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The Myth of the Catholic Vote

The Influence of Ideology and Theology on Catholics in Presidential Elections, 1972 - 2008

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Abstract

Is there a distinctive Catholic vote? Opinions range from the view that Catholics are predisposed to the Democratic Party to the position that they are classic centrists indistinguishable from other voters in the United States. Instead, we believe the measure of Catholic *religious* distinctiveness is its responsiveness to the social teachings of the Church. We evaluate the impacts of three issues included in Catholic social teaching regarding the consistent ethic of life – abortion, the death penalty, and the preferential option for the poor – on the political behavior of Catholics. Unlike other analyses that predict Catholic attitudes by individual-level characteristics, we are interested in knowing how issues important to the Church's social teachings influence members' political behavior. The positions of the Republican and Democratic parties on these issues pose conflicting pressures for Catholic voters. Herein lies the Catholic distinctiveness. Catholics use a mix of values, both secular and religious, to help them decide how to vote. The impact of these issues consistently pushes and pulls Catholics in the direction of the party position predicted by Catholic social teaching and is reinforced by age and regular mass attendance. We find that the contemporary Catholic vote is pluralistic but also sensitive to the expectations associated with fabric of life issues. Consistent advocacy of life issues by the Catholic Church has influenced the attitudes and political behavior of some Catholics.

Introduction

A Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of "right" or "left," nor the platforms of any party. Our values are often not "politically correct." Believers are called to

> be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test the public life by the values of Scripture and the principles of Catholic social teaching. Our responsibility is to measure all candidates, policies, parties, and platforms by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity, and the rights of the human person, whether they protect the poor and the vulnerable and advance the common good (USCCB 2003: 7).

[1] Is there a distinctive Catholic vote in the United States? How do Catholics resolve the tension that can emerge between the imperatives of the Church's doctrines on issues such as abortion, poverty, and the death penalty, when political parties and candidates incompletely represent those positions? Many view Catholics as a Democratic-leaning bloc owing to their immigrant heritage and historical lower class status. Yet, Catholic voters today appear largely indistinguishable from other voters possessing similar social and economic characteristics. Defining the so-called *Catholic vote* as a Democratic vote is problematic because this equates it to a class-based vote rather than a religious vote explained by the teachings of the Catholic Church. This suggests there is nothing distinctive about Catholics as Democrats compared to any other class-based voting group. Furthermore, partisan affiliation encompasses many influences such as social class, educational attainment, political ideology, and processes of generational replacement and socialization instead of solely religious voting. More importantly, neither political party fully represents the issue positions of the Church's social teachings. Consequently, we argue the better measure of religious voting and the distinctive political characteristic for American Catholics is the degree they are responsive to the authoritative teachings of the Church. The potential influence of Catholic teachings on the attitudes and preferences of the Catholic electorate is an issue of debate (Heyer et. al.). We find that the Catholic Church's teachings matter to many of its members, and that they matter in a relatively systematic way. Moreover, the increased polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties makes it easier for Catholics to identify the issue positions of the two parties relative to the Catholic Church (Mockabee).

[2] We examine the influence of three issue positions advanced by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops on Catholic voting and attitudes. Even the USCCB acknowledges that official Catholic issue positions frequently crosscut the platforms of both political parties and their candidates. The Catholic doctrine of a "seamless web of life" directs Catholics to oppose abortion and the death penalty as well as support a preferential option for the poor, sympathetic immigration policies, and universal health care. Neither party nor its presidential candidates can satisfy all these positions and Catholic social doctrine can pull their members in conflicting political directions. The situation for Catholics is unique because other Christian denominations do not have a single ecclesiastic body speaking authoritatively across a spectrum of issues. Accordingly, the impact of abortion, the death penalty, and the preferential option for the poor on Catholics is analyzed between 1972 and 2008. The results indicate the issue positions of the Catholic Church each exert an independent influence on Church members' political behavior. Moreover, the frequency of church attendance and age condition the influence of these issues on Catholic political behavior. We find that advocacy of fabric of life issues by the Catholic Church has influenced the attitudes and political behavior of some Catholics – especially those who regularly participate in the life of the Church.

A Catholic Vote?

[3] The Catholic vote is often considered a religious bloc loyal to Democratic party candidates. John F. Kennedy, the nation's only Catholic president – but not the only Catholic presidential candidate – captured 80% support from Catholics who voted. Kennedy's support among Catholics was exceptional and not reflective of the normal Catholic vote. Still, it reinforces the perception that Catholics are a Democratic party bloc. John Kerry, also a Catholic, roughly split the total Catholic vote with George W. Bush in 2004 suggesting there is not a distinctive Catholic presidential vote – or at least, not any longer. Instead, "partisanship has grown to trump faith for Catholic voters due to a combination of demographic factors, changes within the Catholic Church, and changes within the U.S. party system" (Gray, Perl, and Bendyna: 203). The characteristic features of a Catholic vote are not in its unity but in its fractures and divisions.

[4] Many scholars conclude that Catholics now are indistinguishable from the rest of the electorate and their political behavior is explained by a variety of forces (DiIulio; Heyer et. al.). As Catholics ascended the socio-economic ladder they mirror the national electorate. Upward mobility allowed ethnic Catholic enclaves to assimilate into American society thus weakening their historic Democratic Party allegiance. Further, declining Catholic support for the Democratic Party may be rooted in the Party's growing secularism and cultural liberalism, sending many culturally conservative Catholics to the Republican Party (Heyer et. al.; Layman 2001). Others continue to observe a residual Democratic preference among Catholics rather than realignment to the Republican Party (Brooks and Manza; Greeley). Layman sees the major development among religious voters, including Catholics, as a broad-based growing relationship between doctrinal orthodoxy and support for the Republican Party (1997; 2001).

[5] Identifying a consistent or coherent partisan preference that reflects official Catholic teaching is easily said but rarely achieved (DiIulio). Catholic social teaching is able to combine diverse social and public policy problems including abortion, nuclear war, social welfare programs for the poor, universal health care, euthanasia, and capital punishment into a coherent moral framework. Archbishop Joseph Bernardin weaves these politically disparate and irreconcilable issues together into a *seamless garment* organized around the promotion of a consistent ethic of life. Nuclear war risks the catastrophic loss of life. Abortion takes the life of the vulnerable unborn. Poverty diminishes the dignity of individuals as well as imposes unacceptable suffering. While society has the right to protect itself from violent crime, it is unnecessary to execute offenders. Thus, Bernardin makes clear the teachings by which Catholics oppose abortion, embryonic stem cell research, the death penalty, and nuclear war and support universal health care as well as protect social programs for the poor.

