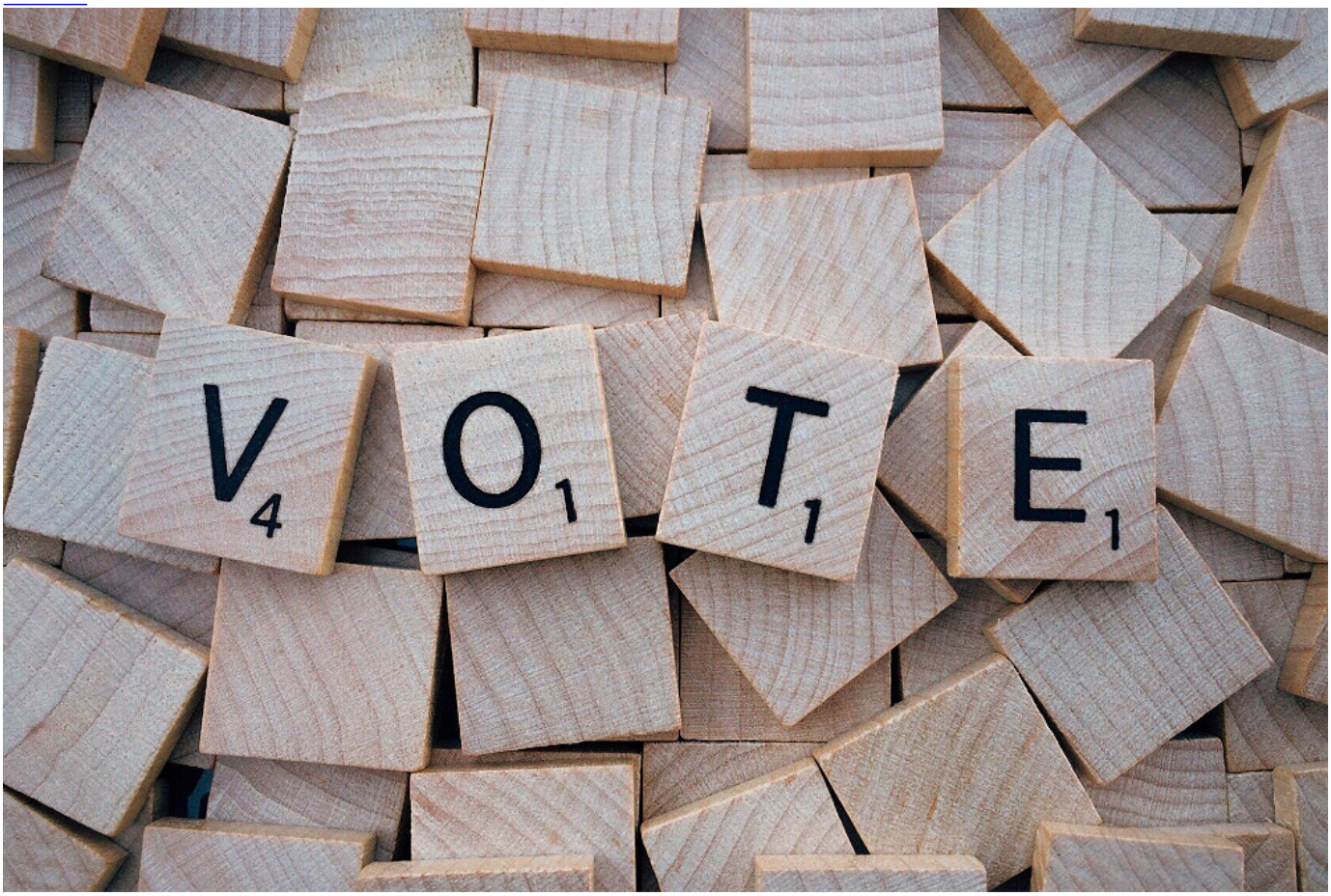
Opinion

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by Michael Sean Winters

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When I published my first book, *Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats*, way back in 2008, political philosopher Alan Wolfe was kind enough to write one of the blurbs: "As Catholics go, so goes America. So if you want to know where America will be going, read this book." In the last quarter of the 20th century, Catholics became the quintessential swing vote, and they are still decisive for winning the White House.

The question will be important again this year. As we have already reported here and here at NCR, President Donald Trump's reelection campaign is focusing heavily on Catholic voters, and news that Vice President Joe Biden may be vetting New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, suggested here at Distinctly Catholic last month, shows that the Democrats understand the importance of the Latino Catholic vote. Sorting through just what is meant by "the Catholic vote" and how it has developed will be key to understanding the dynamics of this November's election.

But there is a problem: There is no such thing as "the Catholic vote." How to resolve this conundrum?

Catholics had been a key constituency in the New Deal coalition and Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies not only served their interests, as most Catholics were members of the working class, but also fit with the church's social teaching. The U.S. bishops in 1919 began advocating for policies that would become core elements in the New Deal 1933 and Msgr. John A. Ryan, who led the Social Action department at the nascent bishops' conference would become a part of FDR's brain trust.

