

Bishops' views don't always find favor among laity

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Opening day Mass at the U.S. bishops' annual fall meeting in Baltimore Nov. 16. (CNS /Bob Roller)

NEWARK, N.J. -- With their high-priority issues prominent on national agendas, Catholic clergy have been unusually active in politics. Bishops in New Jersey and elsewhere have been especially vocal on matters such as same-sex marriage, national health care and illegal immigration.

Yet polls show that when Catholic bishops press their positions with politicians on such issues, they often do so without the support of large segments of the lay people in their dioceses.

Regarding same-sex marriage -- which the bishops oppose and which the New Jersey Legislature rejected in January after intense debate -- American Catholics are divided, polls have shown. On health care reform, a majority appear to disagree with the bishops' position that no health care bill is acceptable if federal money can be used to pay for abortions. On immigration reform, a third disagree with bishops' call to give illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, according to a recent Zogby poll.

Critics of religious influence on politics point to the disparities and argue religious leaders are speaking for themselves and for their faith's official teachings, not for those in their pews.

"When bishops go to Capitol Hill, who do they represent?" asked Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice, a group of liberal Catholics who favor abortion rights. "Very often, I feel there is a presumption that the bishops speak on behalf of Catholics even though poll after poll in the U.S. shows that's not true."

Bill Donohue, director of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, said disparities between leaders' pronouncements and members' sentiments exist in most organizations, religious and nonreligious.

And, he said, Catholic bishops often have motives other than representing their flocks when lobbying. For one thing, bishops view themselves as teachers, Donohue said. And when it comes to health care, they do not want Catholic hospitals to be pressured to provide abortions to obtain federal reimbursements.

"A lot of this has to do with a fear that the government is going to encroach on the authority and autonomy of the bishops," said Donohue, a frequent defender of bishops against liberal critics. "It has to do with the fear that

this government will force them, as a condition of getting federal money, to violate their doctrinal prerogatives.?

Catholic bishops aren't the only religious leaders lobbying without widespread agreement from their flocks. Clergy of almost every stripe have lobbied for universal health care even as large swaths of the public worry about the cost, size and impact of proposed reforms. And Bishop George Cuncill of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey testified before state legislators in favor of same-sex marriage even though, he acknowledged in an interview, a sizable minority of his lay people oppose it.

Still, as leaders of the nation's largest denomination, and with relationships on both sides of the political aisle, Catholic bishops have left the largest clerical footprint on political debates over the last year, coordinating lobbying through national and statewide conferences.

Not every lobbying position the bishops have taken goes against views in their pews. Lay Catholics, like their bishops, broadly favor letting illegal immigrants become citizens, with some conditions.

Though longtime proponents of universal health care, bishops in New Jersey and elsewhere lobbied to quash reform bills they say would allow federal funds to pay for abortions.

The nation's Catholics, like other Americans, are divided on the bills passed by Congress, but most of their opposition stems from other factors.

“Across the board, few Catholics cite abortion as the most important factor,” said Alan Cooperman, associate director of the Pew Research Forum on Religion and Public Life. “Generally, the bishops have not opposed government efforts in the realm of the economy, and they're not generally troubled by big government. But clearly the people in the pews are.”

In New Jersey, Catholic bishops' efforts against same-sex marriage involved conversations with legislators, letters read from pulpits, op-ed pieces in newspapers, and a petition with 156,000 signatures, said Patrick Brannigan, executive director of the New Jersey Catholic Conference, which represents New Jersey's Catholic bishops on public policy.

Brannigan said he believes Catholics are less divided on the issue than polls indicate. In a Pew poll released in October, 45 percent of Catholics favored same-sex marriage, 43 percent opposed it and 12 percent did not know. “I would suggest that the 31 consecutive wins (across the country) when this issue goes to the ballot ... indicate that a majority of people who indicate they're undecided in polls actually oppose this,” he said.

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