[6] The political process seems unable to accommodate these issues into a single platform. The Republican Party is identified with opposition to abortion but not as sympathetic to the poor. The Democratic Party advocates universal health care and is less committed to the death penalty than the Republican Party, yet it is also pro-choice. Hence, Catholics are confronted with following the consistent moral positions of the Church with the contradictions posed by American political processes. Bernardin outlines the role of the Catholic Church in his 1984 speech at St. Louis University: "A consistent ethic of life seeks

to present a coherent linkage among a diverse set of issues. It can and should be used to test party platforms, public policies, and political candidates. The church legitimately fulfills a public role by articulating a framework for political choices by relating that framework to specific issues and by calling for systematic moral analysis of all areas of public policy."

[7] However, an individual's political ideology or partisan identification often better predicts the Catholic voter's position on these issues. Politically conservative Catholics emphasize abortion and stem cell research as the most important issues, whereas liberals focus on capital punishment, the preferential option for the poor, and universal health care. Nevertheless, issues can be complex and multidimensional as illustrated by poverty when attempting to discern a Catholic vote.

[8] What does the Catholic voter do when both the conservative and liberal, or Republican and Democratic, politician claim their policy approach is consistent with Church teaching (DiIulio)? The reform of welfare in the 1990s is a case in point. Conservative Republican politicians argued the existing AFDC program created unintended and negative outcomes such as dependency and fractured households. According to this logic, a Catholic may find that it is morally right to eliminate AFDC in order to reduce poverty and strengthen families. Conversely, liberal and Democratic legislators argued the welfare reforms of 1996 would harm the marginalized, and hence it should be rightly opposed. Similarly, the recent struggle over national health care reform reflects this dilemma. Does indirect federal funding for abortion fatally flaw President Obama's health reform or should Catholics embrace the other benefits included in the legislation? Catholics are not a unitary religious or political bloc. They – like most other voters – are left to decide this issue on their own and may rely on typical influences such as partisanship or political ideology. Indeed, in *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* (2003), the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops state that in cases such as these each Catholic must determine for herself which policy is more likely to achieve the "just" result. Their statement gives Catholics the criteria of a just politics, but declines to provide concrete guidance on which policies and candidates help achieve that goal. For example, Catholics simultaneously oppose an absolute ban on abortions and government financing of abortions. Catholics apparently see shades of gray regarding the abortion issue and vote accordingly (Heyer et. al.).

[9] Leege and Welch find substantial variation within the ranks of Catholic voters as well as between Catholics and other Christian denominations. Although Catholics may be distinctive they also are politically complex. Catholics are more Democratic and slightly more ideologically liberal on most issues compared to White Protestants. Even the movement of Catholics to the Republican Party and more conservative issue positions in the 1980s lagged behind other religious groups. Although in the aggregate Catholics, like other groups, did become more conservative during these years, noticeable variation exists because different "types" of Catholics exist. Foundational religious values influence Catholic political orientations. For instance, differences between communitarian versus individualistic foundational values will influence Catholics' opinions on issues. Moreover, evidence suggests age conditions Catholics' identification with the Church. Younger Catholics tend to be more individualistic, whereas older Catholics are likely to reflect communitarian values. This in turn can influence Catholics' views on faith, morals, and public policy (D'Antonio et. al.). Hence, younger Catholics might be more similar to the rest of the population, whereas older

Catholics are more distinctive (Penning). Young Catholics are less partisan and more independent than their older cohorts. Younger Catholics, similar to other young Americans, are more likely to be liberal on social issues and conservative on economic issues, while the relationship is reversed among older Catholics. Leege, too, finds age to be significant but observes older Catholics tend to be warmer toward social justice issues and express empathy toward the poor and marginalized (Leege 2000a). Because younger Catholics attend church less frequently than their older cohorts they receive less exposure to church teachings and less group reinforcement in church settings. Leege wonders whether these younger and more secular voters will form a new Catholic majority that will be cross-pressured by both political parties.

[10] David Leege also sees both political parties competing for the Catholic vote since 1980 (2000b). Catholics have become increasingly dealigned since 1980, especially by generation and gender. Today, Catholics over age 50 illustrate high levels of church attendance unlike those under age 50. This means younger Catholics are less exposed to sacramental rites and social teachings. Younger male Catholics tend to be economically conservative, more Republican, but culturally liberal. Younger Catholic women attend mass slightly more often, are more Democratic, and are slightly more liberal culturally and economically.

[11] Finally, Leege finds that younger Catholics tend to reflect the Church's pro-life teachings only on abortion and have only tepid opposition to capital punishment. When "prescriptive teachings about social justice, equal opportunity, and a preferential option for the poor are involved, . . . being Catholic . . . predicts little about a person's views about social justice and government programs. . . [T]he depth of identification with the Catholic community predicts very little about warmth towards minorities, or the poor" (2000b: 18). This large segment of Catholic voters is likely to feel cross-pressured by both political parties in 2010 and beyond.

Trends in Catholic Political and Social Behavior, 1952 – 2008

[12] Historically, Catholics have identified with the Democratic Party. According to the National Election Studies in 1952 approximately 68% of Catholics classified themselves as Democrats and only 25% self-identified as Republicans. Despite strong Democratic identification, 48.4% of Catholics in 1952 voted for Eisenhower and a majority supported him in 1956. By 2004 about 47% of Catholics considered themselves to be Democrats – a decline of 20%. The change corresponded with an increase in Republican identification to 38% and 14% of Catholics now consider themselves to be independent. While Catholics continue to demonstrate a slight Democratic leaning their partisanship has clearly changed since 1952. The Democratic Party nationally lost identifiers through the 1960s and 1970s as many voters become dealigned from the decay of the New Deal coalition. The National Election Study (NES) data show declining Catholic identification with the Democratic Party since 1952 while the percentage of weak party identifiers and independents increases. Thus, Catholics are not immune from changes occurring in the larger political system.

[13] Nor have Catholics consistently supported Democratic presidential candidates. In addition to voting for Eisenhower in 1956, a majority of Catholics voted for Nixon in 1972, Reagan in both 1980 and 1984, and virtually split their vote for Bush in 2000 and 2004. Catholics are more faithful supporters of Democratic presidential candidates compared to

Protestants – but a majority of their vote is not guaranteed, and only rarely has the division in their vote been greater than ten percentage points. Thus, the idea that Catholics are a unique bloc that routinely votes for one party according to religious, ethical, or moral standards seems inconsistent with presidential election results. Neither party's presidential candidate consistently won the Catholic vote for the last 50 years.