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Still, the Catholic vote was never monolithic, and even John F. Kennedy did not get as high a percentage of Catholic votes as Barack Obama did among blacks 48 years later. In the 1950s, Massachusetts Gov. Paul Dever famously said that the only man who could beat then-Archbishop Richard Cushing in an election in Boston's South End was Sen. Joseph McCarthy, not Kennedy. In the late 1960s, some white, ethnic Catholics were repulsed by the anti-war movement, not only because of their anti-communism but because war had been their ticket into societal acceptance during

and after World War II.

Religious and social dynamics were also changing the political landscape: Catholics became more affluent in the postwar era and this necessarily caused the significance of their Catholic identity to shrink and shift. White suburbs were less denominationally exclusive than the inner-city neighborhoods had been and they were more racially hostile as well.

There is an old joke about a young man picking up his mom, Mrs. O'Leary, and bringing her to the polls on election day. "Who are you going to vote for, Mom?" he asks as they drive toward the polling place. "I shall be voting the straight Democratic ticket as I always do," she replied. Her son could not help from asking, sarcastically "Mom, you would not vote for Jesus Christ if he were running as a Republican, would you?" His mother looked him straight in the eye. "Now, why, after all these years," Mrs. O'Leary rejoined, "would our Lord and Savior change his party affiliation?"

Mrs. O'Leary's tribal identity as a Catholic Democrat had stayed strong, but her son quite possibly had already voted in an affluent suburb on his way to work at a brokerage or law firm. He was voting Republican.

In 1980, in part because Ronald Reagan had come around to a strong pro-life position, but even more because of his hardline anti-communism, his racist dog whistles and his celebration of affluence, Republicans cleaned up among white Catholics in the suburbs of Detroit, Chicago and Philadelphia. Washtenaw County, which includes Ann Arbor, was the only suburban county in Michigan to back Jimmy Carter over Reagan. In Macomb County, north of Detroit, Kennedy had won 62.8% of the vote in 1960, but Reagan beat Carter 51.9% to 40.1%, with the rest going to third-party candidates. All of the suburban counties outside Cook County in Illinois backed Reagan, as did every county surrounding Philadelphia. In New York and New Jersey, Italian Catholics overwhelmingly backed Reagan over Carter, 57% to 37% and 60% to 33% respectively.

The Democrats had also ceased to be the party of ideas, and had become a congeries of constituencies and special interests. As I described the '70s Democrats in *Left at the Altar*:

> The spiderweb of New Deal programs, built upon the twin notions of social justice and human dignity, were still in place, but the Democrats had

> forgotten the spider. … In the 1970s, the Democrats and the Left had no such grand, unifying national goals. They created caucuses within their governing structures for women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, Hispanics, the disabled, Pacific Islanders, etc. This was less a coalition than a confederacy, and it neither required nor created a sense of shared national goals that would inspire an electorate.

Bill Clinton won some suburbs and hugely cut into the Republican margins in others, to make his way into the White House twice. He benefitted hugely from the fact that in 1992, the candidacy of Pat Buchanan, a proto-Trump character and link between the McCarthyite and Trumpist conspiratorial tic (along with Roy Cohn), cast the Republicans as extreme, just as George McGovern had done to the Democrats in 1972. Culture wars only appealed to a sliver of Catholics, and they gave Clinton a plurality of their votes. By the time the Democrats nominated another Catholic, John Kerry, in 2004, Catholics were evenly divided: Kerry narrowly won the Catholic vote in Pennsylvania, but lost it in Ohio and Florida. Nationwide, George W. Bush captured 52% of the vote to Kerry's 46%.

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The 2004 election marked another important moment in the development of "the Catholic vote." Key prelates, such as then-St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke, said they would not give communion to Kerry because of his pro-choice stance. Kerry was likely more devout than Kennedy had been but even less comfortable discussing his faith in public, and he would not get into a public spat with the prelates. Liberal Catholics, already reeling from the clergy sex abuse scandal, found in Burke's posturing one more reason to sleep in on Sunday morning. They might still self-identify as Catholic when asked, but the sense of Catholic identity was slipping away.

And so, by 2008 it seemed that Catholics mirrored the general population in their voting preference and so political scientists like Wolfe concluded the Catholic vote

was decisive. The nature of campaigns reinforced this fact. If you were running as a Republican, you were not likely to advertise in a Jewish newspaper because you would be reminding eight Jewish Democrats to vote for every two Republicans. Instead, Republicans would advertise on white evangelical radio stations that Democrats would shun: The Republican ad would remind eight evangelicals to vote for their guy for every stray two Democratic evangelicals who might make it to the polls.

But there was no way to message to Catholics in such a partisan way because they split down the middle, or so it seemed. As the early decades of the 21st century unfolded, Catholics continued to mirror the general electorate, but in a radically different way from that found in the last quarter of the 20th century. We'll pick up the story there tomorrow.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

***Editor's note:*** *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*