
A WORD FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

Catholics and Contemporary American Politics

This volume focuses on Catholics and contemporary American politics, both at the institutional and the individual level of analysis. There are various analytical reasons as to why Catholics merit the attention of scholars within the context of American politics. First, as a religious group, Catholics comprise a large component of the American electorate. Though estimates may vary somewhat depending on the survey and the year at which it was done – Catholics comprise somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of the American electorate. And, as such, they constitute a relatively large segment of American voters, thereby enhancing their electoral importance.

Second, the geographical location of Catholics contributes to their political importance. Although Catholics can be found throughout the country, substantial numbers of Catholics are to be found within many of the “battleground states” currently present within American presidential politics. For example, in 2020, Catholics made up a substantial percentage of voters in the battleground states of Pennsylvania (28 percent), Arizona (27 percent), Wisconsin (25 percent), Florida (22 percent), and Michigan (21 percent).¹

Third, Catholics may well constitute an important “swing vote” in American politics today,² as the Catholic vote in recent presidential elections has typically aligned with the national popular vote.³ For example, a majority of Catholics backed Trump in 2016, Obama in 2012 and 2008, and Bush in 2004.⁴ Thus, although Catholics may no longer constitute a distinctive voting bloc, they may still serve as an important “swing vote” within American electoral politics in that any aggregate shift in support for the presidential nominees of the two major parties may well contribute to securing electoral victory for that candidate who obtains a majority of Catholic votes in the general election campaign.⁵

Fourth, Catholics are a diverse group racially and ethnically. Most Catholics in America are whites, many of whose ancestors were immigrants drawn from various European countries (e.g., Italy, Ireland, Poland) during the latter part of the 19th

¹ See: Niraj Chokshi, “The Religious States in America, in 22 Maps,” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2015. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2015/02/26/the-religious-states-of-america-in-22-maps> (accessed May 2, 2023).

² *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Elections, Understanding the “Swing Vote”*, Marie Gayte, Blandine Chelini-Pont, and Mark J. Rozell (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2018.

³ However, Streb and Frederick have argued that Catholics are not an important “swing vote” in that: “Catholics vote quite similarly to non-Catholics, and their partisan affiliations and views toward the two major parties are basically the same.” See: Matthew J. Streb and Brian Frederick, “The Myth of a Distinct Catholic Vote,” in: *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension between Faith & Power*, Kristin E. Heyer and Mark J. Rozell (eds.), Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 2008, p. 109.

⁴ Thomas Reese, “In 2020, ‘Nonexistent’ Catholic Vote Will Be Crucial-Again,” *Religion News Service*, October 29, 2020. Available at: <https://religionnews.com/downloads/media-assets-for-the-2020-nonexistent-catholic-vote-will-be-crucial-again/> (accessed May 2, 2023). It is somewhat unclear whether Catholics continued this pattern in 2020, as exit poll data suggested that Catholics backed Biden while the CES survey data suggested that Catholics marginally supported Trump. See: Corwin E. Smidt, Catholics and the 2020 Presidential Election, *Politics and Religion Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, Table 8.

⁵ Mark J. Rozell, “Introduction: The ‘Catholic Vote’ in the USA,” in: *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Elections: Understanding the “Swing Vote”*, Marie Gayte, Blandine Chelini-Pont, and Mark J. Rozell (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2018, pp. 1-19.

century. But nearly one-third of Catholics in the United States are now Hispanics, and significant numbers of Catholics are also drawn from various Asian countries (e.g., the Philippines, Vietnam) along with a substantial number of blacks, both African-Americans and those more recent immigrants drawn from various African countries. Consequently, this racial and ethnic diversity within their ranks of Catholics provides a means by which to assess how race and ethnicity serves to shape the voting patterns of those sharing the same religious faith within the American context.

Finally, many Catholics, particularly those for whom their religion is highly salient, may be politically cross-pressured voters. Although members of other religious groups may also experience being cross-pressured in making their political decisions, Catholics may be somewhat unique in that the teachings of the Church tend to move Catholics in divergent political directions. The social teachings of the Catholic Church emphasize the life and dignity of the human person as well as the requirement that the needs of the poor and vulnerable be addressed. Both the Democratic and Republican parties advance certain policies that embody different facets of these teachings of the Catholic Church, with the Republican Party platform typically advancing opposition to abortion and the Democratic Party platform typically promoting social and economic justice issues (e.g., healthcare reform, immigrant rights). As a result, devout Catholics who seek to follow the teachings of the Church may experience cross-pressures politically as to which teachings of their Church should be given predominant emphasis in their political decision-making and, thereby, which political party they should support in elections.