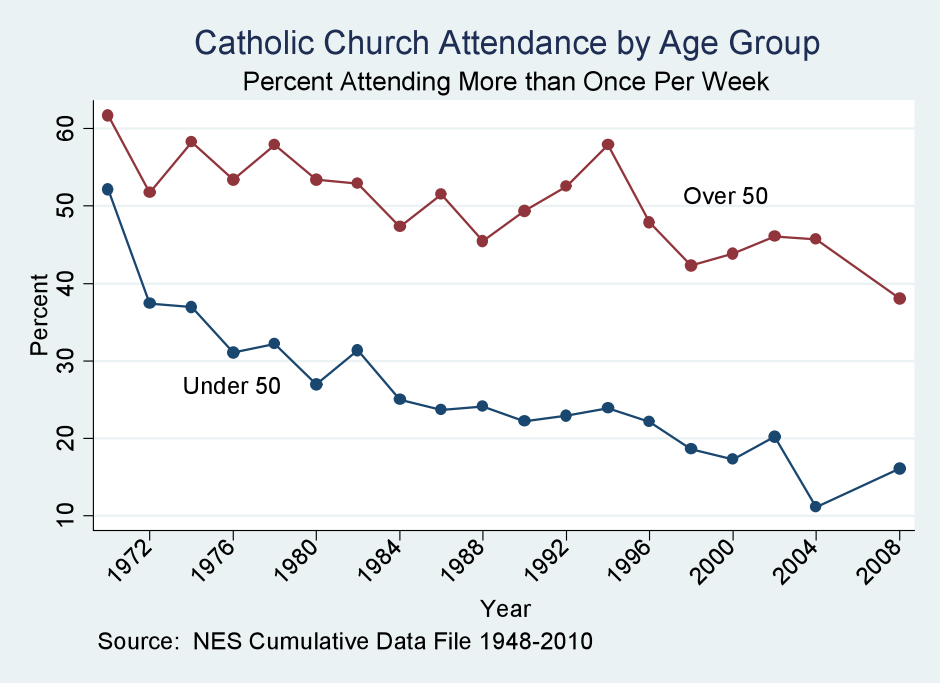
Figure 1. Declining Catholic Support for Democratic Party

	Catholic Presidential Vote (% Democrat)		Catholic Party Identification (% Democrat)	
Year	National Election Study (N)	General Social Survey (N)	National Election Study (N)	General Social Survey (N)
1952	51.6 % (287)		67.1 % (387)	
1956	45.8 % (297)		59.4 % (372)	
1960	81.9 % (205)		71.1 % (229)	
1964	78.6 % (272)		68.7 % (349)	
1968	55.5 % (236)		65 % (337)	
1972	38.6 % (412)	42.9 % (977)	62.8 % (640)	65.3 % (1379)
1976	56.9 % (339)	64.3 % (975)	62.4 % (549)	63.5 % (1522)
1980	41.3 % (218)	40.1 % (931)	55.4 % (370)	55.3 % (1462)
1984	45.8 % (380)	43.7 % (998)	51.7 % (582)	59.8 % (1544)
1988	52.4 % (309)	50.6 % (898)	50.8 % (484)	51.4 % (1399)
1992	49.6 % (412)	56.3 % (919)	54.9 % (582)	52.5 % (1269)
1996	54.7 % (300)	58.5 % (964)	55.1 % (425)	48.5 % (1329)
2000	49.5 % (325)	42.9 % (737)	49.5 % (460)	49.6 % (1462)
2004	49.8 % (201)	45.6 % (870)	45.5 % (292)	45.4 % (1421)
2008	66.5 % (350)	56.8 % (422)	59.7 % (526)	51.9 % (1039)

Sources: NES Cumulative Data File, 1948-2010; GSS Cumulative Data File, 1972-2010

[14] We also find age to be an interesting and complex factor influencing Catholics' political behavior. Like Leege, we find that younger Catholics are less church-going compared to older Catholics. Throughout our period of study younger Catholics attended church less frequently than their older peers. Moreover, the data show that church attendance has declined during this time period for all Catholics. For example, 52.2% of Catholics under the age of 50 in 1970 reported going to church *more than once per week* compared to only 11.1% in 2004 – a decline of 41%. At the same time, 61.7% of older Catholics reported in 1970 going to church *more than once per week* declined to 45.7% in 2004 – a difference of 16%. While the rate of decline in frequent church attendance is greatest among young Catholics, clearly the trend is towards reduced participation for all Catholics.

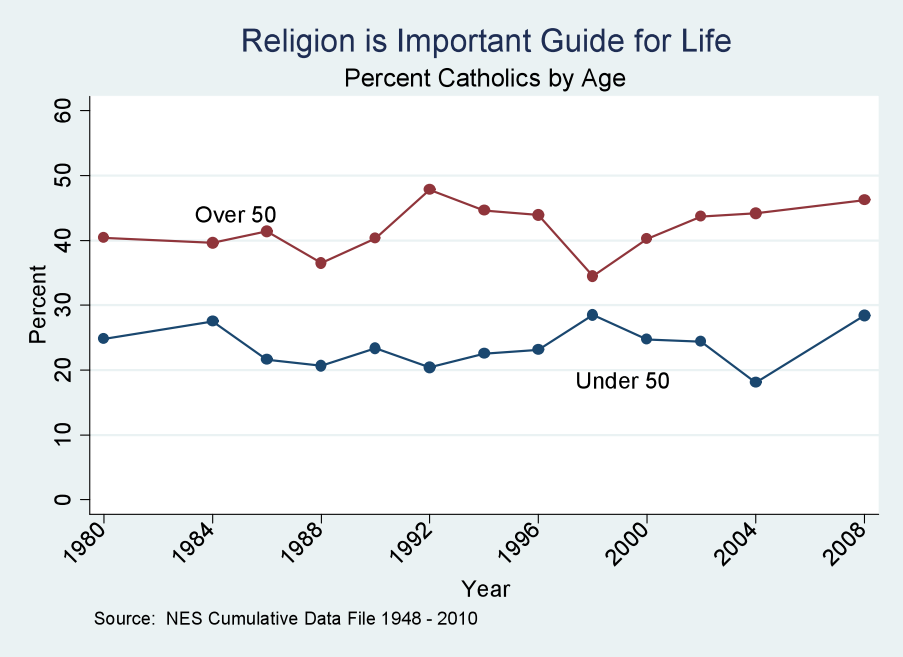
Figure 2



[15] There is much less across-time change in how Catholics see their religion as being an *important guide to their lives*. Young Catholics were consistently less likely to view their religion as being an important guide for them compared to older Catholics. However, the differences between them are slight and there is only marginal across-time change in this outlook for both groups. Indeed, there is a slight increase in the percentage of older Catholics in 2008 who view their Catholicism as being an important guide for their life compared to 1980. This suggests that religious, i.e., Catholic, identity has remained a comparatively consistent influence even though church attendance has declined. Still, it is important to note that young Catholics consistently attend church less frequently and are somewhat less likely to view religion as an important guide for their lives compared to older Catholics. Thus, younger Catholics have always experienced less exposure to the teachings of the Church and the social and political reinforcements of the pew. Accordingly, younger Catholics are more susceptible to competing appeals and overtures made by the parties and their candidates regarding issues.

