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Original scientific paper
<https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1702277a>
Date received: January 14, 2023
Date accepted: May 19, 2023

INHABITING THE MIDDLE GROUND: THE CASE OF BORN-AGAIN CATHOLICS

Abstract

Once fierce adversaries, American Catholics and Evangelical Christians have grown closer politically over the past decades, finding common ground on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. These bonds have grown so strong that a notable portion of Catholics now identify as “born-again” despite their religious tradition not being characterized as one that requires its members to have a born-again experience. This manuscript investigates how prevalent these born-again Catholics are throughout the electorate and how they differ politically and religiously from born-again Protestants as well as Catholics who do not identify as born-again. Using data from the Cooperative Election Study (CES), I find that born-again Catholics display higher levels of religiosity and identify as being more conservative and more Republican than Catholics who do not identify as born-again. However, as a group, they are not as conservative, nor display as high levels of religiosity, as their white evangelical counterparts. In short, born-again Catholics appear to be inhabiting a “middle ground,” having “dual-reference groups” as Welch and Leege (1988) called it, and, in so doing, they span the divide between Catholicism and Evangelicalism. These born-again Catholics may also be the bridge that is responsible for the forging of political bonds between the two religious traditions.

Keywords: born-again Catholics, identity, religiosity, cross-cutting cleavages

Introduction

“The evangelizing mission is not based on personal activism, that is, on ‘doing,’ but on the witness of brotherly love, even amid the difficulties that living together entails.”

Tweet from Pope Francis, July 3, 2021

Catholicism is the largest religious tradition in the United States. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) estimates that around 22 percent of Americans identify as Catholic, totaling more than either their Mainline and Evangelical Protestant counterparts. It is also the most racially diverse of the major American religious traditions and the oldest, tracing its roots back to the first pope, the Apostle Saint Peter,

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who was alive during the time of Jesus. Its structure is centralized and hierarchical, with the Vatican regularly dispensing teaching on the most pressing political, social, and theological issues. It has a self-conception of its authority to offer this instruction, and that it is binding for believers, a dynamic not found in any of the world's other major religions.

But despite this top-down structure, scholars have documented the fragmented nature of Catholicism,² which has led to many important differences that span church customs, theology, and politics. Moreover, the recent influx of Hispanic immigrants from Central and South America has changed the ethnic composition of its laity, with these immigrants also being different from white Catholics in that they tend to be more liberal and more likely to focus on issues related social justice, such as immigration and welfare.³ Catholics are also fragmented theologically in that the extant literature has shown that even priests themselves take very different stances on issues, thus giving license to Catholics to have leeway in their beliefs.⁴ And, finally, Catholics are divided politically. Once a reliably Democratic bloc, the advantage for Democrats among Catholics has all but evaporated as they are now sharply divided between the two major political parties.⁵ In short, a centralized structure does not mean homogeneity at the mass level.

One of the important and understudied fractures among American Catholics regards identity, namely those Catholics who choose to identify as born-again and the reasons for why they elect to do so. Born-again Christians typically place an emphasis on the rebirth brought about by baptism (often immersion) and place a focus on spreading the Gospel, which is why they are often referred to as “evangelical” Christians. As Pope Francis’ quote above illuminates, the Catholic Church does not place an emphasis on personal evangelism, the phenomenon whereby followers should be winning them “one by one” to Jesus, but rather they adhere to a missional Evangelicalism view, which is focused on “much more than just the proclamations of the Gospel of eternal salvation... It involves the total Christian ministry to the world outside the church.”⁶ In short, Catholicism does not demand a “born-again” experience of its members or the behavior associated with it. This, in turn, creates an interesting puzzle: why do so many Catholics identify as such?

The number of Catholics who identify as “born-again” is growing in the United States at a rapid rate, more than doubling in the last two decades (see Figure 2 below)⁷. These changes have important political implications given the close nature of

² Tricia C. Bruce, *Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the Catholic Church*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017.

³ David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and Geoffrey C. Layman, The Party Faithful: Partisan Images, Candidate Religion, and the Electoral Impact of Party Identification, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2021, pp. 42-58; Oliver Richomme, “A Catholic Latino Vote?”, in: *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Elections*. Marie Gayte, Blandine Chelini-Pont, and Mark J. Rozell (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, pp.161-191.

⁴ Gregory A. Smith, *Politics in the Parish: The Political Influence of Catholic Priests*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 2008; C. Richard Hofstetter, John W. Ayers, and Robert Perry, The Bishops and their Flock: John Kerry and the Case of Catholic Voters in 2004, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2008, pp. 436-455.

⁵ Lyman A. Kellstedt and James L. Guth, Catholic Partisanship and the Presidential Vote in 2012: Testing Alternative Theories, *The Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2014, pp. 623-640.

⁶ Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, *The Study of Evangelicalism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 5.

⁷ Surveys garner different proportions of Catholics who identify as born-again. For example, the 2020 ANES found that only 12% of Catholics identified as born-again. This may be attributed to differences in question wording. Nonetheless, given that Catholics regularly represent approximately one-quarter of the electorate, the number of born-again Catholics is substantial.

two-party competition in American national elections. However, scholars have given little attention to these individuals and how they differ politically and religiously from other Catholics as well as from evangelical Protestants. So, just who are these born-again Catholics, and what are their religious and political characteristics?

As evident from data gathered through the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the Cooperative Election Study (CES), born-again Catholics are more politically conservative and exhibit higher levels of religiosity than their Catholic counterparts who do not identify as born-again. While white born-again Catholics are more politically conservative than their non-white, born-again Catholic counterparts, white born-again Catholics are not as politically conservative, nor do they display as high levels of religiosity, as white evangelicals. Therefore, it appears that born-again Catholics are indeed inhabiting a “middle ground,” influenced by both religious traditions, and they blend customs, practices, politics, and the beliefs of both religious traditions.

