

The American Catholic Voter: In History and Today
St. Agatha Peace and Social Justice Committee Discussion Group
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Catholics in the American historical narrative have been pushed and pulled by two distinctly different forces: One, the need to profess and live out our Catholic faith, the other the pressure and desire to assimilate and mute our Catholic identity.

The Catholic as outsider in American history can be traced to our nation's very beginnings. No Catholics were present at either Jamestown in 1607 or at Plymouth Rock in 1620, and it is important to remember that these colonies were founded just 90 years after Luther's 95 theses began the Protestant Reformation and a period of horrific sectarian violence.

More than one-third of the population in Ireland, for example, died from violence or starvation after English forces under Oliver Cromwell swept through that country. Catholic property was confiscated, celebration of the Mass was banned and it became a criminal offense to teach a Catholic to read or write. Carrying these attitudes across the Atlantic, Catholics were banned from settling in Massachusetts and Virginia. Indeed, there is no record of any Catholic – not one – settling in New Hampshire until 1822.

Catholics found a home in the New World when Sir George Calvert (first baron of Baltimore) persuaded Charles I to grant him a colonial charter for the settlement of Maryland. But Calvert had no desire to create a "Catholics only" enclave. Rather, he envisioned a colony where residents of any and all denominations could freely worship. By comparison, other colonies noted for their tolerance, such as Rhode Island or Pennsylvania, had one exception: Catholics were excluded from public life.

By 1690, having twice been invaded by Protestant militias, Maryland, too, saw its charter revoked, and its religious tolerance laws repealed and replaced by laws denying Catholics the right to vote, hold office, bear arms, own land (or even a horse worth more than five pounds), or hold religious services. Remarkably, the handful of American Catholics continued to not only hold on but to grow. Some even prospered – no more so than the Carroll family of Maryland, whose patriarch, Charles Carroll, the wealthiest man in the United States, who was the sole Catholic signatory of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

Carroll's presence in Philadelphia on both occasions was testament to evolving American attitudes toward religion. By the time of the American Revolution, Catholics were being actively recruited for the "Glorious Cause." Although the total Catholic population in the colonies totalled just 25,000, revolutionary leaders knew they needed every available American. As a sign of new-found tolerance, George Washington forbade Protestant soldiers from celebrating Pope Day, the American equivalent of "Guy Fawkes Day" in Britain where effigies of the Pope are burned, and Catholics were included in an official delegation charged with keeping Canadians out of the American fight. Catholic France,

of course, provided the decisive margin of victory for the colonials with 70 percent of the soldiers on the winning side at Yorktown being French and American Catholics.

Catholics were rewarded for their part in the Revolution's success by Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited a religious test as a condition for public office, and by the First Amendment, which guaranteed no state-sanctioned religion and which included some of the very language first included in the Maryland Constitution developed by Lord Baltimore.

But these concessions did not mean an end to old attitudes. Beginning in the 1830s, the number of Catholics in America exploded with the immigration of the Irish fleeing the starvation of the great potato famine. This growth alarmed many Protestants, who worried the penniless immigrants were straining a very small social safety net and driving down wages. It also spurred Catholic leaders to be more assertive in American public life – especially in regard to public schools. Catholics protested the use in public schools of Protestant Bibles, mandatory Protestant prayer, and textbooks and teachers that were often vehemently anti-Catholic.

Catholics at first sought changes in public school curriculum and then sought state funding for Catholic schools. Rebuffed on both counts, in the 1840s the Church began development of the extensive parochial school system that is with us today – as is the policy of no public aid to religious schools.

Meanwhile, the Vatican was roundly criticized in the United States for adopting anti-democratic attitudes, such as papal opposition to the unification, independence and democratization of Italy.

Yet, the terrible anti-Catholic riots in Boston, Philadelphia, Louisville and a score of other cities that left churches and convents burned, dozens dead and hundreds wounded began not over economics or global politics but by a bizarre flood of bogus anti-Catholic literature. The 1830s and 1840s saw a slew of reports which “exposed,” among other things, that convents were, in fact, brothels where imprisoned young women slaked the lust of priests. One such missive, Maria Monk's “Awful Disclosures” sold 300,000 copies – most after it was clear that the author was at best a fraud and at worst insane.