Given these various reasons for focusing on Catholics and American politics, the authors of the articles in this volume analyze a number of distinct topics related to Catholics and American politics. Yet, despite the variety of topics analyzed, a number of different themes or issues related to Catholics and American politics are inherent across the articles in this volume. One issue that underlies many of the articles in this volume relates to the extent to which American Catholics are unified or divided religiously and whether possible religious differences among Catholics may contribute to political differences within their ranks. Though the dependent variables may vary, several authors examine the extent to which political differences may be evident within the ranks of Catholics between those who are highly, and those who are less, committed religiously, while another author examines the extent to which Catholics who claim to be "born-again" are politically similar to, or different from, other Catholics who did not make such a claim.

A second issue underlying some of the articles relates to what serve as the bases for political differences among Catholics. Some authors, as just noted, focus more on various religious differences among Catholics as possible factors contributing to political differences among Catholics, without necessarily ignoring other social factors that might shape such political differences. Other authors, however, focus more attention on likely social factors (e.g., race and ethnicity, generational differences,

regional location; social class and education), without ignoring religion in shaping political differences among Catholics. In the end, both religious and social factors are found by the various authors as shaping political differences among American Catholics today.⁶

A third issue that directly or indirectly undergirds several articles is the manner and extent to which Catholic parishioners choose to follow the political teachings of the Church. The first article of the volume examines *Faithful Citizenship*, a document written by the U.S. Catholic Bishops that provides voting guidelines for Catholics in relationship to being faithful to church teachings. That document states that Catholics bear the responsibility to “hear, receive, and act upon the Church’s teaching...,”⁷ and so the question arises as to whether Catholics actually do so. For example, the Catholic Church has a long history in terms of teaching on immigration, and one article examines the extent to which Catholic laity exhibit political attitudes reflective of Church teaching on the issue. Moreover, given that each of the two major parties tends to emphasize one facet of Church teaching (either “respect for life” or “social justice”) while downplaying the other facet, another article examines whether Catholics, in having to choose between the Church’s teaching on “respect for life” and “social justice” in making their electoral decisions, are uniquely “cross-pressured” in terms of their voting behavior. Finally, given that the party platforms of both major parties diverge from Catholic social teaching, another article examines whether a newly formed political party, the American Solidarity Party that was founded on the principles of Catholic social teaching, might be an attractive alternative to the two major parties for those Catholics seeking to be faithful to Church teachings.

Separately, however, each article addresses a particular topic. The first paper focuses on one institutional component of the Catholic Church in the American context—the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the voting guidelines published by the USCCB in their document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility* from the Catholic Bishops of the United States. This article, written by Thomas Drury, examines the document in terms of its content, its implicit assumptions, and its implications. While Drury outlines how the document draws on Catholic social teaching and serves as a useful resource for Catholic political engagement, he argues that the document suffers from certain areas of conceptual underdevelopment. In particular, Drury seeks to reveal how the underlying contentions of the document could be honed and clarified, particularly in relationship to a deeper conceptual understanding of constitutional democracy.

In the second article, Lyman Kellstedt and Brian Newman first examine the policy perspectives of leaders of the Catholic Church in the United States on the issue of immigration. They contend that the leadership has consistently adopted “inclusive or permissive positions” on immigration and have rejected “restrictionist”

⁶ However, as Feingold and Guth reveal in their article in this volume, the extent to which these two different factors are found to do so may well be dependent on the number and variety of religious questions asked in the survey employed.

⁷ “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship”, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, p. 12. Available at: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/upload/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2023).

policies. They then examine whether Catholic laity adhere to such positions, using data from the 2020 Congressional Election Study with its large sample size of over 60,000 respondents. They find that white Catholics tend to hold more conservative views on immigration than their church leaders and differ widely in their views from those expressed by Latino, Asian, and African-American Catholics. In the end, they conclude that political forces (such as partisanship, ideology, attitudes toward Donald Trump, and viewing Fox News) serve as the strongest predictors of Catholics' immigration attitudes.

The third article, "Polarization? Identifying What Divides and Unites American Catholics," written by Maureen Day, examines the extent to which American Catholics are politically and religiously united. Her analysis is based on data drawn from a national survey of 1507 Catholics conducted in 2017, with the survey itself being part of a larger project that has, since the late 1980s, conducted surveys of American Catholics every six years. In the first part of her article, Day examines the extent to which race, gender, generation, commitment to Catholicism may shape political polarization among Catholics, while the second part of her article examines whether, and to what extent, partisan affiliations may serve to shape their religious beliefs and practices of Catholics. Her analysis reveals that political polarization does exist among Catholics, with the strongest political divisions falling along racial and ethnic lines. However, despite this polarization, she finds that those Catholics who are the most religiously committed are more likely than those less committed to defect from their party's position when that party position conflicts with the teaching of the Church. Moreover, despite the political polarization that is evident within the ranks of Catholics, a level of theological unity remains across party lines among American Catholics. Not only do Catholic Democrats and Catholic Republicans hold relatively similar expectations related to the religious beliefs and practices that are "essential" for what it means to be a Catholic, but they hold relatively similar beliefs as to what one may believe or do and still be a "good Catholic."