[16] Conversely, Catholics over age 50 consistently attend church more frequently and view religion as an important guide to their lives for the entire time series. Leege and Welch see young Catholics potentially forming a new majority of largely dealigned voters available for both parties to mobilize. They view this emerging pool of dealigned voters to be the result of generational replacement. Alternatively, it is possible that the effects of age on Catholics are similar to its effects on the rest of the electorate. In other words, young Catholics are similar to other young voters and their political orientations and behaviors change as they age, in which case their church attendance should become more regular as they age, and the political consequences of church attendance may become more pronounced.

Figure 3



The Influence of Issues

[17] To explore the degree to which Catholics can be considered a unique voting bloc we turn to more specific analyses of their vote choice in specific election years and assess the degree to which issues (as opposed to party) drive the vote decision (and for whom). In order to investigate these questions across time we use the General Social Survey (GSS), 1972-2010. The GSS offers the advantage of a reasonably acceptable sample size of Catholic respondents in each survey year. Moreover, the GSS typically uses the same question to tap issue preferences across several years.[1]

[18] The initial analyses presented here are simple attempts to determine if specific issues significant to Catholics are important in determining their vote or if their vote is driven by

[1] We limit the analysis to the GSS in order to ensure a sufficient sample size for Catholics. The GSS have a substantially larger sample of Catholics included in their surveys. For comparison we replicate the analysis using the NES data. The typical Catholic subgroup frequency in the NES is less than 35 respondents. The coefficients for the issues obviously are almost always statistically not significant. The GSS, however, asks respondents to recall their presidential vote after the election. This potentially increases bias in the direction of the winning candidate. We are primarily interested in whether a particular issue is able to *pull* Catholic voters in the direction of one of the political parties. Thus, if we detect a Democratic pull in years when Republican candidates win the presidency then it is reasonably safe to conclude that there is Democratic influence on Catholic voting for that issue. In fact, this is the pattern revealed in Figures 1 and 5-7. Generally, the GSS slightly overestimates the Catholic presidential vote in the direction of the winner compared to the NES. However, the model shows a Democratic pull for poverty and the death penalty in 1980, 1984, 1988, 2000, and 2004 – all years when the Republican candidate won the presidency. Predictably, abortion always pushes Catholics in the Republican direction. It is likely, therefore, that the GSS data underestimates the influence of the push and pull of Catholic social teaching.

other factors. In order to identify the various influences on candidate choice by Catholics, at least for presidential elections, we use an analysis that allows the relative impact of issue positions to be followed from year to year. Unlike other analyses that predict Catholic attitudes by individual-level characteristics, we are interested in knowing how issues important to the Church's social teachings influence members' political behavior. Since, unlike some religions, the Catholic Church's teachings do not neatly align with the policy prescriptions of a single political party, we expect that they will likely *push* and *pull* their members in conflicting directions.

[19] Several key issues, as identified in the *Faithful Citizenship* (2003) letter by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, appear to have some, but not overwhelming impact in explaining the voting behavior of Catholics in any single election. These issues include abortion, the death penalty, immigration, and a preference for the poor. Of these, abortion and the death penalty are included directly in the GSS survey. The preferential treatment for the poor, however, is not explicitly addressed. To estimate this item we construct an index of poverty alleviation and identification items from questions about welfare spending, government programs to encourage job creation, hiring practices, and feeling thermometer responses about the poor. All variables were first recoded so high values indicate support for preference for the poor; values were then standardized to adjust for differences in their means and ranges. A score for each respondent was then created by summing across items and dividing by the number of items to which the individual responded.

[20] We present the results of standardized regressions for presidential elections showing the relative impacts of abortion, the death penalty, and the preferential option for the poor. The Catholic vote in each presidential election year is the dependent variable (coded 0/1, Republican/Democrat). Standardized regression is used in this initial model because it offers a straightforward way to determine whether one variable's effect is larger compared to other variables. Therefore, this simple method examines whether fabric of life issues appear to exert any influence on Catholics' political behavior.[2] Notice that these issues do not map with a single party. Abortion is associated with the Republican party while opposition to the death penalty and the preferential option for the poor are associated as Democratic party issues. Not surprisingly, no one issue serves as a strong explanation for how Catholics voted across all of the years. Even the powerful issue of abortion declines to insignificance in some years, but is large and significant in the 1972, 1984, and 1988 elections. These are years in which abortion was a substantial campaign issue: Nixon labeled McGovern as the candidate of "Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion;" and Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush both campaigned heavily among pro-life groups. Beginning in 1968 the Republican Party made a conscious effort to attract Catholic voters by emphasizing the Democratic Party's support from pro-choice groups. Recognizing that the Catholic Church was concerned about the

[2] The standardized regression model for Catholics is estimated as, $Y = \alpha + \beta 1$ (Party ID) + $\beta 2$ (Abortion) + $\beta 3$ (Death Penalty) + $\beta 4$ (poor) + ε, where Y = vote (0/1) for Democratic presidential candidate, $\beta 1$ = respondent party identification, $\beta 2$ = respondent favor or oppose abortion, $\beta 3$ = respondent favor or oppose capital punishment, and $\beta 4$ = respondent supports programs to help the poor.

financial expense of operating their extensive network of schools, the Republican platform of 1968 called for "inclusion of non-public school children in programs of federal assistance" (Prendergast). After the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, President Nixon began to define a position on abortion. He limited access to abortion for military personnel and their families and in selected speeches he embraced the position of the Catholic Bishops condemning abortion. Republican support for pro-life measures peaked in 1976 with the passage of the Hyde Amendment, barring all use of federal money in support of abortions. Until today this remains the main demonstration of Republican opposition to abortion.

[21] At the same time the Catholic Church is a staunch advocate for the poor and opposes capital punishment. In 1974 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops declared its opposition to the death penalty. This emerges partially in response to Supreme Court rulings concluding capital sentencing statues as currently implemented in the states constituted cruel and unusual punishment. Also Catholic Church teachings instruct that the needs of the poor and vulnerable should be placed ahead of others. We believe both issues favor the Democratic Party, although conservative Democrats support the death penalty and insist on strict spending limits for social welfare.

Figure 4. The Effect of Partisanship and Issues on Presidential Vote

Standardized Regression Coefficients for Catholics				
Year (N)	PartyID	Abortion	Poverty	Death Penalty
1972 (210)	.21*	-.14**	.19*	.11
1976 (319)	.34**	-.06	.17*	.09
1980 (692)	.11*	-.20*	.16*	.21*
1984 (370)	.09*	-.22**	.18	.22**
1988 (269)	.08**	-.24*	.13*	.23**
1992 (443)	.32*	-.09**	.17*	.13
1996 (281)	.31**	-.07**	.18*	.10
2000 (239)	.39**	-.17**	.03	.0004
2004 (283)	.37**	-.01	-.05	.06
2008 (69)	.69**	-.07	.01	.01

Source: GSS Cumulative Data File, 1968-2004; GSS Data File, 2010

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.1$

[22] Figure 4 demonstrates the lack of consistency in the factors driving the Catholic vote. Positive values show an increase in the likelihood of a Democratic vote. Party identification is always the strongest force, although its influence varies dramatically. Partisan identification

is controlled in these plots, and what is shown is the change in the likelihood of voting for the Democratic presidential candidate due to each issue. For Catholics, abortion is statistically insignificant in some years but in other years can explain a substantial number of Democratic defections to the Republican candidate. Aside from abortion, attitudes on poverty appear to be the issue most likely to influence the Catholic vote, working to the advantage of Democratic candidates in all elections excepting 1984, 2000, and 2004. Finally, the death penalty is important only in 1980, 1984, and 1988 – perhaps reflecting the salience of law and order issues generally during that decade.