This period of anti-Catholic bigotry generally gets little space in American history textbooks, in part because we are always embarrassed when our history fails to live up to our creed, but also because as this was happening, America was coming apart, north vs. south, free vs. slave.

The Whig Party had broken apart under the stress of the national conflict and one of the new movements rising to take its place was the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. Dedicated to ending non-Protestant immigration, the order, whose members were told to state “I know nothing” if asked about the society, enjoyed tremendous electoral success in 1854.

But by 1856, Americans had concluded slavery, not immigration, was the most important national issue and it was the anti-slavery Republican Party, not the nativist American Party, which emerged and continues as the second major national political party.

Still, there remains an actual physical monument in Washington, D.C., to this period of nonsense – the Washington Monument. If you look at the monument today, you can see the color of the stone changes about one-quarter the way up. This is because in 1854, as the monument was being constructed, Pope Pius IX sent a commemorative stone to be included in the monument as a gift to the American people. This led to nativist rumors that the completion of the monument would be a signal for Catholics to rise up and overthrow the American government and replace it with papal rule.

Nativists stole the papal gift and destroyed and an anti-immigrant faction took over the monument committee. Amid such turmoil, Congress cut off funding for the monument, and work was halted for 20 years – the monument not being completed until 1882, by which time Catholics, Irish and otherwise, had become more firmly entrenched in American politics.

Perhaps now is the time to discuss why, until very recently, Catholics have primarily voted with the Democratic Party. One answer is that Democrats began reaching out to Catholics from the very beginning, with the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800. Jefferson's vice president, the notorious Aaron Burr, was a brilliant political organizer who used a new political/social club in New York called the Tammany Society. The work of Tammany in rallying the city's small Catholic population is generally credited with Jefferson, a deist with no sectarian affiliation, carrying New York and winning one of the closest presidential elections ever.

Meanwhile, the Federalists and their successors, first the Whigs and later the Republicans, remained the primary home for nativist sentiment for generations – carrying down to our present day, at least on the issue of immigration.

After the Civil War, for example, Republicans, led by their 1884 presidential candidate James G. Blaine, led the charge to enshrine in law the policy of no public aid to religious schools, as Republicans charged the Democrats were now only the party of “Rum, Romanism and Rebellion.”

For the next several decades, Catholic political participation focused primarily on city politics through the famously corrupt urban political machines, and on taking care of their own through the formation of the Knights of Columbus, the continuing growth of Catholic schools and colleges and securing the rights of labor through union organization – the latter effort endorsed by Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, “*Rerum Novarum*.”

Catholics were also conspicuous in their participation in the First World War, hoping, as so many immigrant groups do, to win greater acceptance through their patriotic sacrifices, but the trauma of the Great War, the fear of Communist subversion, and the crime wave fuelled by Prohibition resurrected nativist sentiment. The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a

renaissance after the release of the film “Birth of a Nation” that was as much anti-Catholic as anti-black.

Into this environment, New York Governor Al Smith somehow found himself the Democratic candidate for President, the first Catholic ever nominated by a major party. Smith had compiled an outstanding record as a reformer and was genuinely shocked by the ferocity of the anti-Catholic sentiment he encountered from all segments of American society.

Burning crosses greeted him on many campaign swings, as did rumors that Protestants would lose their citizenship if he were elected. Attacked low, Smith was also attacked high by reputable publications like *The Atlantic Monthly* that questioned how Smith, as a practicing Catholic, could do anything but follow Vatican policy on everything from foreign affairs to marriage, education and censorship.

Smith replied that in four terms as governor and another 15 as a state legislator he had never encountered a conflict between his religious and public duties, but he still lost to Herbert Hoover in a landslide. As a Tammany machine politician with a raspy Brooklyn accent running in the midst of an economic boom, Smith would have had tough sledding even had he been a Protestant, but the Smith loss convinced many Catholics that full assimilation was not possible in America.