In the next article, "Inhabiting the Middle Ground: The Case of Born-Again Catholics," Levi Allen also assesses religious differences among Catholics, but he does so in terms of differences that may be evident between those Catholics who claim to be "born-again" and those who do not. Allen observes that a notable portion of Catholics within the American context now identify as being "born-again," even though historically Catholicism has not advanced the expectation that its members have a born-again experience. Drawing on data from the General Social Surveys, Allen initially examines how American Catholics have increasingly adopted the label, and then uses data from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study to examine whether born-again Catholics differ religiously and politically both from born-again Protestants and from those Catholics who do not so identify. Allen finds that born-again Catholics exhibit higher levels of religiosity and are more likely to label themselves as political conservatives and identify as Republicans than those Catholics who do not claim to be born-again. On the other hand, white born-again Catholics exhibit

lower levels of religiosity and are less likely to classify themselves as political conservatives or identify as Republicans as do white born-again Protestants. As a result, Allen concludes that “born-again” Catholics inhabit a “middle ground” between other Catholics and “born-again” Protestants.

In the fifth article, Laura S. Antkowiak first examines whether those Catholic voters who share the Church’s core policy positions are necessarily more likely than non-Catholic voters who hold identical policy positions to exhibit political behaviors that are typically associated with cross-pressured voting (e.g., either choosing not to cast a ballot or not voting for the candidate of the party with which one identifies). Using data from the 2016-2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies, she finds little evidence to suggest that Catholics are either uniquely or strongly cross-pressured when compared to other cross-pressured voters. She then expands her analysis to focus on those respondents from various religious traditions, including Catholics, who experience cross-pressures emanating from a conflict of cues between the partisan identification one holds and the issue stand typically associated with members of one’s religious faith tradition (e.g., among Catholics, being a pro-life Democrat or a pro-welfare Republican or, among white evangelicals, being a pro-immigration Republican or a pro-life Democrat). Once again, she finds that the results fail to reveal that the political behavior of cross-pressured Catholics is necessarily distinctive, and, thereby, that their cross-pressures are uniquely strong. Rather, if anything, she finds cross-pressured (and other) Catholics are more likely than comparable non-Catholics to embrace partisan politics, using one particular facet of the Church’s teaching to legitimate their own partisan preference.

In “Catholic Partisanship in the 2020 Presidential Election,” Thomas Feingold and James Guth examine four distinct perspectives concerning the possible demographic underpinnings of Catholic partisanship—including socio-economic differences, race and ethnic differences, domestic role differences, and religious differences. Using data from the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES) and the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES), they too find that ethnic differences contribute substantially to partisan differences among Catholics today. On the other hand, the two authors find that, while socioeconomic factors have diminished considerably in contributing to differences in Catholic partisanship (though less so for Latino Catholics), religious factors matter more for white Catholics in shaping partisan preferences. However, the authors also issue a cautionary note about the conclusions one draws related to the role of religion in shaping the partisanship of Catholics. Given that divergent findings emerge between the 2020 ANES and 2020 CES studies related to the relative importance of religion, a result that derived from a more extensive battery of religious questions found in the ANES survey, they note that conclusions related to importance attributed to different factors shaping the partisanship of Catholics can vary by the particular survey one employs and, more specifically, by the particular religious measures that are (or are not) included within that survey.

Finally, given Catholic social teaching and the fact that both the Democratic and Republican Party platforms deviate from such teaching, Sean Thomas examines in his chapter whether Catholics might find a political home in the American Solidarity Party (ASP), a party founded in 2011 on the principles of Catholic social teaching. As such, the party offers Catholic voters in the U.S. an alternative that would enable them to vote in conformity with Catholic social teaching, though without any immediate electoral success. Thomas conducted lengthy interviews with supporters of the party to ascertain: (a) why they decided to support the party, (b) how they perceived the party's internal dynamics, and (c) what they hoped the party can achieve politically. Not all members of the party are Catholics, given that those outside the Catholic faith might also find such a party appealing. Thomas' in-depth interviews with more than 70 party members provides some preliminary understanding as to the reasons why party members generally, and Catholics more specifically, support the ASP, their assessments of intra-party dynamics and their concerns related to party dynamics, and their short-term and long-term goals for the party. Thomas finds that "Catholics who have joined ASP to this point are committed to personal consistency and "deeply desire to act fully in accord with their Catholic faith" in political matters. Although Thomas believes that ASP has the potential to grow considerably, he also notes some of the existing constraints that operate within a two-party electoral system that are likely to shape the future of the party.

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