[23] However, in almost all years it is partisanship rather than issues which best predicts whom a Catholic voter will support. Of course, this makes sense from some traditional perspectives, but it seems to belie the emphasis pundits and campaign professionals have placed on "the Catholic vote" in recent years. Indeed, it may likewise hold that party best predicts the vote of so called "Christian conservatives," but that would ignore the role played by religion in helping determine partisanship, as "Christian conservatives" are heavily Republican while no single party claims the allegiance of Catholics. But it is important to notice that no issue is consistent in its overall influence on Catholic voters, and that the Catholic vote itself is inconsistent over time.

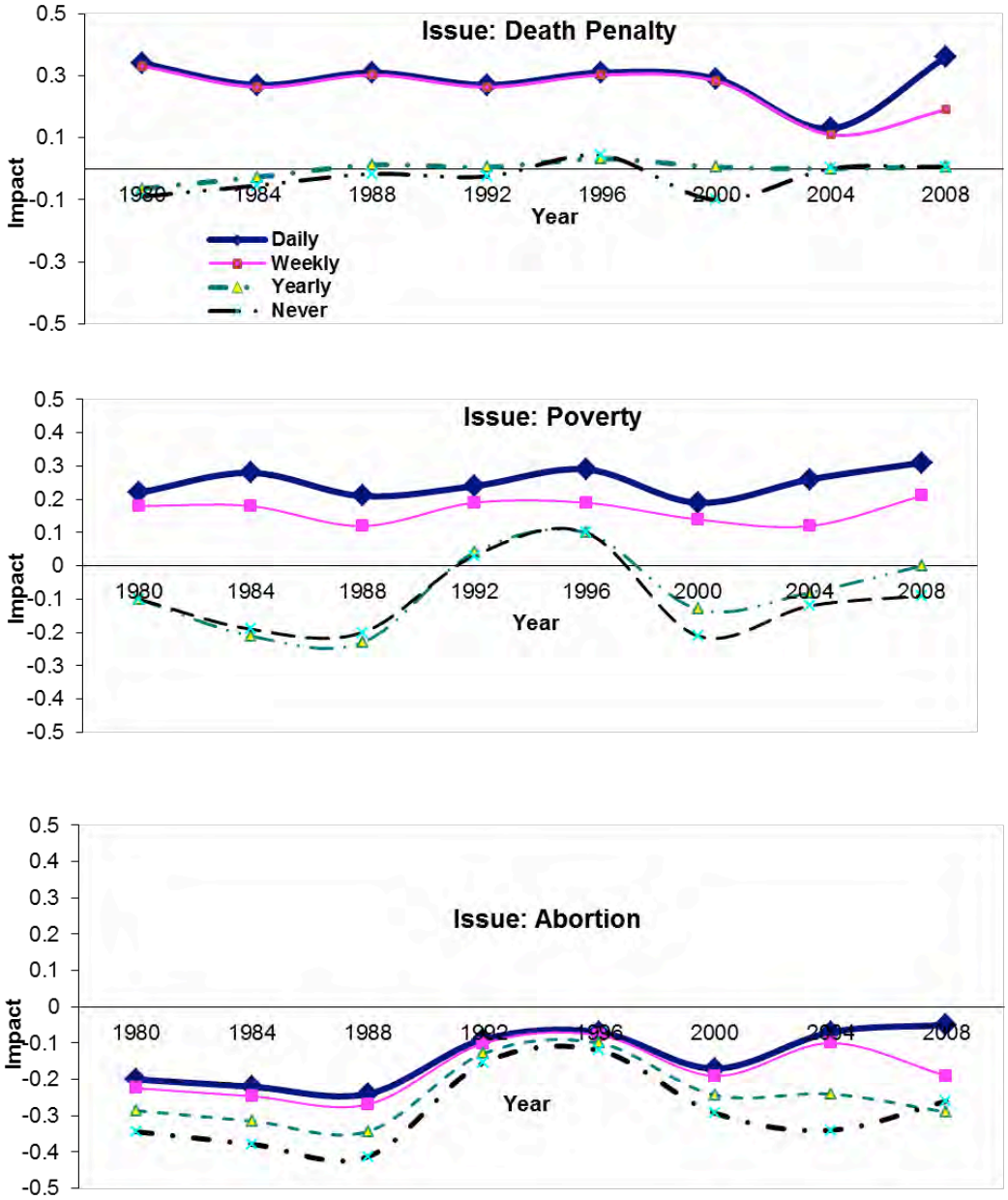
The *Push* and *Pull* of Fabric of Life Issues

[24] To further investigate this we consider whether the voting patterns of Catholics vary according to how they see their faith. Catholics, like adherents of most religions, vary enormously in how seriously they take their faith. We are primarily interested in whether a particular issue is able to *pull certain types* of Catholic voters in the direction of one of the political parties. This is complicated by the fact that Catholics are fairly unique in claiming their religion if they were born into it even if they have ceased to practice it. Some who tell the interviewer that they are Catholic will attend church daily, while others have not been to church in many years, and there is every shade in between. Thus we sort Catholics into categories according to their practice, as it is possible different portions of Figure 4 are explained by the influence of different "kinds" of Catholics – i.e., the different levels of commitment to the Catholic Church among its members. Each issue will exert a separate impact on the way a person votes. Some issues may push Catholics to cast a Democratic vote, whereas other issues will pull them in a Republican direction. In Figures 5 and 6 we present the impact of our three *fabric of life* issues on the probability of voting Democratic based on church attendance and age for Catholics.

[25] The dependent variable in our multivariate analyses is the probability Catholic respondents vote for the Democratic presidential candidate. These conditional probabilities are retrieved by estimating a multivariate logistic regression model on standardized independent variables, controlling for education, income, and party identification. Positive values show the increase in the probability of a Catholic casting a Democratic vote (regardless of initial vote inclination) attributed to the issue, while negative values show the decrease in the probability of a Democratic vote (or support for the Republican candidate) due to the issue. Thus, the graphs present the impacts of the death penalty, poverty, and abortion on the probability of a Democratic vote. Positive values show how much more likely a Catholic is to vote Democratic due to the sole impact of that issue alone; negative

values show an increase in voting Republican due to that issue. In other words, the graphs demonstrate the marginal contribution of each issue on different subgroups of Catholics, with partisanship, education, and income controlled.

