

# Catholic voters present puzzle of interests, beliefs

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country, Catholics constitute a sizable constituency in the electorate. Hence, many politicians ponder ways of appealing to the concerns of Catholics while retaining the support of non-Catholic constituents.

Lining up the Catholic vote was easier in the past because Catholics often voted the Democratic ticket. This phenomenon stemmed from Catholic immigrants' experiences upon arrival in this country, according to Father Andrew M. Greeley, professor of sociology at the University of Arizona and a research associate at the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, Ill.

"When the Catholic immigrants came to the cities they found that the Republican Party was the party of the bosses and of the Protestant leadership," Father Greeley wrote in the fall edition of *Church* magazine. "Those Protestant leaders feared Catholic immigration, and the Democratic party, especially as it was organized by the Irish in the cities, was willing to take their side and respond to their needs."

And most Catholics were extremely hostile to Prohibition in the 1920s, Father Greeley added.

"The Protestant Republican leadership did the Democratic Party an enormous favor by driving Catholics into the Democratic Party on that issue," he concluded.

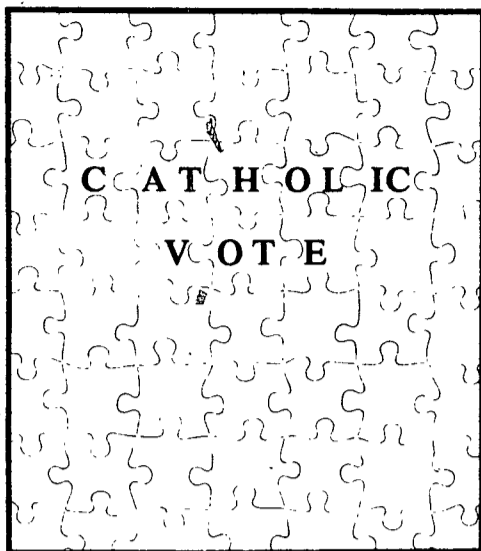
Yet even in the nation's early days, some politicians of other parties were unwilling to cede Catholic votes to the Democrats. In the 1840s, for example, New York Gov. William H. Seward, a member of the Whig Party, attempted to woo Catholic votes by supporting public aid to parochial schools.

Seward, however, failed to recognize the disdain with which many of his fellow Whigs held Catholics, particularly those who were Irish immigrants pouring into the country in that decade.

"Seward hoped to crack the Democratic party stranglehold on the Irish Catholic vote, but he drastically underestimated the antipathy to Irish Catholics," David O'Brien wrote in his 1989 book *Public Catholicism*. Seward's support for aid to Catholic schools later undermined his ambitions for the presidency, O'Brien noted.

Seward wasn't the last politician to attempt to draw Catholic votes away from the Democrats.

President Bush has echoed Seward's efforts by supporting tuition vouchers for public, parochial and private school parents. Bush's repeated appeals for national support of his proposal has



been viewed by some analysts as a deliberate attempt to appeal to Catholic voters — and non-Catholics who send their children to Catholic or private schools.

In fact, Bush's stance on vouchers earned him an invitation to speak at the ninth-annual convention of the New York State Federation of Catholic School Parents, slated for Oct. 23-25 at the Rochester Hyatt Regency Hotel. According to federation officials, Bush is expected to decide by Oct. 15 whether he will attend.

Linda Zaleski, president of the Rochester diocesan chapter of the Catholic school parents' federation, maintained that Bush will be able to win Catholic votes in November because his stand on vouchers directly opposes Clinton's opposition to such vouchers at the elementary and high school levels.

Zaleski's claims are bolstered by recent Catholic News Service report on a Gallup poll released on Sept. 17. That poll showed that seven out of 10 Catholic respondents supported the use of tax money for school vouchers. In addition, the Gallup poll demonstrated three of five U.S. citizens also support the concept.

Nonetheless, Democratic Party officials expect most Catholic voters to pull the lever for Clinton because they are fed up with Bush's economic performance, according to Brooks Rathet, a press assistant with the Democratic National Committee in Washington, D.C.

"The Number 1 issue is the economy," Rathet told the *Catholic Courier* in a telephone interview. "Regardless of religious faith, the Number 1 issue is that people are losing jobs. They see Bill Clinton as the only chance for change."

Rathet pointed to a New York

Times/CBS News poll published Sept. 16 showing that 47 percent of the nation's Catholic voters were supporting Clinton, as opposed to 37 percent voting for Bush. Twelve percent were undecided.

Yet, Zaleski contended, if economic issues are the bottom line for Catholics, then Catholic school parents will at least consider Bush. She noted that many diocesan school parents literally spend thousands of dollars each year — in addition to taxes for public education — in order to send their children to Catholic schools.

"If we vote our pocketbooks, we will vote for Bush," she said.

The contentions of Rathet and Zaleski point out that no one really can peg the Catholic vote in 1992. According to Father Greeley, about three-fifths of all Catholic voters regularly support Democratic congressional candidates. But as he and other observers have concluded, Catholics have also helped put such Republicans as Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan into the Oval Office.

