News



Worshipers attend a candlelight vigil July 20 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in El Paso, Texas, following an immigration march and rally. (CNS/Jorge Salgado)



by Maria Benevento

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The church's job is to form people according to the Gospel, El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz told NCR, but he worries that in the political realm, it often falls short.

"It concerns me a lot when people seem to be more aligned with their [political] party's platform than with the Gospel, and we see that on so many issues," said Seitz, whose heavily Latino West Texas diocese borders Mexico.

He isn't imagining things.

With a few exceptions, polling shows that partisanship explains people's positions on political issues much more than faith, according to Rob Griffin, associate director of research at the Public Religion Research Institute. On immigration, for example, partisanship and "racial issues," including people's own ethnicity and their racial attitudes, seem to be the "root causes" of opinions about immigrants.

In a nation where the two major political parties seem to have divvied up the Catholic view of a consistent ethic of life, it's problematic to prioritize partisan politics over faith, Seitz said, especially because doing so doesn't encourage the development of candidates or even parties who do respect the comprehensive Catholic worldview.

"Neither major political party aligns itself well with issues that are of tremendous importance to the church, so it puts us in a bit of a moral dilemma as we make these judgments about the candidate we should vote for," he said. "I'd like to start seeing there be enough of a call for a candidate that respects the basic Gospel teachings that we actually have candidates and perhaps parties that reflect those values."

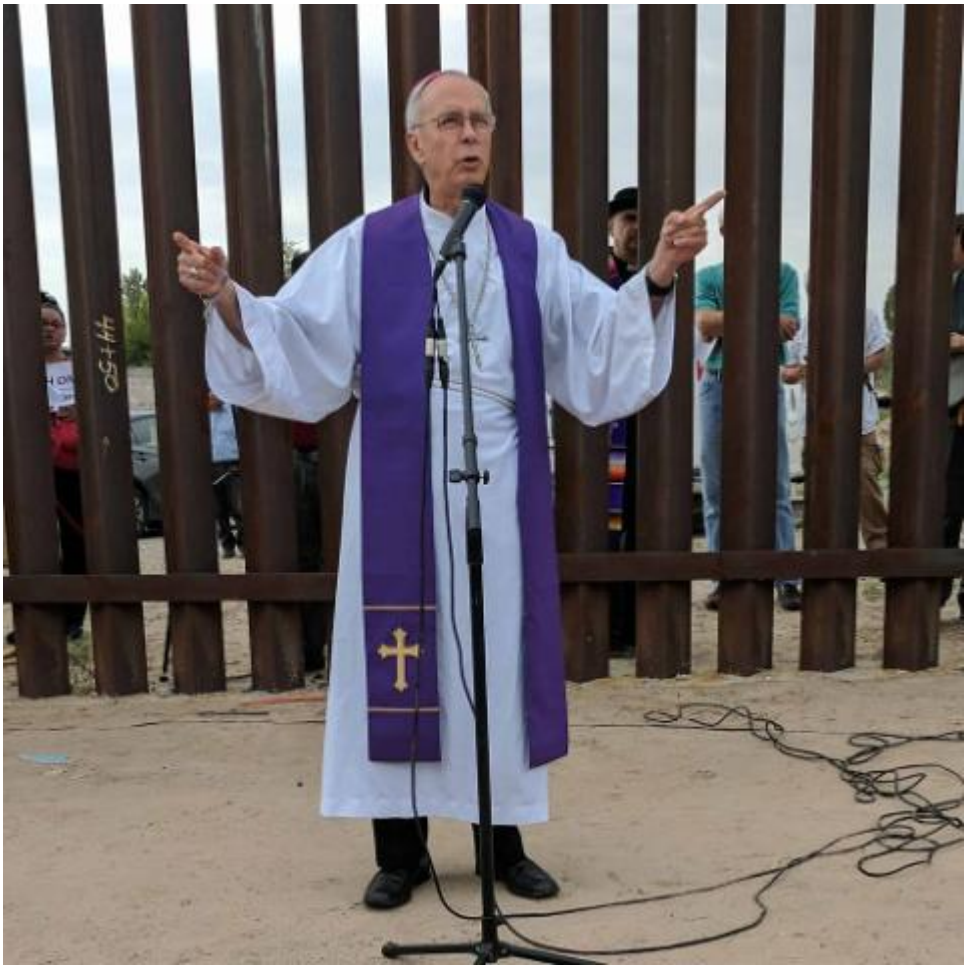
Latinos, who make up the majority of Catholics under 18 and are likely the future majority of the church, might be the answer sought by Seitz and others concerned with representing the totality of Catholic teaching in politics, says theologian Maureen Day.