The Political History of Catholics

Catholics were one of the most dependable Democratic constituencies throughout much of the 19th and 20th Centuries, constituting a core bloc of the New Deal Coalition.⁸ The source of this Democratic Party identification was driven by two factors. First, the ostracization that Catholics faced throughout this time-period was fierce. Given that Democrats have long been the party that has provided a home for marginalized ethnic and racial groups,⁹ their identification with the Democratic Party should not come as a surprise. Outcasts due to their ethnicity as being from “undesirable” European countries such as Ireland and Italy, earlier immigrant waves of Catholics were also detested because of their religion. They faced widespread discrimination as surges of xenophobia occurred throughout the United States. As Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee report in their seminal ethnography of Elmira, New York, “Catholics have become more Democratic despite the prevailing opinion climate, illustrating to some extent their group isolation, at least as far as politics is concerned. And the more intimately Catholic they feel... the more Democratic they vote.”¹⁰

The initial basis by which Catholics began leaving the Democratic Party can be attributed to their seismic ascent up the socioeconomic ladder during the latter half of the 20th Century, a rise that was nothing short of remarkable.¹¹ As they began to ascend into higher economic strata, their support for the redistributive policies of the Democratic Party began to erode.¹² This, in turn, began to break down negative stereotypes and tropes levied at Catholics, such as them being characterized as “lazy,” and it has led to a divided Catholic bloc that supports the Democratic and

⁸ William B. Pendergast, *The Catholic Voter in American Politics: The Passing of the Democratic Monolith*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 1999.

⁹ See: Paul Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999.

¹⁰ Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1954, p. 67.

¹¹ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1990.

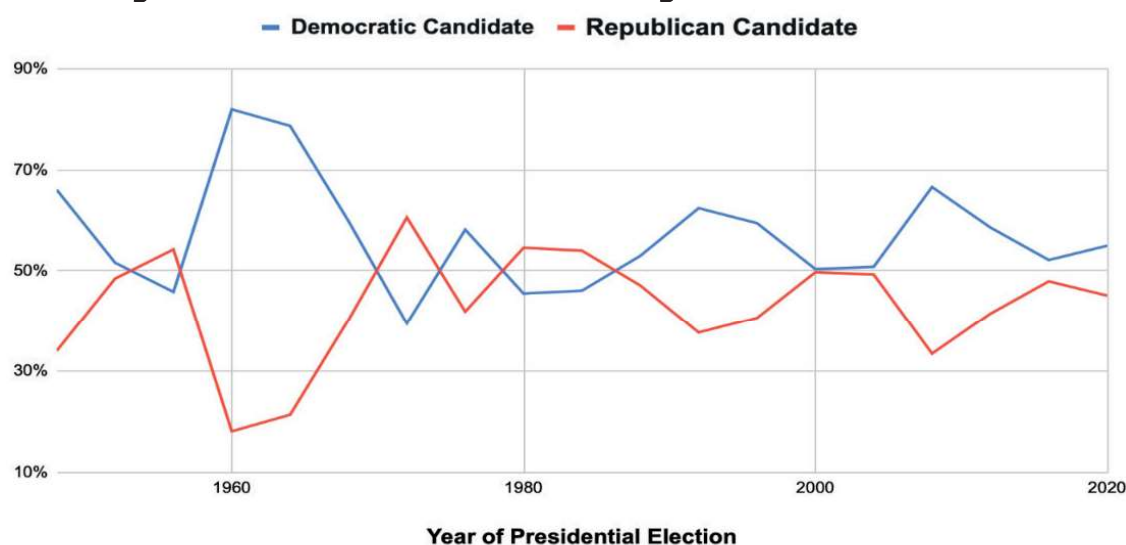
¹² Stephen T. Mockabee, “The Political Behavior of American Catholics: Change and Continuity”, in: *From Pews to Polling Places*, J. Mathew Wilson (ed.), Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 2007, pp. 81-104.

Republican parties in relatively equal measure, with neither political party winning Catholics by more than single digits over the past twenty years.¹³

Second, the political priorities of the Democratic Party began to shift. With the sexual revolution of the 1960s, as well as the campaign in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and the nomination of far-left candidate George McGovern, Catholic activists began to grow disgruntled with a party that was moving leftward on social and cultural issues. In response, a group of Catholic activists, described by Chelini-Pont as “theo-conservatives,” joined forces with fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants with the hope of rebuffing this new cultural tide.¹⁴ Hanna argues that the early catalyst for the pro-life movement was not from evangelicals, but rather from pro-life Catholic priests and laity who were troubled by a Democratic Party that was growing more and more accepting of abortion rights.¹⁵ This also began to erode Catholic Democratic partisanship.

Figure 1 displays the presidential vote choice among Catholics from 1952 to the present day. The election of John F. Kennedy, a Catholic from the Northeast, in the 1960 Presidential Election was the highwater mark for Catholic Democratic support. In many ways, while Kennedy’s election would have brought tangible benefits to Catholics, it was symbolic, mirroring in some ways the election of Barack Obama in 2008 as a long-marginalized group was able, for the first time, to see one of their own on the presidential ballot.¹⁶

Figure 1. Presidential Vote Choice among All Catholics, 1948 – 2020



Source: American National Election Studies

¹³ The exception to this is Barack Obama’s landslide victory in 2008.

¹⁴ Blandine Chelini-Pont, “Catholic Colonization of the American Right”, in: *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Elections: Understanding the “Swing Vote”*, M. Gayte, B. Chelini-Pont & M. J. Rozell (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, p. 50.

¹⁵ Mary T. Hannah, *Catholics and American Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1979.

¹⁶ Of course, Kennedy was not the first Catholic on the ballot as Al Smith, the Catholic Governor of New York, ran in the 1928 Presidential Election and was defeated by Herbert Hoover in an electoral landslide.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Catholics were overwhelmingly Democratic, and even slightly favored Bill Clinton during the 1990s. However, since George Bush's election in 2000, which coincided with a rise in the salience of "moral issues" and the mobilization of evangelicals around these issues, the Catholic vote has been almost evenly split save for Barack Obama's landslide victory in 2008. Even having a Catholic on the ballot in 2020 – Joe Biden – did not significantly move the Catholic vote, although Biden's Catholicism was the source of many political attacks due to his support for abortion and same-sex marriage. These middling levels of support for Democrats is a stark contrast to sixty years prior when John F. Kennedy was on the ballot and the Catholic identity was more homogenous and solidified.