Figure 5. Issue Impacts on Catholic Voting Patterns, by Church Attendance



[26] Catholics are grouped into categories according to the frequency of church attendance in Figure 5. We label the categories "Daily" for those who attend three to seven times a week, "Weekly" for those who attend 1-2 times a week, "Yearly" for those who attend once

or twice a year, and "Never" if they attend less than once a year or never. This figure displays the impact on the voting behavior of Catholics for the death penalty, poverty, and abortion. Disaggregation into attendance groups shows some remarkable and puzzling trends. First, we once again note that for no issue is the trend consistent over time. Perhaps this result is not surprising, as the differences offered by the candidates and the attention paid to the issue varies from election to election. In the third panel of figure 5 we see that abortion fairly consistently pushes Catholics somewhat toward the Republican candidates. However, a closer inspection of this panel shows an interesting trend: it is slightly stronger for rare church attendees than for frequent ones in the 1980s and then all attendance groups converge in the 1990s. While this may seem to make little sense, we propose that for infrequent attendees abortion is the single most important issue while frequent attendees use an array of issues. The crosscutting influence of issues is greatest for Catholics who likely are exposed to the greatest range of church teachings. Moreover, as the most publicized issue, abortion may be the only "Catholic position" familiar to infrequent attendees. To the degree that any "Catholic position" influences the vote of Catholics who attend church infrequently, it thus is more likely to be abortion than any other issue. This is significant because it belies the conventional wisdom among pundits and the press that the most religious Catholics are the ones who are most influenced by the abortion issue. Indeed, it appears that the opposite may hold, and that more frequent attendance increases the conflicting pressures of issues thereby bringing both parties into relevance for Catholics. At one level this makes sense, otherwise Catholics would be a Republican voting bloc.

[27] The death penalty and a preference for the poor offer a different story. First, it is important to note Daily and Weekly attendees follow similar trends over time. Moreover, for both the pattern is always in the direction predicted by the Bishop's statement. On these issues, however weakly, the effect is to pull Catholics toward voting for Democratic candidates. We see, however, for those who attend church rarely, there is no consistent impact from these two issues; indeed, in 2000 and 1980 through 1988, these issues seemed to contribute to greater Republican support. Instability increases as regular church attendance decreases, suggesting these voters are more susceptible to the unique appeals of each campaign and thus less attendant to the Church's teachings on the issues. Commitment is likely to influence Catholics' views on faith, morals, and policy. The weaker one's commitment as reflected through church attendance, the fewer reasons individuals have to follow the church's positions on policy (Prendergast). Furthermore, we cannot discount the possibility rare attendees are largely unaware their church even takes positions on these issues, and hence we should not expect it to greatly influence their vote even if religion is important to them in spite of rare attendance. Church positions on poverty, human rights, and war rarely are discussed in the popular media, and their position on capital punishment is mentioned when they note that priests and nuns are arrested at an anti-death penalty event, and even then attention is usually directed at the individual arrested and not the Church position. Thus, we propose that it is not just commitment to the religion that matters, but that attendance at masses and other church functions expose attendees to a broader array of Church teachings than can be found in the popular media or campaign literature and advertisements.

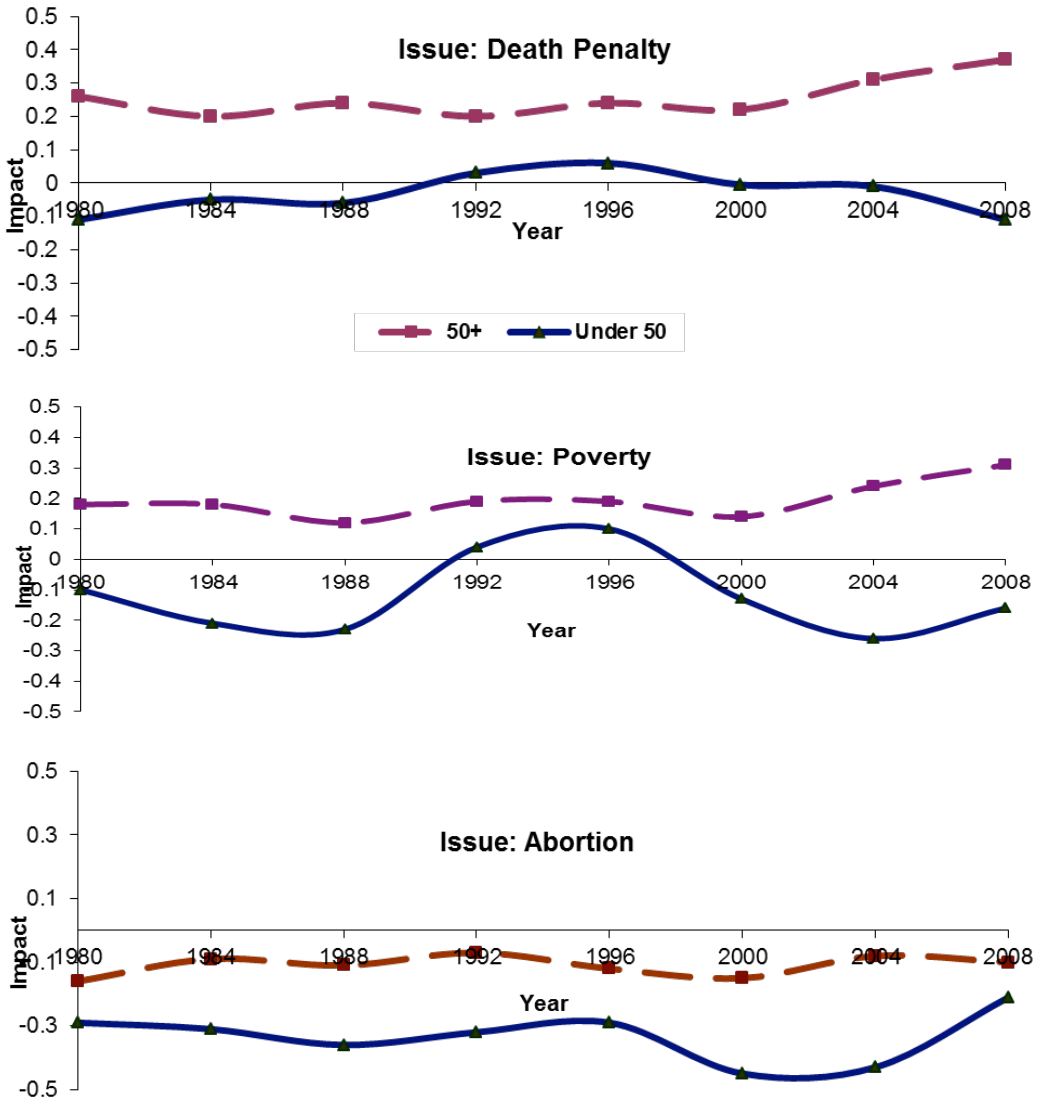
[28] Exposure and commitment may not be the only explanations for the trends observed here. Abortion, perhaps, can be considered an *easy* issue (Carmines and Stimson). An easy issue requires less of voters to determine their position. It is an issue on the political agenda for a long time, it tends to elicit a "gut" response by citizens, and it is one on which the parties and candidates have long staked out their competing positions. Conversely, the preferential option for the poor and death penalty are *harder* issues, especially for the infrequent church attendee. The death penalty is not discussed as frequently or as visibly compared to the abortion issue. The preferential option for the poor is technically even more difficult; solutions to poverty are complex and both parties sometimes claim that their policy positions are the best means for reducing poverty and, implicitly, thus consistent with Catholic teaching. Further, the secular media no doubt devotes more news coverage to abortion than the death penalty and poverty.