Crossing the party lines has become commonplace among voters during the last few decades, according to several commentators.

Deacon John J. Erb, a Democrat and Monroe County legislator, noted that when he ran for Rochester City Council 20 years ago, his urban district was more easily defined politically because of its Catholic Irish, German and Italian residential makeup. Catholics often voted Democratic, he said, simply because the Democrats were considered the party of the urban voter.

But with the movement of millions of U.S. Catholics to the country's more affluent suburbs, many Catholics lost their allegiance to the Democrats, Erb noted. Among today's political Catholics, he added, "I haven't experienced any sort of predictable political viewpoint or slant."

Erb's point was amplified by several observers, who noted that — unlike African-Americans linked by their experience of racism or Jewish-Americans bound by support for Israel — Catholics no longer look to a common political flag around which to rally.

Because Catholics now cut across the entire economic spectrum and often hold divergent viewpoints on such traditionally "Catholic" issues as abortion, a politician can rarely appeal to Catholics as a unified group, according to Father Bryan J. Hehir, counselor to the United States Catholic Conference.

"I don't think Catholics vote as a bloc," Father Hehir told the *Courier* in a telephone interview from Notre Dame University, one of several stops on his current lecture tour. "I think Catholics are harder to fuse together. There's no single entity that brings them together."

Frank J. Mastropietro, a parishioner at St. Francis of Assisi in Auburn, echoed Father Hehir's observations. Mastropietro spent 22 years of his life serving on public and Catholic school boards, and as a city councilman.

The 77-year-old Republican remembered that Catholics — both Republicans and Democrats — often voted the party line in the past, which meant that the Democrats often got most of the Catholic vote in national elections.

One notable exception in Mastropietro's experience was the election of 1960, when he and other Auburn Catholic Republicans crossed the party line to vote for John F. Kennedy. Their intention in voting against their own party was to prove that a Catholic was as worthy of the nation's highest political office as any Protestant.

But today's Catholic seems to have little allegiance to a specific party — or a specific Catholic politician, for that matter, Mastropietro said.

As a lobbyist for church positions on health care, abortion, education and a host of other matters, John M. Kerry, executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference, also has observed that the time has long passed when pundits could make easy predictions about the Catholic vote.

Still, Catholics do seem to hold a certain predisposition when they enter the voting booth, Kerry asserted. Frequently, he noted, Catholics will support politicians who espouse a human services or pro-labor agenda, he said in a phone interview from his Albany office.

"They do tend to have general philosophical and programmatic preferences," Kerry concluded.

Since many older Catholics experienced government economic intervention as a positive force under such Democratic presidents as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Catholics may be less likely to accept conservative interpretations of the role of government, observed Democrat Tom Frey, Monroe County executive from 1987-91.

"They're not going to buy the argument that government is evil," said Frey, a member of the Diocesan Stewardship Council.

## Pennsylvania governor decries snub at Democratic convention

By Lou Baldwin  
Catholic News Service

PHILADELPHIA — Pennsylvania Gov. Robert Casey said the Democratic National Convention's refusal to allow him to speak because of his pro-life views was "a direct slap in the face to Pennsylvania."

Casey charged that the Democratic National Committee "acts as though it's a subsidiary of the National Abortion Rights Action League."

Pro-life Democrats seeking office don't speak out more, he added, because "if you don't toe the party line, you're not going to get the campaign contribution."

In a Sept. 11 interview with the *Catholic Standard and Times*, Philadelphia's archdiocesan newspaper, Casey said it seemed as if NARAL

"was running the Democratic National Convention," adding that NARAL and like-minded groups "have a disproportionately large influence on policy at the national level."

The Democratic Party, "on the value issues, particularly the abortion issue and related issues," Casey said, "is very short-sighted... I think many people are offended by them."

He said, "I was very disappointed that more people did not come forward" to challenge the party's abortion stance at the convention, but he predicted there would be more of that "as time goes on."

Casey noted the irony in not being permitted to speak at his own party's convention, while "a Republican woman from Hershey (Pa.) who happened to be pro-choice was put up

there front and center, and not only spoke but was the center of the entire presentation."

"Casey for Pope" buttons circulated by a pro-choice group during the convention were offensive to Casey. "I didn't think it was funny. I didn't think it was satire."

"This whole question is right at the surface of this whole debate. Many people try to convert the whole abortion issue into a Catholic issue. That's fundamentally wrong," Casey said.

He added that "some of the greatest social movements" that have created progress in America "have come from clergymen of different faiths."

At the time of the Civil War, some of the most prominent abolitionists were Protestant ministers of New England. That did not make slavery a

Protestant issue. Dr. Martin Luther King (Jr.) spoke from the pulpits in the South on giving equal rights to African-Americans; that didn't make the question of equal opportunity a religious issue.

The fact that some of our best laws to protect workers and laws to bring about social justice in this country find their origins in the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII doesn't detract from the efficacy of those programs," Casey said.

Casey declined to predict the outcome of the November presidential election. But "I'll tell you this: even in a time of great economic suffering in this recession, the value issues, principal among which is abortion, in my judgment will be a major factor in this election," he said.