Some have argued that a possible reason for this split vote is that the church takes positions that reflect both sides of the political spectrum. For example, the Church's position on immigration and climate change align more fully with the Democratic Party while its position on same-sex marriage and abortion align more fully with the Republican Party—a situation that may well induce political cross-pressures for American Catholics. While cross-pressures may theoretically exist in the aggregate, there is little evidence, however, that rank-and-file Catholics are actually cross-pressured at the individual level. Rather, Catholics pick and choose their policy priorities and in so doing, align their partisan preferences based on their policy positions related to these priorities.¹⁷

This illustrates, once again, the splintered nature of the Catholic identity, which has allowed for disparate identities, affiliations, and political and theological attitudes to persist, and in some cases, flourish, all the while retaining the Catholic label and identity. Even in a centralized, hierarchical religious structure, there is still great latitude. For example, priests have great discretion in the subject matter of their homilies, varying between messages that are more theologically liberal and that focus on social justice and messages that are more orthodox and that focus on personal morality.¹⁸ Such differences can be rather contentious within Catholicism, with traditionalists and modernists regularly squaring off on what it means to be Catholic.

Born-Again Identity

As noted above, Catholics are rather divided theologically and politically. One difference that has emerged within Catholicism are between those Catholics who may share some characteristics with evangelicals, or identify as evangelical or born-again themselves, and those Catholics who do not. More than three decades ago, Welch and Leege drew political scientists' attention to these Catholics called "evangelically oriented Catholics."¹⁹ They measured this disposition along five dimensions: reading and studying the Bible alone, reading or studying the Bible with friends,

¹⁷ Laura S. Antkowiak, Levi G. Allen, and Geoffrey C. Layman, Coping with Cross-Pressures: The Seamless Garment in Catholic Political Behavior, *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 42, S. 1, 2021, pp. 195-240.

¹⁸ Gregory A. Smith, *Politics in the Parish* . . .

¹⁹ Michael R. Welch and David C. Leege, Dual Reference Groups and Political Orientations: An Examination of Evangelically Oriented Catholics, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1991, pp. 28-56.

prayer, sharing beliefs, and saying grace before meals, all of which they attributed as being “evangelical” behaviors. The authors found that this orientation was related to several conservative attitudes, such as viewing secularism as a threat and support for prayer in public schools. They surmised that some Catholics had “dual-reference groups,” leaning on both Evangelicalism and Catholicism when conceptualizing their identity and engaging in behavior. As the authors report: “Aside from demonstrating that the effects of evangelical-like faith styles and their attendant world views are often conditioned by the clarity and concordance of the political positions held by relevant religious reference groups, and that these effects now extend outside Protestant denominations to U.S. Catholics, our data also reinforce an emerging line of research in the study of religion and politics... [that] that religious variables... ultimately explain variation in measures of political orientations.”²⁰

But what does it mean to identify as “born-again” and what are the components that make up that identity when it concerns Catholics? The phrase itself is derived from Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus, recorded in John 3, where Jesus says that, in order to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus must be “born-again” (John 3:3). It is also connected to baptism for many Christians, as the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” For evangelical Protestants, this conversion is an unofficial prerequisite of the faith as the born-again experience is a mark of a genuine confidence and trust in the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross.²¹

So, what do Catholics mean when they say that they are born-again? This conundrum becomes intriguing when applied to Catholics, a religious tradition that neither requires nor is characterized by a born-again experience.²² There are a few possible explanations.

First, Catholics may be identifying as born-again for theological reasons, believing that they must indeed have a conversion experience in order to be saved, taking the Scripture literally and defying their Church’s traditional view of baptism, one that has been influenced by American evangelicalism. There exists a great amount of theological diversity within Catholicism. For example, only 31 percent share the Church’s view on transubstantiation, believing that the bread and the cup actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Consequently, differences between born-again Catholics and those who do not so identify may simply reflect certain theological differences among Catholics.

Furthermore, many Catholics do not adhere to the teachings of the Church on salient political issues. This may be due to a number of different reasons (e.g., incorrectly believing what the Church’s position is, bias in self-reporting, or the misrepresentation of the Church’s position). For example, Antkowiak, Allen, and Layman test three issues and find that only about 10 percent of Catholics hold political views

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 50.

²¹ James Davidson Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1983; Robert Wuthnow, “The Cultural Capital of American Evangelicalism”, in: *Evangelicals and Democracy in America*, vol. 1, S. Brint and J.R. Schroedel (eds.) Russell Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009, pp. 27-43.

²² Corwin E Smidt, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and James L. Guth, “The Role of Religion in American Politics: Explanatory Theories and Associated Analytical and Measurement Issues”, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics*, C.E. Smidt, L.A. Kellstedt, and J.L. Guth (eds.), Oxford University Press, New York, 2009 pp. 3-42.

across all three issues as advanced by the Church.²³ Thus, even with this low bar (e.g. positions on three issues salient to the mass public), few Catholics clear it. So, while Catholicism is perhaps the most organized and hierarchical of all religious traditions, that structure does not necessarily translate to rank-and-file Catholics adhering to the Church's teachings and beliefs. Thus, it is not unreasonable to think that Catholics are relatively unconstrained to identify as born-again if they wish to do so.

Second, as frequently referenced, Catholics are also fractured politically, and so identifying as born-again may occur for political reasons. Given the recent politicization of religion, particularly evidenced by the alliance between white evangelicals and the Republican Party, identifying as born-again may be done to convey to others that one holds a set of culturally conservative policy positions rather than to reflect one's religious identity. While journalists, evangelical leaders, and academics have speculated about this possibility, there is a lack of concrete evidence as to what respondents think about when they choose the label to describe themselves. Still, it is also true that certain religious behaviors have consistently decreased among those who identify as born-again, suggesting that the identity may be becoming more political, than religious, in nature. For example, according to CES data, almost two in three—63 percent—of white evangelicals reported going to church at least once a week in 2008, whereas that number fell to below half (49 percent) in 2020. Moreover, despite these religious changes, the partisan lean of evangelicals has remained steadfastly Republican giving some credence to this notion that when respondents invoke the born-again identity, some are doing so, at least in part, for political reasons.

Third, the choice to identify as born-again may also mean something different across racial groups.²⁴ The born-again identity does a much better job at predicting attitudes among whites than it does among non-whites, and there are important racial group differences among non-whites.²⁵ The racial segregation of religious traditions means that "minority group status and issues of marginality are not regular topics of theological reflection,"²⁶ which could, in turn, impact the likelihood that individuals identify as born-again.

