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Election Time: The Catholic Vote

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, Catholic University?s Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies [1]had a panel at the National Press Club, examining the Catholic vote and the upcoming midterm elections. The panel included CUA politics professor Matthew Green, who addressed the electoral landscape this year, Public Religion Research Institute?s CEO Robert Jones, who presented the results of a new survey his organization conducted, and Greg Smith, who discussed the polling data from Pew surveys this year and how those surveys compared to previous years. The panel was moderated by Mark Rozell of George Mason University.

The results of the PRRI [2] and Pew surveys were revealing of several cleavages. There are distinct differences between the political views of Latino Catholics and their white coreligionists. 67% of Latino Catholics believe that American society does not provide sufficient equal opportunity, compared to 48% of white Catholics. Latino Catholics are also much more likely to believe that government has grown in response to legitimate social needs. Latino Catholics are also breaking heavily towards the Democrats, with 72 percent favoring the Democrats, according to PRRI. Meanwhile, the Pew survey indicates that Catholics as a whole are trending towards the GOP: In 2008, 48 percent of white Catholics identified as Democrats compared to 41 percent who identified as Republicans but this year, the numbers have almost reversed with 49 percent identifying as Republicans and only 42 percent as Democrats.

One of the most interesting developments is what Jones called a ?decoupling? of two issues on which the hierarchy has taken a prominent role, abortion and same sex marriage. 85 percent of voters reported that their views on abortion have not changed and, among the 14 percent who have changed their minds, seven percent claimed to be more pro-choice and seven percent more pro-life. But, 25 percent of those surveyed said they have changed their minds on same-sex marriage and among those, 19 percent have shifted to support for, and only 6 percent to opposing, gay rights.

On the issue of same-sex marriage versus civil unions, it becomes clear that civil unions are going the way of the horse drawn buggy. 37 percent support same sex marriage, 27 percent civil unions and 33 percent oppose any legal recognition of same sex relationships. Most interestingly, PRRI also asked a follow-up question: ?If the law only provided for civil marriages like you get at city hall for gay couples, I would support allowing them to have a civil marriage.? The numbers shift enormously, with 59 percent supporting gay marriage, 10 percent sticking with civil unions, and 29 percent opposing any legal recognition of the relationships. Information is an amazing thing.

The PRRI survey also showed a surprising degree of support for health care reform, with 54% of all voters saying they would be more likely to support a candidate who supported health care reform. White Catholics mirrored the national totals, with 49% agreeing with the same statement. By way of contrast, only 40% of white evangelicals agreed with the statement but 68% of those with no religious affiliation did so. Conversely, white Catholics outpaced all Americans in their support for immigration reform, 51% to 46%, while only 39% of white evangelicals support immigration reform. Another really interesting finding is that a person?s individual financial health has almost no bearing on their assessment of the overall economy, while their partisan

affiliation definitely affects their views on the economy?s health. 73% of Republicans think the economy has gotten worse over the last two years, compared to 27% of Democrats. But, 46% of those who say their own financial situation is ?excellent? think the economy is about the same as it was two years ago, while 50% of those who say their own financial situation is ?fair? or ?poor? think the economy is about the same.

One of the things that has become clear over the past years is that Catholics now mirror the general population in their political attitudes. There are differences within the Catholic community, between Latinos and white, and between those who attend Mass more or less regularly. The panel yesterday showed this dynamic repeatedly, but it raises for me a different question, one perhaps better directed to theologians and church historians than to pollsters and political scientists, but worthy of examination at CUA: Is it a good thing that Catholic voters are, as a whole, so little different from their fellow Americans? It is a large question, and a complicated one, and I am not sure myself where I come down on it. For all the long and necessary struggle to assimilate with American culture, and to beat back the nativist charge that Catholics could never be good Americans, still, somehow it seems that we Catholics should be more counter-cultural than we are.

N.B. The panel was videotaped, and as soon as we have the link, I will post it here.

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