According to Day, a professor of religion and society at the Franciscan School of Theology in San Diego, when Latinos are surveyed about their values, they tend to take "conservative" Catholic positions, such as opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, while also supporting more "progressive" positions in line with church teaching on immigration, the death penalty and taxation.

White Catholics, meanwhile, tend to line up with either the Republican or Democratic Party.

"It's almost like white Catholics are not trying to do the nitty-gritty work of 'How does my faith impact my vote?' so much as they're already coming to their faith through a Democratic lens or a Republican lens," Day said.

Latinos, on the other hand, are "doing that difficult work of coming to this as a Catholic and then saying, 'Which of these candidates is most in line with my Catholic position?' "



El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz offers a "blessing of this sacred land and these people" during an interfaith service Sept. 7 at the border fence between Anapra, Mexico, and Sunland Park, New Mexico. (Courtesy of Auburn Seminary)

In the Texas Senate election this November, voters face a choice between Democrat Beto O'Rourke, a vocal opponent of the administration's anti-immigrant policies who

wants to ensure access to abortion, and Republican Ted Cruz, a pro-life candidate who has opposed even bipartisan efforts to make life easier for undocumented immigrants.

O'Rourke, 46, is Catholic, an El Paso native and U.S. representative for Texas's 16th Congressional District. He has gained national attention as he challenges Cruz, 47, a one-term incumbent who ran for president in 2016.

In a state where Republicans have won all statewide offices for the past 20 years, even a single-digit loss could be a sort of victory for Democrats, or at least a foundation for hope. A CNN poll released Oct. 16 showed Cruz leading by 7 points, while an Ipsos online poll released Oct. 23 showed a 5-point lead for Cruz.

Texas' voting turnout is typically low, and the Senate election could hinge on whether candidates manage to draw out those who don't usually vote, like many Latinos, and which way they would lean.

'Pro-whole-life'

Currently, Latinos have one of the lowest voting rates of any ethnic group in the U.S.

Many factors could contribute to this, including poor voter education, a disconnect with political culture, the perceived or genuine irrelevance of issues politicians emphasize, or experience with corrupt elections or politicians in Latin America or the U.S.

Catholic groups, including the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, are among those working to overcome these issues.

But ambivalence about political parties and candidates could also be a factor, making Latinos less motivated to vote since they're not enthused about any choice, said Day.

"Among voters who have this strong pull like 'I really feel like the Democratic or the Republican Party actualizes my ideals,' you're going to have more people turning out for elections, whereas if you have people who are ambivalent about it, they're going to be less likely to show up. ... There's less of a certainty among Latino voters when they come to their final choice in political candidates."

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Nationally, Catholic Latino voters tend to swing Democrat, with 67 percent voting for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and only 26 percent for Donald Trump. But O'Rourke isn't a clear choice for all, even in his home city, a West Texas border town with a highly Catholic, Latino and Democratic population — but typically very low voting rates — where many people still have connections to family in neighboring Ciudad Juárez or other parts of Mexico.

During a Sept. 19 meeting to plan voter registration drives at St. Luke Catholic Church in El Paso, a woman mentioned she'd recruited help collecting voting pledges at a meeting of O'Rourke supporters. She sat next to a woman who was confident members of her pro-life group would be eager to promote voting in order to continue recent growth they'd seen in the realms of pro-life causes and religious freedom.

The second woman, Ana Collins, told NCR after the meeting that she believed Catholic voters had swayed the last presidential election in Trump's favor. Catholics have a "moral obligation" to vote for the person that "better adheres" to Catholic teaching, she said, adding that she supports allowing priests and pastors to be more outspoken on candidates to fulfill their responsibility to "direct their flock to what will stand judgment."

Referring to an argument she'd had with an O'Rourke supporter who said the pro-choice congressman would protect migrants, Collins, herself an immigrant from Panama, seemed confident that if given the freedom to do so, pastors would advise their flocks to prioritize abortion issues over concern for immigrants.

But some pastors said the choice isn't so clear-cut and the church shouldn't support particular candidates.

"It's not really the church's role to tell people who to vote for," said Seitz. "Our job is to help form people's consciences and to let them know some of the basic principles that they should be using to make a judgment about the best candidate. We couldn't even claim as a leader in the church, on behalf of the church, to know who the best candidate is. That's a lay citizen's responsibility and it's mine as a citizen as well."