Born-Again Catholics

Although much ink has been spilt on the formation and impact of the Moral Majority, an evangelical organization that drove Republican Party politics throughout the 1980s, far less time and effort has been spent examining how The Catholic Alliance has impacted American Catholicism. The Alliance was launched in 1995 by Pat Robertson, the head of the Christian Coalition and an influential member of the

²³ Laura S. Antkowiak, Levi G. Allen, and Geoffrey C. Layman, *Coping with Cross-Pressures: The Seamless Garment in Catholic Political Behavior* . . .

²⁴ Levi G. Allen and Shayla F. Olson, *Racial Attitudes and Political Preferences among Black and White Evangelicals*, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2022, pp. 631-648.

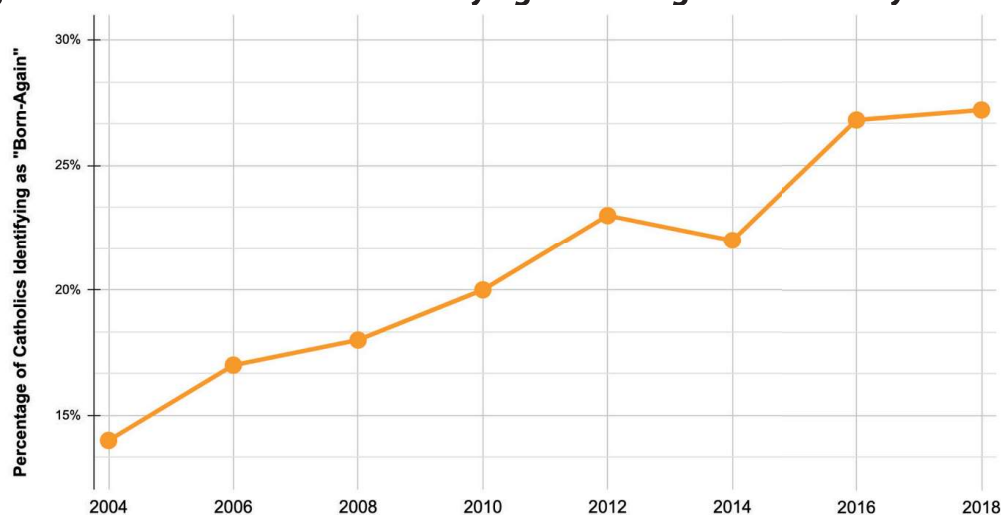
²⁵ Janelle S. Wong, *The Role of Born-Again Identity on the Political Attitudes of Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans*, *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2015, pp. 641-678.

²⁶ Brian D. McKenzie and Stella M. Rouse, *Shades of Faith: Religious Foundations of Political Attitudes among African Americans, Latinos, and Whites*, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2013, p. 220.

Religious Right, when he announced that his organization had created a subsidiary—The Catholic Alliance—to rally pro-life conservative Catholics to support pro-life candidates (who were most often Republicans). Ralph Reed, another prominent leader in the Christian Coalition, called this alliance between Catholics and Evangelicals “the most significant flowering of ecumenical cooperation” in centuries.²⁷ This alliance began to break down hostilities between the two religious traditions as they found common ground on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage.²⁸ This denoted a significant shift among evangelicals, especially given their long history of hostility toward Catholics, and it marked an important moment in history when Evangelicals and Catholics joined forces on political grounds.²⁹

Although Welch and Leege focused on behavior when distinguishing certain Catholics from other Catholics,³⁰ this article focuses on identity in distinguishing between Catholics by separating out born-again Catholics (BACs) from those Catholics who do not choose such an identity. As shown in Figure 2, the portion of Catholics identifying as born-again has steadily risen since 2004.³¹

Figure 2: Number of Catholics Identifying as Born-Again has Steadily Increased



Source: General Social Survey

During the election of George Bush in 2004, the number of born-again Catholics hovered around 12 percent. Since then, the rate has steadily increased, save for a small decline in 2014, with the number rising to 27 percent—slightly more than one quarter of American Catholics—identifying as born-again in 2018. Clearly, a substantial number of Catholics identify as born-again, yet scholars know very little about this subset of Catholics. So how do BACs differ politically from Catholics who do not identify as born-again?

²⁷ “Mostly Protestant Christian Coalition Gains Catholic Alliance”, *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 1995. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/10/us/mostly-protestant-christian-coalition-gains-catholic-alliance.html> (accessed June 19, 2023).

²⁸ William M. Shea, Biblical Christianity as a Category in Nineteenth-Century American Aologietics, *American Catholic Studies*, Vol. 115, No. 3, 2004, pp. 1-21.

²⁹ Geoffrey C. Layman, *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001.

³⁰ Michael R. Welch and David C. Leege. Dual Reference Groups and Political Orientations: An Examination of Evangelically Oriented Catholics. . .

³¹ The General Social Survey (GSS) was used to construct this figure.

Table 1 shows relevant demographic variables for Catholics who identify as born-again and those who do not. The data are derived from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES), given its large sample size of 65,000 respondents. In the CES study, Catholic respondents were asked: “Would you describe yourself as a “born-again” or evangelical Christian, or not?” Respondents who answered in the affirmative were coded as “born-again Catholics” and respondents who answer in the negative are “non-born-again Catholics.”

Table 1. Born-Again Catholics are more diverse, less affluent than Non-BACs³²

	Born-Again Catholics	Non-Born-Again Catholics
Race	63% White 21% Hispanic 10% Black	72% White 18% Hispanic 3% Black
Gender	55% female	57% female
Age (mean)	46 years old	52 years old
Income (median)	\$50,000 - \$59,999	\$70,000 - \$79,999
Education	21% Bachelor’s Degree	26% Bachelor’s Degree

Source: Cooperative Election Study

While there are no significant gender differences between the two groups of Catholics, born-again Catholics are more racially diverse than their non-born-again counterparts. For example, Blacks comprise more than three times the portion of born-again Catholics in comparison to those Catholics who do not so identify. There is also a larger portion of Hispanics among born-again Catholics, although the difference is negligible. Given that the growth in born-again identities is occurring primarily among non-whites, who as a group are just as orthodox as whites in theological matters (and on some moral issues), it is unsurprising that such a large portion of born-again Catholics identify as Hispanic.³³ Within American society, blacks are more likely than whites to claim a born-again experience, and since individuals tend to socialize more with those of their own race than across racial groups, it is hardly surprising that black Catholics are more likely to claim a born-again identity than white Catholics.

