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New Knights' survey on host of moral issues

by Mark Pattison by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON

American Catholic voters in 2008 tend to be more moderate and less liberal than U.S. voters as a whole, according to a survey commissioned by the Knights of Columbus and released Oct. 14.

"A plurality of Catholic voters, 39 percent, are Democrats, and 45 percent describe themselves as moderate. Only 19 percent say they are liberal," the survey said.

The survey was conducted by telephone with 813 self-identified Catholics Sept. 24-Oct. 3 by Marist College's Institute for Public Opinion. Those who identified themselves as practicing Catholics outnumbered nonpracticing Catholics by close to a 2-1 ratio. Interviewers polled 1,733 Americans in all, Catholics and non-Catholics.

On the subject of abortion, 48 percent of all Catholics surveyed said they were "pro-life," while 47 percent said they were "pro-choice," and 5 percent said they were unsure. However, twice as many practicing as nonpracticing Catholics -- 59 percent to 29 percent -- called themselves "pro-life," while 65 percent of nonpracticing Catholics said they were "pro-choice" compared to 36 percent of practicing Catholics.

While more than 90 percent of all Catholics polled said they favored restrictions on abortion, there was less consensus on what kind of restriction should be put in place.

A plurality of 35 percent said they would allow abortion only in cases of rape, incest or to save the mother's life. The survey also found that 26 percent of all Catholics would permit abortion in the first three months of pregnancy, although 17 percent said abortion should never be permitted and 11 percent would allow it only to save the life of the mother.

The poll found that 55 percent of Catholics say they would "definitely" vote for a candidate who believes that life begins at conception, while 20 percent said they would vote for such a candidate although with some reservations, and 19 percent said they would "definitely not" vote for such a candidate.

A plurality of registered Catholic voters, 36 percent, said homosexual couples should be able to form civil unions. The remaining 64 percent were split evenly -- 32 percent to 32 percent -- on gay couples being able to legally marry or such couples getting no legal recognition.

Nearly half of all Catholic voters, 49 percent, said they would "definitely" vote for a candidate who defined marriage as being between one man and one woman, yet 45 percent would "definitely" vote for a candidate who supports civil unions for any two adults who want to live together.

The economy was considered the top issue by 59 percent of registered Catholic voters. No other issue reached double digits: 9 percent said the war in Iraq was the top issue; 6 percent each, government spending and health care; 5 percent, terrorism; 3 percent, immigration; and 2 percent, jobs. Twelve percent of those surveyed mentioned other issues.

A significant majority of Catholics, 73 percent, said they believed the country was headed in the wrong direction; only 21 percent said they thought it was headed in the right direction, and 6 percent said they were not sure. By a similar margin, 72 percent said they were mostly discouraged about the direction of the country and 23 percent said they were mostly encouraged; 5 percent were unsure.

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Sixty-six percent of Catholics were mostly upset about the direction of the country, compared to 26 percent who said they were mostly energized.

In terms of party identification, 39 percent of the Catholics polled said they were Democrats, 30 percent said they were Republicans and 29 percent were Independents. When it comes to ideology, 45 percent identified themselves as moderate, 36 percent as conservative and 19 percent as liberal -- although 26 percent of the registered nonpracticing Catholics called themselves liberal, 7 percentage points above the figure for all Catholics, and 29 percent of the nonpracticing registered Catholic voters described themselves as conservative, 7 percentage points lower than the overall Catholic figure.

At least half of all registered Catholic voters and registered practicing Catholic voters say they would vote for a candidate who will:

- "Uphold religious liberty and freedom of conscience."
- "Work to solve global warming."
- "Stand for the Christian principles on which this country was founded."
- "Support vouchers to allow students to attend private, public or religious schools."
- "Maintain that life begins at conception."
- "Support universal health care."

-- "Be committed to success in the war in Iraq."

-- "Make government funding for the poor a top priority."

At least half of all registered Catholics said they would vote for a candidate who "supports embryonic stem-cell research," while more than half of registered practicing Catholics said they would vote for a candidate who would "uphold marriage only between a man and a woman."

According to the survey, the Knights calculated that 65 percent of Catholics worship "regularly," with the breakdown as follows: more than once a week, 8 percent; once a week, 36 percent; and once or twice a month, 21 percent.

The survey had a margin of error ranging from plus or minus 2.5 percentage points for all Americans surveyed up to plus or minus 6.5 percentage points for registered nonpracticing Catholic voters.

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