St. Luke's pastor, Fr. Marcus McFadin, told NCR, "If you get up there like some of these [priests] have done and go after a candidate, it really turns people off. They're just going to tune you out."

Instead, he asks his parishioners to think about how church teaching relates to issues they consider important.

For other local Latino Catholics, the perception that those in power ignore issues important to their area led them to make the opposite judgment to Collins', even while some expressed qualms about supporting a pro-choice candidate.

> "It's not really the church's role to tell people who to vote for."
>
> **— Bishop Mark Seitz**
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At a young adult group meeting at St. Mark Catholic Church, members of the entirely Latino group, who identified themselves only by their first names, spoke passionately about how their faith and the reality in their border community motivate them to have a voice in politics.

Luis said he started voting regularly two years ago because he didn't like the way "lower-class" people were being treated by those in power, particularly Republicans. "Everything they stand for is pretty much against what I believe and what the Catholic Church has taught me about how to treat people and how us as a society should function."

Two young women shared that they had voted Democrat despite lingering doubts; people they respected had encouraged them to vote Republican because of pro-life issues.

Some group members tried to dispel their doubts by casting aspersions on Trump's pro-life credentials. "Trump's not pro-life, he's just anti-abortion," Luis said.

Even the church's pastor, Msgr. Arturo Bañuelas, noted that Trump's positions on immigration, taxes and health care meant he wasn't "pro-whole-life."

Immigration issues loomed large in the group's concerns. Many had direct experience with the effects of immigration policies on their community, including working with unaccompanied children.

"Now more than ever, I will vote for my beliefs," said Aurora, whose close friend was recently deported.

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Immigration issues

El Paso's location on the border makes immigration issues hard to ignore, especially for Catholics, said Richard Pineda, a professor of communication for the University of Texas at El Paso.

The Trump administration's family separation policy was tested in El Paso before being formalized, and after it ended, hundreds of families were reunited in local shelters. A growing tent city that was developed to house increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors is also located just 35 miles outside El Paso.

These immigration policies, which seem to challenge the Catholic value of mercy, aren't coming from local authorities, said Pineda. He described El Paso as a heavily Catholic community that "wants very desperately to try to help the immigrants. That's partly driven by the sense of Catholic obligation in the community but I just think it's driven by a sense of humanity."

Although Pineda, like Griffin, mentioned religion's waning influence, he also recognized that local Catholics have been extremely visible in pro-immigrant causes. "It's unavoidable to have those conversations and it's unavoidable to separate out your values from what you're seeing happening."

This seems to be the case for Ruben Garcia, director and founder of Annunciation House, a shelter for migrants in El Paso. He met with NCR immediately after welcoming a group of 45 parents and children who had just been released from immigration detention to one of Annunciation's overflow shelters in an unused nursing home.

Annunciation House recently took in hundreds of reuniting families, some of whom shared with Garcia their stories of separation. Garcia noted that O'Rourke has opposed separating or detaining families. "If the day arrives when the Hispanic population becomes a real voting machine, that's going to be the awakening of the giant because there's so many Hispanic voters," said Garcia, an El Paso native who grew up with family in Mexico.



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, embraces a woman during a march for immigration rights July 20 in El Paso. (CNS/Jorge Salgado)

Many Hispanics may actually be "more in tune with the Republican Party" in many ways but are currently alienated by harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric, he added. "If the Republican Party were to ever develop a strong immigration position I think the Democrats would find themselves incredibly threatened trying to keep the Hispanic vote."

Increased Latino involvement in politics could actually encourage both parties to consider their perspectives and field candidates Latinos could more wholeheartedly support, Day said. "With having a greater sense of the Latino ideology, which is a better representation of the Catholic ideology when it comes to choosing candidates, then I think that you would then see political candidates having to be more nuanced and kind of embrace this consistent ethic of life."

"Even if at the end of the day [politicians] do come to different positions" on the death penalty, abortion, immigration or government assistance to the poor, "they

would still need to engage those ideas, whereas right now they don't engage the ideas, they kind of just fall back on the party rhetoric."

Latinos will become engaged and take leadership when they feel like full members of the political system, Day said.

Some of the young adults at St. Mark are already becoming aware of the changes that might occur if they and other Catholic Latinos add their voices to the political arena.

"There's a reason why we vote," said Joash. "People are not voiceless; they're just not being heard."

"Minorities don't think they're going to actually make a difference when the minorities are the majority," said Jessica. "If the minorities voted we wouldn't be where we are now."

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This story appears in the **2018 Midterm Elections** feature series. View the full series.
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