On income and education, non-born-again Catholics are also more affluent and better educated than those who identify as born-again. This substantiates the findings of Perry and Schleifer who argue that the role of education is critical in understanding Catholics who choose to identify as born-again.³⁴ It could also be that there is something political occurring here as well, given that the born-again identity has been so closely connected to the Republican Party and that higher levels of income and education are correlated with a Democratic Party identification.

³² I also analyzed the 2008 CES to see if the demographic composition has changed over time. I found little evidence that it has.

³³ Janelle S. Wong, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2018.

³⁴ Samuel L. Perry and Cyrus Schleifer, Understanding the Rise of Born-Again Catholics in the United States: The Role of Educational Attainment, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 60, 2018, pp. 555-574.

What then about politics? Do BACs differ politically from non-BACs? Here born-again Catholics are further divided by race in that scholars have long documented the profound role that race plays in shaping political behavior and the new focus on how important being white may be to a white person's identity.³⁵

Three political variables were selected to be examined: how a respondent voted in the 2020 Presidential Election, their partisan identification, and their self-identified ideology. The first of these variables is a "short-term" political measure as presidential vote choice is a snapshot of which party individuals prefer in the short-term. It should not be conflated with partisanship, which is a far more durable and stable identity.³⁶ The final measure, ideology, has been connected to a variety of political outcomes.³⁷

In addition, three issue attitudes were examined: the environment, immigration, and abortion. These issues selected because the Catholic Church has taken clear positions on these issues.³⁸ The Pope's second encyclical *Laudato si'* is dedicated to emphasizing the need for environmentalism, critiquing those who would not take care of "our common home." The Pope's third encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, while primarily addressing the COVID-19 Pandemic, speaks at length about immigrants, saying that, "The limits and borders of individual states cannot stand in the way [of the inherent dignity of immigrants]." Finally, the Church's teaching on abortion has been consistent and constant for decades, particularly given the emphasis that the United States Conferences of Catholic Bishops has placed on it. Consequently, one might expect Catholics not only to be aware of these issues, but to have clear views on them as well, given the Church's positions on them.

Finally, three religiosity variables found on the CES were examined: level of church attendance, the frequency with which one prays, and the importance of religion in one's daily life. Since claiming to be born-again may be associated with other religious variables, they are included in the analysis.

Table 2 examines the differences between Catholics on political matters. Politically speaking, white born-again Catholics were very support of Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election. They are also quite Republican, and a majority of them identify as conservative. Compared to Catholics who do not identify as born-again, they are significantly to the right. This is in line with our expectations in that a white identity is conservatizing, particularly so when paired with an evangelical identity.³⁹ Conversely, non-white BACs are to the left of their counterparts, show-

³⁵ Ashley E. Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2019; Efren Pérez, E. Enya Kuo, Joey Russel, William Scott-Curtis, Jennifer Muñoz, and Megan Tobias, *The Politics in White Identity: Testing a Racialized Partisan Hypothesis*, *Political Psychology*. Vol. 43, No. 4, 2022, pp. 693-714.

³⁶ Donald P. Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002.

³⁷ Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, *Ideology in America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012; Donald R. Kinder and Nathan P. Kalmoe, *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017.

³⁸ Laura S. Antkowiak, Levi G. Allen, and Geoffrey C. Layman. *Coping with Cross-Pressures: The Seamless Garment in Catholic Political Behavior*. . .

³⁹ Janelle S. Wong, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change*. . .; Levi G. Allen and Shayla F. Olson. *Racial Attitudes and Political Preferences among Black and White Evangelicals*. . .

ing paltry support for Trump and the Republican Party. However, non-born-again Catholics, who are predominately white, are more politically conservative than non-white born-again Catholics. The most politically liberal group are Catholics who do not identify as white nor born-again as less than one-third supported Trump, and small minorities identify as Republican and conservative.

Table 2. Non-white Born-Again Catholics more politically liberal, more Religious than other Catholics

	White Born-Again Catholics	Non-White Born-Again Catholics	White Non-Born-Again Catholics	Non-White Non-Born-Again Catholics
Political				
2020 Vote	69% Trump	35% Trump	49% Trump	30% Trump
Party ID	64% Republican	28% Republican	44% Republican	24% Republican
Ideology	52% Conservative	20% Conservative	37% Conservative	22% Conservative
Issue Position⁴⁰				
Immigration	64% pro-immigration	75% pro-immigration	64% pro-immigration	78% pro-immigration
Abortion	43% pro-choice	53% pro-choice	55% pro-choice	66% pro-choice
Environment	52% pro-climate	64% pro-climate	58% pro-climate	70% pro-climate
Religiosity				
Church Attendance	48% once a week	45% once a week	25% once a week	24% once a week
Prayer	67% once a week	61% once a week	42% once a week	44% once a week
Importance of Religion	66% very important	65% very important	34% very important	37% very important

Source: Cooperative Election Study

On the issues in which the Catholic Church has taken a clear position, there are also interesting differences. Regarding immigration, non-white born-again Catholics exhibit the strong pro-immigration attitudes, with three-quarters of them taking the pro-immigration policy stance, approximating the percentage exhibited by those non-white Catholics who do not claim to be born-again. Likewise, white Catholics, regardless of whether or not they claim to be born-again exhibit somewhat lower levels of pro-immigration support, but at rather similar levels regardless of whether or not they claim a born-again identity. Thus, on this issue, the effects of born-again identity has little impact beyond the differences seen related to racial differences among Catholics.

⁴⁰ All response options to the variables are binary, asking individuals whether they support or oppose a certain measure. The questions selected were the broadest within the battery and there was little variation between items within each issue domain. The specific question regarding immigration is: "Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least 3 years and have not been convicted of any felony crimes." The specific question regarding abortion is: "Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice." And finally, the specific question regarding the environment is: "Strengthen the Environmental Protection Agency enforcement of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act even if it costs U.S. jobs."

On abortion, the most pro-life group are white born-again Catholics (43% pro-choice), followed by born-again non-white Catholics (53% pro-choice), and then non-born-again white Catholics (55% pro-choice), with non-white Catholics who did not claim to be born-again exhibiting the lowest level of pro-life responses (66% pro-choice). In this sense, the born-again identity does appear to be linked with more conservative policy.