And so began a period when Catholics created a universe, separate but parallel, to mainstream America. If there were organizations where they were not welcome, Catholics formed their own, so the 1930s and 1940s saw a proliferation of Catholic publications and programs, professional and trade organizations, charities and youth organizations.

For those outside this Catholic world, Catholics in the public square seemed inconsistent or deliberately obscurantist. How, after all, could the Church produce two people as different in the 1930s as Dorothy Day or Father Charles Coughlin? As church historian Charles Morris writes: “If the Church looked anti-intellectual or confused, it was only because its conclusions were so radically at variance with those of the prevailing American secularist faith. The Catholic worldview was actually highly rational, and if anything, hyperconsistent, even though it did not fit in with conventional ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ categories.”

But even as they separated, Catholics were suddenly being brought into the American fold. Catholics were an important New Deal constituency, and popular culture, which had generally avoided religion, suddenly embraced the moral certainty of Catholicism – perhaps in response to the uncertainty created by the Great Depression and the Second World War. Beginning with Spencer Tracy’s portrayal of Father Flannigan in “Boys Town” until the 1960s, Catholics could not have received better treatment from Hollywood. Priests were portrayed not merely as paragons of virtue and wisdom, they were also fearless, tough and manly in films like “Angels With Dirty Faces,” “Keys to the Kingdom,” “On the Waterfront” or the Oscar-winning “Going My Way.”

Catholic patriotism was celebrated in war movies like “The Fighting 69th” and “The Fighting Sullivans,” and Catholics burnished their patriotic image by taking the lead in the fight against Communism during the Cold War. The Knights of Columbus, to highlight the struggle between the godly west and godless east, led the campaign that convinced Congress to add the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. It is to our shame, however, that Catholics were such enthusiastic boosters of Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy.

It seemed to at least one ambitious family that the time was ripe for a Catholic to make another run at the presidency. Using his extraordinary charisma, his father’s fortune and a tremendous competitive drive, John Kennedy defeated several older and more experienced foes to win the Democratic nomination in 1960. Yet, he was well aware that his biggest obstacle to winning the general election was his Catholic faith as prominent Protestants like Norman Vincent Peale continued to question whether a Catholic could be president and still exercise his freedom of conscience.

Kennedy chose an address before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960, to try to put the Catholic issue behind him. In that address, Kennedy said:

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute – where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote – where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference ... where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials.”

Kennedy’s address is often considered a key reason for his election victory. In fact, it did little to stem the work of anti-Catholics; they just went underground. The Fair Campaign Practices Committee reported that nearly 400 pieces of anti-Catholic literature with a circulation of 25 million were distributed during the campaign. Kennedy had expected to win 53 to 57 percent of the popular vote; he blamed anti-Catholic bigotry for the fact that he won with just 49.72 percent of the vote.

Nor did the address satisfy Catholics. Francis Cardinal Spellman was angry that Kennedy had summarily discarded public funding for public schools. Catholic Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray said that arguing that to make “religion merely a private matter was idiocy.” Dr. Robert Royal, president of the Faith and Reason Institute, said later that the argument that religion has no role in the public square seriously misread the role of religion in creating American democracy and in such worthy causes as the civil rights movement. And historian William Miller said, “the joke was that [Kennedy] turned out to be, in effect, our first Baptist president.”

Kennedy’s aim to become America’s first Catholic president by promising not to be a devoted Catholic was not a great sacrifice for him to make. When a man said he was considering authoring a book about Kennedy’s religious beliefs, Kennedy’s sister, Pat, quipped, “That will be a very short book.” Kennedy told friends that he perfunctorily

attended Mass only to make his father happy, and he once considered converting to Anglicanism. Yet, such is the power of the Kennedy legacy – his charisma, his eloquence, his charm, his humor, his vigor, even his hair – that his pledge to separate his Catholic faith from his public duties has been a guidepost for countless Catholic politicians since.

