, 1949.

⁵Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and US Presidential Elections, 1952-1960* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), p. 114.

⁶Cited in William V. D'Antonio, et. al., *Lait American and Catholic: Transforming the Church* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996), p. 12.

⁷Everett Carl Ladd, *America at the Polls 1994* (Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1995), p. 124.

⁸William Booth, “From Florida Voters, A Mixed Verdict,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 1996, p. A-25.

⁹Cited in D'Antonio, et. al., *Lait American and Catholic*, pp. 61-62.



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