Finally, the environmental attitudes follow a somewhat different pattern. Here, both race and religious identity shape the responses provided, with white born-again Catholics exhibiting the lowest level of pro-climate responses (52%), followed by white Catholics who are not born-again (58%), then non-white born-again Catholics (64%), and with non-white Catholics who do not identify as born-again exhibiting the highest rate of pro-climate responses (70%). Again, Catholics who are not white and do not identify as born-again are markedly more liberal on issue positions than their counterparts, while white Catholics who do identify as born-again exhibit the most conservative position.

A very different story emerges when religiosity is considered. Catholics who identify as born-again display much higher levels of religiosity than non-born-again Catholics. They report attending church, praying, and conveying that religion is very important in their daily lives at much higher levels than non-born-again Catholics. This is not to say that non-born-again Catholics are necessarily less religious, but that they display lower levels of religious behavior than their born-again counterparts. And, on this, there is no significant racial division: practically speaking, just as many non-white born-again Catholics say they attend church once a week, pray daily, and that religion is very important to their daily lives as do white born-again Catholics. Regardless of race, a born-again identity is a religious identifier that Catholics use. Finally, despite their political liberalism, Catholics who do not identify as born-again and are not white do not show significant differences in religiosity when compared to white Catholics who do not identify as born-again. This reveals some preliminary evidence that the born-again identity is a religious identity for many Catholics.

How then do white born-again Catholics compare to white born-again Protestants? Are they relatively similar or are their important differences between them? This is examined in Table 3. As shown in the table, the two groups are very similar demographically, with the only difference between the two groups being that white born-again Protestants are slightly more likely to be female in gender composition than white born-again Catholics.

Although white born-again Catholics are more politically conservative than their Catholic counterparts, they are not as conservative as white-born again Protestants. White born-again Catholics lag behind white born-again Protestants in their support for Donald Trump, the likelihood of adopting a Republican partisan identification, and their willingness to classify themselves as conservatives. The story remains the same regarding the three issues examined: white born-again Catholics are more liberal in their policy positions than white born-again Protestants in that they adopt more pro-immigration stances, more highly favor a woman's right to

a legal abortion, and more likely to support policies designed to combat climate change.

Finally, white born-again Catholics display slightly less levels of religiosity than white evangelicals.⁴¹ In short, while they are distinctly more conservative and displays higher levels of religiosity than non-born-again Catholics, they do so at lower levels than white born-again Protestants. In so doing, they are rather distinctive in occupying a “middle-ground” as is made clear Table 3.

Table 3. White BACs are not as Conservative as White Evangelicals

	White Born-Again Catholics	White Born-Again Protestants
Political		
2020 Vote	69% Trump	79% Trump
Party ID	64% Republican	72% Republican
Ideology	52% Conservative	65% Conservative
Issue Positions		
Immigration	64% pro-immigration	52% pro-immigration
Abortion	43% pro-choice	22% pro-choice
Environment	52% pro-climate	36% pro-climate
Religiosity		
Church Attendance	48% once a week	54% once a week
Prayer	67% once a week	76% once a week
Importance of Religion	66% very important	78% very important

Source: Cooperative Election Study

Logistic Regression

In order to better understand what explains the choice to identify as born-again Catholics, a logistic regression was employed to model different existing explanations as to why Catholics may choose to identify as born-again. A logistic regression was utilized because the dependent variable, identifying as born-again, is binary. Three models were assessed. The first model contains only demographic variables that would be theoretically connected to the decision to identify as born-again. The second model adds political ideology to the mix, while the third model further adds partisan identification into the equation.

Gender is a binary variable with respondents who identified as male being coded as a “1” and those who do not as a “0.” The same is true for education, as a dummy variable was created that codes respondents who have achieved at least a Bachelor’s Degree as a “1” and those who have not as a “0.” Age is a continuous variable measured in years, while family income is a discrete variable that ranges across bins

⁴¹ While being “born-again” is associated with being an evangelical, the two are analytically distinct in that there are different ways to define who are evangelicals. Depending on one’s definition, there can be evangelicals who do not claim to be “born-again.” Hence, the words “evangelical” and “born-again” are used interchangeably here for stylistic purposes only.

of income, separated out by \$10,000 increments. Racial identity is also a dummy variable with those who identify as white being coded as a "1." Ideology and party identification are both discrete variables with higher values indicating conservative and Republican identifications, respectively.

In order to best ascertain the factors that motivate individuals to identify as born-again Catholics, a stepwise regression approach was employed. Model 1 uses just demographic independent variables to get a first glimpse at what determines the decision among Catholics to identify as born-again and the model yields two important takeaways. First, education is negatively correlated with identifying as a born-again Catholic. Respondents who report having a college degree are less likely than those who do not have a college degree to report having a born-again experience. This corroborates the findings of Perry and Schleifer who find that less educated Catholics are more divorced from "standard or mainstream Catholic experiences and self-identities."⁴² Second, identifying as white is also negatively correlated with identifying as born-again. This is perhaps unsurprising given that non-white Protestants are more likely than white Protestants to identify as born-again, and so it would stand to reason that non-white Catholics would also be more inclined to identify as born-again than would white Catholics.

The second model adds in a variable measuring ideology, which ranges from 5 (strong conservative) to 1 (strong liberal). The coefficient for ideology is statistically significant and in a positive direction, meaning those who identify as conservative are more likely to identify as born-again than those who identify as liberal. This is also in line with our expectations given that those who identify as born-again are more conservative than their non-born-again counterparts.

The third model adds a variable measuring party identification, which ranges from 7 (Strong Republican) to 1 (Strong Democrat). This variable is also positive, with a coefficient that is larger than ideology, meaning that Catholics who identify as Republican are more likely than those who are not-Republicans to identify as born-again.

These results are presented in Table 4. The findings evident in the table yield three important results. First, there is further corroboration of Perry and Schleifer that higher levels of education – operationalized in this case as attaining a Bachelor's Degree – is negatively associated with identifying as a born-again Catholic.⁴³ While education may also be a proxy for Democratic Party identification, scholars have posited other explanations for the link between the born-again experience, or lack thereof, and education.⁴⁴ Second, being white is negatively associated with identifying as born-again, a result that corroborates recent literature which has focused on the growth in the evangelical church among immigrants and those who do not

⁴² Samuel L. Perry and Cyrus Schleifer, Understanding the Rise of Born-Again Catholics in the United States: The Role of Educational Attainment, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 60, 2018, p. 557.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 2011, pp. 91-111.

identify as white.⁴⁵ Finally, the two political variables in the study – identifying as a conservative and as a Republican – are strongly correlated with identifying as born-again. This is in line with my expectations as the born-again has become correlated with a conservative outlook on politics.