Since Kennedy, the most famous Catholic exponent of this absolute separation of church and state was former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. Coincidentally, it was on this very date 22 years ago that Cuomo, in order to deflect criticism by Church leaders of Democratic vice presidential nominee and fellow Catholic Geraldine Ferraro, gave an address at the University of Notre Dame explaining why, though he was personally opposed to abortion, he could not act on that belief – nor should anyone – because he and they would be forcing their and their church’s religious views on the broader citizenry.

This line of reasoning has had considerable impact on Catholic thinking. A recent Pew Research Center poll found that a slight majority of Catholics – 52 percent – as well as mainline Protestants agree that churches should not express political views, and Catholics are also more likely than the general population to believe politicians should be willing to compromise on controversial issues than simply hold to their religious views.

Whatever help he was trying to provide Ferraro, Cuomo’s speech did not stop Ronald Reagan from carrying 49 states in the 1984 election – in part because Reagan had substantially improved on his share of the Catholic vote.

In 1980, pollsters found just 17 percent of Catholics considered themselves Republicans, while by 1986 that number had grown to 26 percent. (Today it is roughly 35 percent.) This movement away from being a solid Democratic voting bloc seems to be driven by two concerns. One is certainly the sexual and life issues that are the hot buttons of today’s “culture wars.” The other reflects the improved economic status of many Catholics who find calls for reduced government spending and lower taxes appealing.

It is probably telling that Hispanic Catholics, who generally are still working their way up the rungs in socio-economic status, are more likely to vote Democratic than their white Catholic counterparts. In 2004, for example, 65 percent of Hispanic Catholics voted for John Kerry, a Catholic, while 56 percent of non-Hispanic white Catholics voted for George W. Bush, an evangelical.

This leads us to the question: Is there, in fact, a “Catholic vote?” Political operatives of both parties seem to think so, and each party has tried to actively engage more Catholics on the theory that as goes the Catholic vote so goes the nation!

Why do they think this? Well, according to surveys, the Catholic vote, which represents about a quarter of the electorate, has gone to the presidential popular vote winner in every election since 1972. But as Joseph Bottom, an editor at *The Weekly Standard*, wrote, “You might as well say the American vote has gone to the popular winner since 1972.” Penn Professor John J. Dilulio Jr. has concluded that “even though Catholic opinion is

divided on many controversial issues, Catholics come as close as any religious cohort in the country to mirroring the American electorate politically. Catholics come near to being the nation's typical, average, or – to use the term that many political scientists prefer – median voters.” More simply, in Bottum's words, “Catholics vote like everybody else, and they live like everybody else.”

This does not seem entirely true. On several questions, we Catholics consistently poll in between evangelical and mainline Protestants, which some think is worth noting. For example, in the Pew Research Center poll more than 2,000 adults were asked which should have more influence on U.S. laws: the will of the people or the Bible? Sixty percent of white evangelicals answered the Bible, while 72 percent of Catholics said the will of the people. Catholics are also much less likely to see the creation of the state of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

But there are also areas of common ground. On environmental issues, nearly 80 percent of all Americans, regardless of religious affiliation, agree global warming is a real problem that requires government solutions. When asked what political issues are addressed from the pulpit in their churches, 96 percent of Catholics and 90 percent of evangelical Protestants answer “hunger and poverty.” This is not to suggest there are not differences in emphasis and method, but that we share common concerns.

2004 was, of course, the first time since Kennedy that a Catholic, Kerry, was the presidential nominee of a major party, yet the Catholic vote went to Bush 52 to 47 percent – the identical proportion by which Bush won the total popular vote. The issue again arose regarding whether a Catholic politician must heed the commands of Catholic prelates – but this time the question was asked by Catholics and focused solely on the issue of abortion.