[29] Church attendance and the role of the church in one's life increase with age. Older Catholics are more likely to attend mass weekly and to believe that the Church is an important guide to one's life. Furthermore, older Catholics can be considered as Vatican II generations and therefore more influenced by the Church's social teachings compared to younger Catholics (Leege 2000a). Thus, it seems reasonable to consider whether the impact of Church positions on one's political views and voting also increases as one ages. Our study yields even stronger results using age alone, suggesting a life-cycle phenomenon rather than a generational one. Thus, we cannot discount the possibility that church may become more influential on those now young as they age. Both the cohort perspective and the idea that the meaning and importance of religion changes as one ages would seem compatible with the occasional observation that young, practicing Catholics are much more conservative than either older Catholics or young, non-practicing Catholic identifiers (Carroll).

[30] Figure 6 presents the impact of the death penalty, poverty, and abortion by the age of the respondent. We break the population into two groups: those fifty or over and those under fifty.[3] The figure presents the impact of each issue on the probability of voting Democratic (estimated from logistic regressions using standardized independent variables with party identification, education, and income included as controls). In this figure we see the abortion issue affects both age categories relatively similarly: the abortion issue increases the appeal of Republican candidates on both age groups, albeit only slightly. The differences between the impact of abortion on the two age groups is small, but appears to have increased for younger Catholics in the 2000 and 2004 elections, pushing them back toward the Republican candidate. Other issues, however, work to the advantage of Democratic candidates for those fifty and over, while having a smaller and mixed impact on those under fifty. Indeed, on these issues, it is the Catholics under fifty who hold the potential to be a "swing vote" for the phenomenon journalists call "the Catholic vote."

[3] Several break points for age between 45-55 were tested. All break points produced similar results. Although now this corresponds nicely with the pre- and post Vatican II cohorts, it does not function as such a break for the earlier years in this study, offering evidence for a maturation interpretation of the results.

Figure 6. Issues impacts on the Vote of Catholics, by Age



[31] The death penalty and poverty issues have the effect of pulling older Catholics toward the Democratic Party in all years, which is the impact one would anticipate given the USCCB statements. These same issues seem to pull younger Catholics to vote for Republican candidates in all the elections examined except the Clinton elections of 1992 and 1996. While this is inconsistent with Catholic teaching, it does appear to be consistent with partisanship in general and with the possibility older Catholics are both more attentive to Church messages and have been exposed to them longer than younger Catholics. We noted earlier how weekly and daily mass attendees were more conflicted than those who attend only rarely, with abortion pulling them toward Republicans but other issues pulling them to vote Democratic. The greatest decline in church attendance is among younger Catholics, and that alone could contribute to their greater volatility on *harder* issues, as rare attendance eliminates

one source of information, especially if eliminating that source minimizes conflicts with partisanship and the perception that only the abortion teachings of the church are relevant (or even exist).

[32] Catholic responsiveness to the impacts of our three *fabric of life* issues appears to differ by church attendance and age. The most frequently attending Catholics are the most conflicted with some issues pulling them towards the Republican Party and other issues pushing them toward the Democratic Party. As attendance rates drop the number of issues with a stable impact on the Catholic vote declines although abortion, the issue that gets the most media attention, continues to exert a strong impact. But even the powerful abortion issue is slightly attenuated by high attendance and age. Thus, one distinctive characteristic of Catholics is their differentiation among themselves.

The Importance of Catholic Identity

[33] How importantly individuals view Catholicism in their lives will likely increase the impact of the Church's teachings on their political behavior. Catholics who attend mass infrequently might still identify with the Church and experience its tugs on fabric of life issues. Indeed, those who consider their Catholicism to be important in their lives are more likely to *hear* and embrace those teachings.

Figure 7. Issues impacts on the Vote of Catholics, by importance of Religion

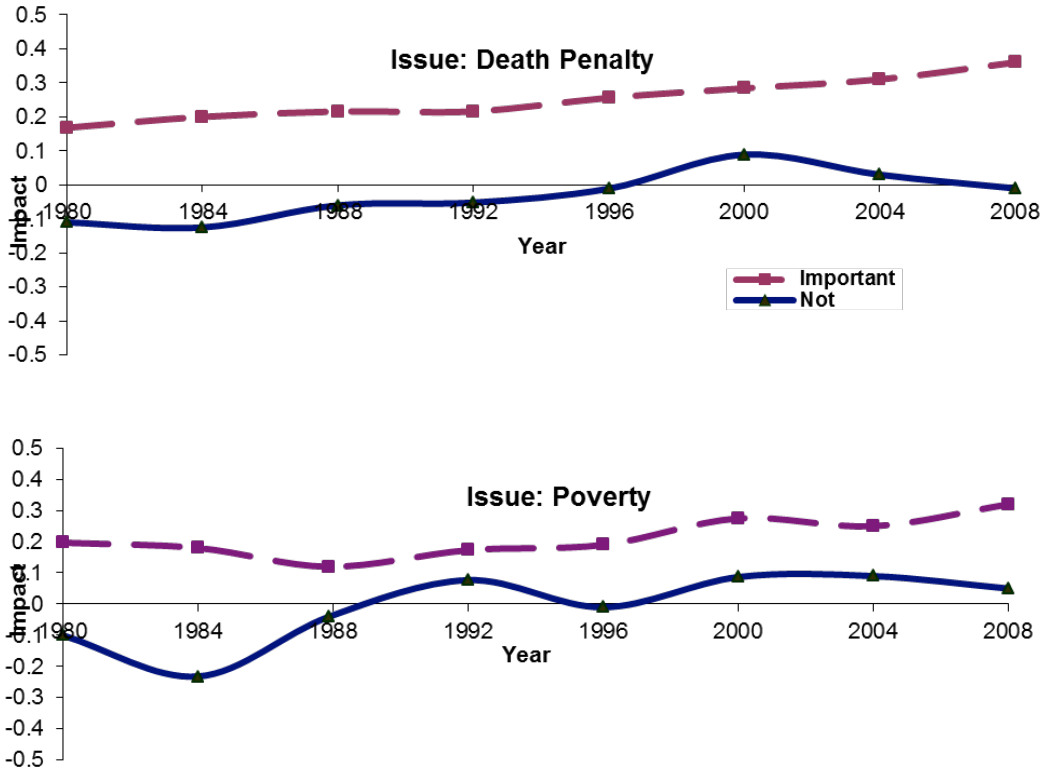
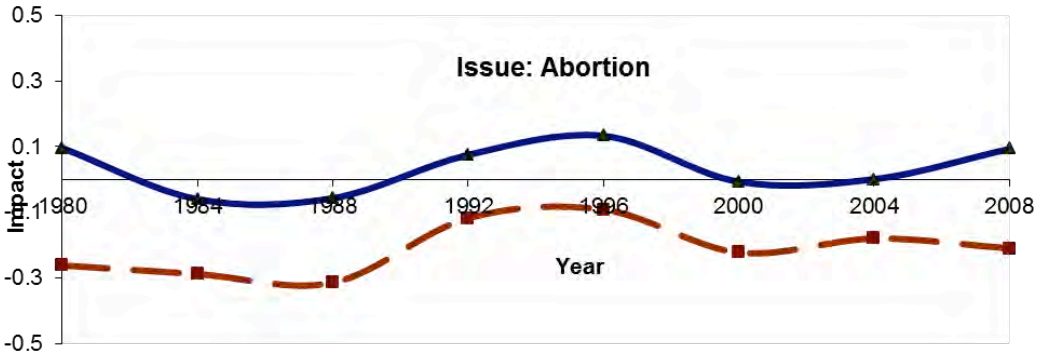