**Table 4. Non-White Catholics, along with Republicans,
More Likely to Identify as Republicans⁴⁶**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Demographics	Demographics + Ideology	Demographics + Ideology + PID	Demographics + Ideology + PID + Religiosity
Male	0.171***	0.164***	0.113**	0.283***
	(0.0541)	(0.0543)	(0.0545)	(0.056)
Bachelor's Degree	-0.293***	-0.204***	-0.187***	-0.312***
	(0.0607)	(0.0619)	(0.0614)	(0.062)
Age	-0.00404***	-0.00466***	-0.00657***	-0.0139***
	(0.00154)	(0.00155)	(0.00156)	(0.002)
Income	0.0141*	0.0221***	0.0139*	0.0153**
	(0.00744)	(0.00749)	(0.00751)	(0.00776)
White	-0.439***	-0.450***	-0.609***	-0.331***
	(0.0563)	(0.0565)	(0.0584)	(0.0617)
Conservative		0.179***	0.0922***	-0.025
		(0.0187)	(0.0216)	(0.024)
Republican			0.145***	0.073***
			(0.0135)	(0.014)
Religiosity				2.925***
				(0.11)
Constant	-3.278***	-3.916***	-3.918***	-4.915***
	(0.0858)	(0.112)	(0.110)	(0.13)
Observations	60.981	60.941	60.941	58.310

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

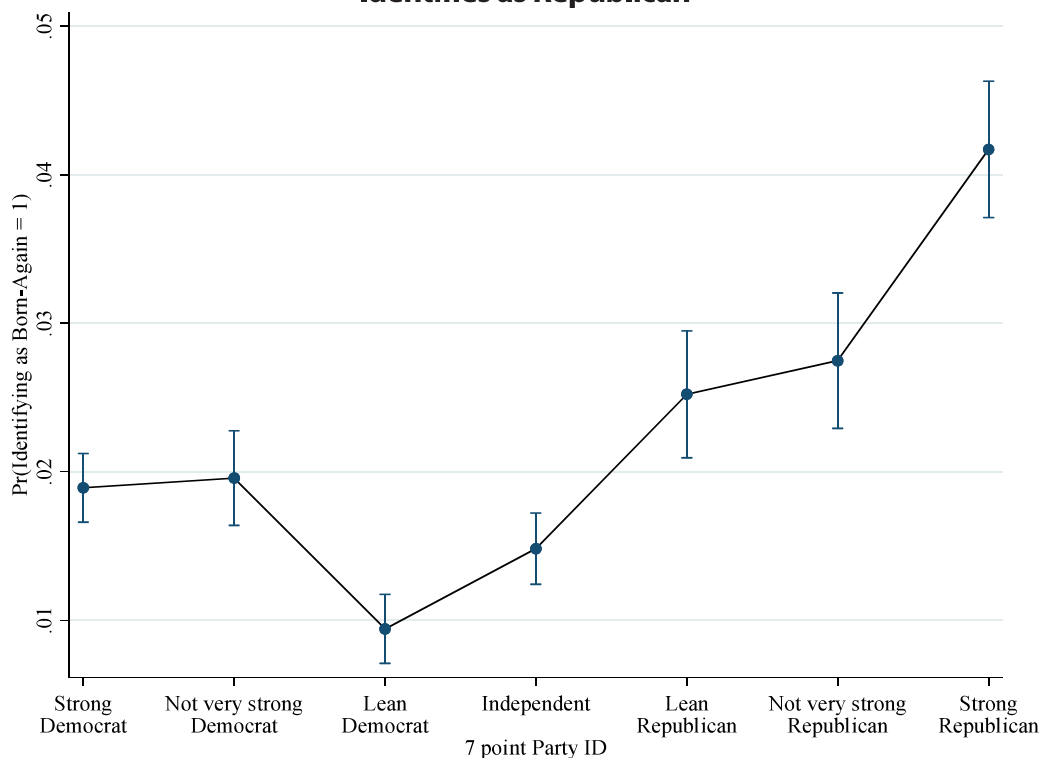
⁴⁵ Janelle S. Wong, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change*. . .

⁴⁶ Source: Cooperative Election Study.

Predicted Probabilities

Given the difficulties of interpreting the substantive effects of logistic regression coefficients, the analysis concludes by executing two predicted probabilities that examine how the likelihood of identifying as a born-again Catholic change based upon one's partisan identification and how often one attends mass, with all other variables in the logistic regression models kept at their means. Figure 3 displays the likelihood that a respondent would identify as born-again when accounting for their partisan identification. A clear pattern emerges. Respondents who identify as Democrats or Independent have a very low probability of identifying as born-again. However, among Republicans, the probability increases, more than doubling when comparing Strong Democrats (1.9% probability of identifying as born-again) compared to Strong Republicans (4.2% probability).⁴⁷

Figure 3. Born-Again Identification among Catholics Rises as a Respondent Identifies as Republican