Several Catholic bishops suggested Kerry, an abortion rights supporter, should not take Communion – a position a California bishop had taken the year before regarding former California Governor Gray Davis the year before. Confusing the issue further was the fact that the bishops involved seemed to single out only Democrats, ignoring “pro-choice” Republicans.

Polling showed most Catholics opposed denying these politicians Communion, and Kerry and Davis avoided confrontations by worshiping in dioceses and parishes where no such edicts existed.

But Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis went further and suggested that Catholics who vote for politicians who support abortion rights were committing a grave sin and must confess before receiving Communion. This led to then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who is now, of course, Pope Benedict XVI, to issue a clarification that Catholics may vote for an abortion rights supporter if there were “proportionate reasons” based on other moral issues. But that no Catholic could in good conscience vote for a politician solely because that person favored abortion rights. This episode, unsatisfying to virtually

everyone on the political spectrum, underscores the difficulty faced by Church leaders as they try to ensure Catholics live and vote as Catholics.

Despite the unruliness in a democratic society, the Catholic Church remains a vital institution in America, far more so than most places. Here, more than 40 percent of Catholics regularly attend Mass, compared to 10 percent in most of Catholic Europe, and we maintain an active and vital system of Catholic schools and charities.

Also, American church leaders seem to be taking a slightly new tack in getting American Catholics to vote consciously as Catholics. Rather than endorsing a candidate or political party – or even dictating that Catholics must take a certain position on a particular issue – the American bishops have taken to posing a series of questions to American Catholic voters to get us to think about what it means to be a Catholic in the voting booth.

Here is a sample of some of the questions the American bishops asked us to think about, which they issued in their most recent statement on Catholics and politics, “A Call to Faithful Citizenship,” issued in 2003:

After September 11, how can we build not only a safer world, but a better world – more just, more secure, more peaceful, more respectful of human life and dignity?

- ... How can we keep our nation from turning to violence to solve some of its most difficult problems--abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies; the death penalty to combat crime; euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age, illness, and disability; and war to address international disputes?
- How will we address the tragic fact that more than 30,000 children die every day as a result of hunger, international debt, and lack of development around the world ... ?
- How can we join with other nations to lead the world to greater respect for human life and dignity, religious freedom and democracy, economic justice, and care for God's creation?

The bishops believe that in addressing questions such as these, we Catholics bring very specific assets to the public square. These include a consistent moral framework. Catholics also bring to public life the broad, everyday experience of serving those in need. We are not alone in this, of course, but Catholics operate the largest private and religious network of social services in America.

Finally, the Catholic community is large and diverse. We have every race, every ethnic background, rich and poor, Republican, Democrat and Independent. More than most Americans, we ought to have a global perspective because, think about it, the Mass celebrated here at St. Agatha's on Sunday will be the same Mass celebrated on that day in Nigeria or India or Brazil.

Perhaps reflecting on the positions taken by Kennedy and Cuomo, the bishops' state, “the Catholic community enters public life not to impose sectarian doctrine but to act on our moral convictions, to share our experience in serving the poor and vulnerable, and to

participate in the dialogue over our nation's future.”

We probably do not feel fully at home in either of our nation’s two political parties for, as the bishops note, “a Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of "right" or "left," nor the platforms of any party.” Instead, believers are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test 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 rights of the human person, whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good.”

The Vatican, too, has made it clear that everyone, Catholics and non-Catholics, Christians and non-Christian, have an obligation to actively participate in the political life of our nations and communities. Pope Benedict, while still head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote that the most fundamental teaching of the Second Vatican Council is that we are to never relinquish our participation in public life. But we must approach that participation from a very distinct Catholic point of view, not yielding to moral relativism, but with the belief that we possess the universal truth of the Gospel while never sliding into religious intolerance.

It is a delicate balance, but our Church teaches that authentic freedom does not exist without the truth. The will of the people is a wonderful thing, unless it contradicts the truth of Christ’s teaching, and then, as Pope John Paul II noted in the 1995 encyclical “*Evangelium Vitae*,” democracy “contradicting its own principles, effectively moves towards a form of totalitarianism.”

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