Figure 7 (continued)



[34] Figure 7 illustrates the significance of Catholic identification. Fabric of life issues exert a systematic impact on Catholics who find their religion to be important in their lives. Committed Catholics are pushed and pulled in the direction of the party's candidate predicted by the issue irrespective of who wins the presidential election.

[35] Conversely, Catholics who report their religion is unimportant appear vulnerable to the other forces of presidential campaigns. Most years the trend line wraps around zero (0) reflecting the insignificant impact of each issue on those voters. Movements away from zero are in the direction of the winning candidate, not necessarily the direction predicted by the Church's teachings. Abortion moved Catholics who do not find their religion to be important in their daily lives in the Republican direction in 1984 (Ronald Reagan) and 1988 (George H. W. Bush) and in the Democratic direction in 1992 and 1996 (Clinton). In contrast, Catholics who believe their religion is important in their lives consistently are pulled in the Republican direction for all elections irrespective of the winner. Capital punishment and the preferential option for the poor always move committed Catholics in the Democratic direction every election. Committed Catholics seem to experience the conflicting push and pull of issues in their political decision-making.

Conclusions

[36] Thus we find Catholics are neither strongly Republican nor strongly Democratic, and they most certainly do not vote as a solid bloc. This is not surprising. Catholics do appear to have a slight Democratic inclination, but not so large as to offer Democratic candidates a reliable electoral bloc. Catholics appear to consider a mix of values, both secular and religious, to decide how to vote, and not surprisingly we also find Catholics vary in the attention they pay to the cues from the Church. Importantly, our results indicate that while Catholics are pluralistic they also are consistently responsive to life issues for the last 30 years. The Church's positions on poverty, abortion, and capital punishment influence the political behavior of some Catholics. The higher a Catholic's commitment measured by church attendance, the greater the likelihood that (s)he will be informed about and more fully embrace the full array of the Church's teachings. Not all Catholics are indistinguishable from the rest of the electorate. Age and church attendance appear to increase the crosscutting pressures of reconciling politics with the social teachings of the Church.

[37] Second, Catholics seem to act similar to swing voters. The direction of their vote, and the impact on their vote of the issues we examined, seems to shift in the direction of the winning candidate in most years. Younger Catholics and those who attend mass less regularly appear to be more influenced by campaign effects than by Church teaching, as they both vary more in how much they are affected by issues and even in the direction of the pull of each issue. When the campaigns of President Reagan, for example, issued indictments of welfare recipients and of welfare programs in general, the poverty issue pulled both infrequent attendees and younger Catholics more toward the Republican Party than in prior years. In Clinton's two campaigns, however, the poverty issue appears to pull these two groups toward the Democratic Party. It may be important to note that Reagan's condemnations of anti-poverty programs argued those programs caused a cycle of dependency while Clinton's focus on anti-poverty programs used a "raise them up" or salvation rhetoric.

[38] We also find Catholics are likely to be conflicted by issues reflective of the Church's social teachings. The *Faithful Citizenship* document (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003) states, "a Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of 'right' or 'left,' nor the platforms of any party. Our values are often not 'politically correct' . . ." and we have seen this is true among Catholics in general and especially among those whom we hypothesize will pay the most attention to and be most informed about and influenced by their faith: regular mass participants and older Catholics. Perhaps this is the distinguishing characteristic of the Catholic voter. Loyalty to a single political party and all its issue positions would be inconsistent with the imperatives of the Church's teachings. Upward mobility and assimilation leaves Catholics to resolve the competing pull of issues and politics in the United States. Further, we argue that doctrinal orthodoxy – at least measured by church attendance – does not necessarily move all Catholics towards the Republican Party. In fact, doctrinal orthodoxy should increase the cross-pressures on Catholic voters but perhaps not members of other religious denominations. Indeed, if a religion takes no position on issues such as poverty or the death penalty, one would not expect to see those issues having a systematic impact on adherents that varies by attendance or commitment to the faith. Similarly, religions that align with a single party will not produce partisan cross-pressures on their members, and in these communities it may be those who are least faithful who feel the greatest conflicting partisan pull in an election season.

[39] Our results might also signal a challenge for Catholic bishops in the United States. As Catholics become increasingly politically heterogeneous, it is more difficult for the church to advance its distinctive ecclesiastical teachings without becoming embroiled in partisan divisions among Catholics, the public at large, and even politicians and the press. In future research we propose to examine other issues included in the Bishop's statements – universal health care, immigration, the rights of workers, war, and the environment – and expand the analyses to include other indicators of religiosity such as the importance of Church teachings and the importance of religion in daily life. This analysis also will be expanded to include mainline and evangelical Protestants as comparison groups. Our expectation is that members of religions that do not advocate a moral principle that connects diverse issues will be more susceptible to political pressures. Also those for whom religion is less important will be somewhat less conflicted in voting patterns. A church whose teachings fall on both sides of

the American partisan divide should not be expected to produce believers who vote as a bloc for any party. What does seem clear though is participation in their faith matters, and probably what the priest says at mass matters a great deal to Catholics who attend most and take their religion most seriously. Indeed, the more one knows about Catholic teaching the more ways one will be pulled, which is why, after all, the church leaders wrote in *Faithful Citizenship* that Catholic teaching does not fit well with any party platform or ideology.

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