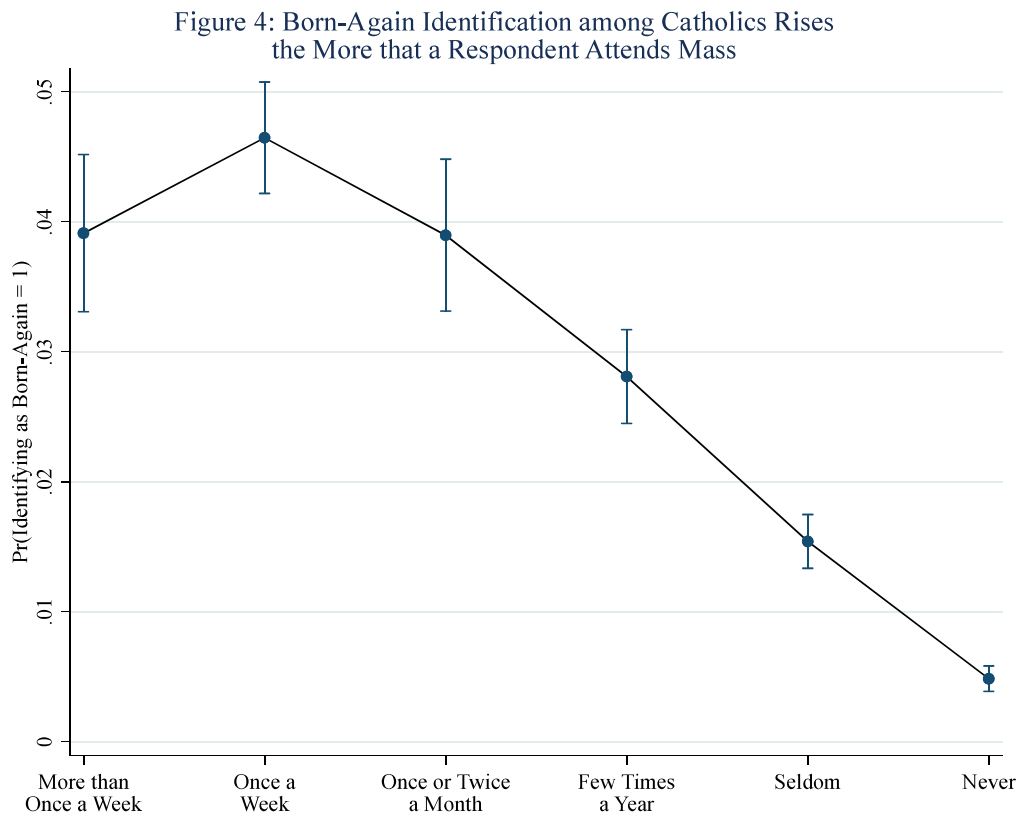


Source: Cooperative Election Study

Figure 4 depicts the probability that one would identify as a born-again Catholic based upon how often one attends church. Among those who attend church once a week, the probability of identifying as born-again is 4.6%. As church attendance declines, the likelihood of identifying as born-again plummets among Catholics. If they report never going to church, the likelihood is well under 1%; among those who say they seldom do, it is 1.5%.

⁴⁷ While the actual probabilities are quite small, an artifact of the Cooperative Election Study having such a large sample size, the predicted probabilities aid in the visualization of the relationship between these salient variables and identifying as born-again.

Figure 4. Born-Again Identification among Catholics Rises the More that a Respondent Attends Mass



Source: Cooperative Election Study

While the highest level of religiosity receives a slightly larger bump than identifying as Republican does (4.6% vs. 4.2% respectively), it is difficult to ascertain, given the data and without the ability to leverage experimentation, which factor is “more” influential in determining identification as a born-again Catholic. However, the story that has emerged is clear: both high levels of religiosity, and identifying as a Republican, are positively correlated with identifying as a born-again Catholic.

Discussion

American Catholicism is characterized not by its unity, but by its fractures, as debates rage over what it means to be a “true” Catholic. This article has examined one of these burgeoning segments of Catholics—namely, born-again Catholics. This group of Catholics is characterized by their racial diversity, religious devoutness, and political conservatism, the latter of which is an effect that holds for only those who are white.

Beyond better understanding American Catholics, these findings also have implications for the conceptualization and measurement of American religion. Theoretically, it reveals that there is at least some fluidity in religious identities and

that one can ostensibly borrow parts of other religious customs and practices when choosing to identify oneself religiously. One does not have to be a member of, or reside in, a religious tradition or denomination that is “evangelical” in order to consider themselves to be born-again. Welch and Leege termed Catholics who shared similarities with evangelicals as having “dual-reference groups” was an apropos description.⁴⁸

This also has repercussions for how we measure American religion. Coding schemes such as RELTRAD depend upon a system of categorization based upon denomination affiliation that might be failing to capture the heterogeneity found within religious traditions. If the researcher only had RELTRAD to rely upon, a paper on born-again Catholics would be impossible to write as RELTRAD has no mechanism by which how parishioners conceptualize their identity may be measured. As the evidence here shows, born-again Catholics display higher levels of religiosity, are more conservative, and display higher levels of support for Donald Trump when compared to other Catholics who do not identify as born-again. Nonetheless, these levels do not reach the levels of evangelicals, showing that perhaps these Catholics are residing in a space between Evangelicalism and Catholicism, using the label to convey a sort of religious adherence alongside political conservatism.

Future research should continue to unpack what Catholics mean when they relay that they identify as born-again. The preliminary evidence provided here suggests that, at least among white Catholics, they may be relaying a kinship with evangelicals on political grounds, given their high levels of Republicanism. But for both white and non-white born-again Catholics, the identity does seem to have significant religious and political implications, with such born-again Catholics having higher levels of religiosity as well as, politically, being more conservative.

⁴⁸ Michael R. Welch and David C. Leege, Dual Reference Groups and Political Orientations: An Examination of Evangelically Oriented Catholics. . .

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Леви Ален

НАСТАЊИВАЊЕ СРЕДЊЕ ЗЕМЉЕ: СЛУЧАЈ ПОНОВО-РОЂЕНИХ КАТОЛИКА

Сажетак

Некада жестоки противници, амерички католици и евангелисти, постали су политички ближи током последњих декада налазећи заједничке теме као што су абортус и истополни бракови. Ове везе су постале толико јаке да се битан део католика данас идентификује као „поново рођени“, иако њихова традиција не захтева од својих чланова да имају искуство поновног рођења. Овај чланак истражује колико ови католици преовађују у електорату и како се разликују политички и верски о поново-рођених протестаната али и католика који се тако не идентификују. Користећи се подацима из Cooperative Election Study (CES), налазим да поново-рођени католици показују већи степен религиозности и конзервативности и да су више наклоњени републиканцима од католика који се не идентификују као поново-рођени. Међутим, као група, они нису толико конзервативни, нити показују толико високе степене религиозности, као бели евангелисти. Укратко, поново-рођени католици изгледа настањују „средњу земљу“, односно како то кажу Welch and Legee (1988) имају „дуалну референтну групу“, и као такви они обухватају поделу између католицизма и евангелизма. Ови католици такође могу бити и мост који је одговоран за изградњу политичких веза између ове две верске традиције.

Кључне речи: поново-рођени католици, идентитет, религиозност, унакрсни расцепи