

Why I Can't Vote for Obama

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 2, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

This is the second time I have found myself unable to vote for a Democratic incumbent seeking re-election to the presidency. In 1996, the straw that broke the camel's back was President Clinton's refusal to intervene in Bosnia during the siege of Bihac, but the camel's back had been weakened by Clinton's inability to articulate the kind of left-leaning economic populist message and policies that would have challenged the ascendancy of the moneyed interest.

This year, it is the HHS mandate that broke the camel's back but the camel's back was already weakened for the exact same reason I was so unenthusiastic about Clinton in 1996: President Obama has not returned the modern Democratic Party to its ideological roots as the party that confronts income inequality, and the political power that flows from that inequality, in meaningful and successful ways.

I know that there are many, many people who think the religious liberty issue is a canard. It is not. For a variety of legal and political reasons, both parties consider it acceptable to ignore the institutional autonomy and integrity of intermediate social groups like churches when a partisan policy objective requires it. We have seen this with GOP efforts to harass undocumented workers and those who serve them, which is why the bishops of Alabama went to court, and why the USCCB filed a friend of the court brief opposing the Arizona anti-immigrant laws. And, we have seen it with the HHS mandate. After promising Cardinal Dolan that he would fix the problem, President Obama in January went back on that promise, choosing to listen to pressure from interest groups that see the Church in the way of their ability to enact laws that further their particular agenda.

There are many reasons why Obama did this, the most likely that he figured it would be good politically ? and it has been. In January, President Obama was desperate for issues, any issues, other than the economy to focus on, and this issue, tied as it was to the issue of contraception, had the further benefit of unleashing torrents of campaign contributions from women's groups and putting the Republicans in the position of appearing extreme. The Republicans, of course, took the bait, with Mr. Limbaugh almost single-handedly turning a complicated issue into a soundbite: a war on women. The bishops, too, over-played their hand. While they had long mentioned their support for individual exemptions from the HHS mandate for individual employers at essentially non-religious enterprises, they began in February to emphasize this concern. It looked like they were changing the goal posts and, more prosaically, they failed to recognize that many millions of Americans don't like their boss, and were reluctant to give their boss this kind of decision-making power over their health care choices.

None of this excuses President Obama from his responsibility for the policy, nor does it excuse or ameliorate the repugnance of the policy. It not only violated ideas we Catholics hold, it violated ideas to which Obama had repeatedly given voice. At Notre Dame, he has spoken of the importance of conscience exemptions. His decision to retain, retool, expand and improve the Faith-Based Office President George W. Bush had created pointed towards a new way of approaching the role of religion in society, one in which Catholic thought had played a key role. I wrote about this last week in reviewing Lew Daly's book *God's Economy*.? The Faith-Based Office, in addition to their good work getting needed funds to faith-based organizations, serves a vital

political function, helping both parties to see past the binary choice of 'big government solutions' vs. 'no government involvement.' The faith-based initiative uses the funding power of the government to enable civil society to meet outstanding social needs. It helped get the country past the excessive separationism that had infected the legal culture in the 70s and 80s (a strict separationism that was itself as great a threat to religious liberty as the HHS mandate, something the USCCB would be smart to acknowledge).

Most importantly, the Faith-Based Office and its activities, candidate and later President Obama's promises to respect conscience rights, and specific moments in the 2008 campaign, such as the decision to give a prime time speaking slot to Sen. Bob Casey at the Democratic Convention, all suggested that Mr. Obama understood the need to transcend the culture wars. This was a goal proper in itself, even noble, but also a necessary step towards refashioning the Democratic Party as the party that identifies with, and stands for, the economic interests of the little guy. It was this goal that warmed the hearts and minds of the Catholic Left, committed to social justice, deeply rooted in the history of America's working class and in the writings of our great teaching Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI and Paul VI and John Paul II and Benedict XVI, all of whom have made as clear as day that the Church stands where Jesus stood, with the poor and the underprivileged and the marginalized.

This year, instead of Sen. Casey, the Democratic Convention gave a prime time slot to Ms. Sandra Fluke and the convention as a whole was deemed, appropriately and pitifully, 'abortion-palooza' by my friend and colleague Melinda Henneberger. This year, the President went back on his promise to protect conscience rights. This year, the culture wars came back. As I mentioned yesterday in explaining why I could not vote for Mr. Romney, a president is also the leader of his party. For some of us, in 2008, the promise of Obama's candidacy rested largely on the hope that he understood the culture wars, their corrosive effect on the nation's politics, and would try to resolve them. This year, it seems like the Democratic Party is mostly concerned about the lifestyle choices of affluent, suburban, politically unaffiliated women, not the party of FDR that stood for the lunch bucket factory worker or the party of RFK that stood with the immigrant farm worker. This is a party that cannot earn my allegiance.

I would add, too, that surely one of the lessons President Obama has learned in the past two years is that he can only accomplish so much without control of Congress. The political consequence of turning over the party's agenda to NARAL and NOW is to virtually guarantee that the Democrats will not win back the seats once held by Bart Stupak and Kathy Dahlkemper and Steve Driehaus and John Boccieri. Did the Democratic Convention's fetish for abortion help Cong. Mark Critz, who is in danger of losing Pennsylvania's 12th District? If President Obama really likes working with John Boehner as Speaker of the House, he could not have crafted a better strategy for guaranteeing he will be working with him in the future.

If the HHS mandate were a one-off, I would hold my nose and vote for Obama. But, I fear that he has not only reignited the culture wars within the Democratic Party, he has failed to articulate an economic agenda that addresses the leading moral challenge of our economic era, the shocking growth of inequality over the past 30 years. I just do not see President Obama emerging in a second term as a champion of economic justice. Yes, Secretary of the Treasury Tim Geithner will probably be replaced, but will his replacement be that different? But, the problem is not the staff. I think the problem is that President Obama has over-learned the idea that good policy is good politics. That is true, but not exhaustive. Take the signature accomplishment of his administration, the Affordable Care Act. Democrats have been pushing for universal health insurance for sixty years, and Obama gets high marks for getting it across the finish line, very high marks. But, as I have mentioned before, the day after the bill passed, I was talking with a friend who works at the White House and I said, 'Remember, the job of selling this thing is just beginning.' I did not feel I was offering 'advice.' I thought I was uttering a commonplace, along the lines of 'That necklace looks good on you.' But, the President and the Democrats did a miserable job defending the ACA. They still seem reluctant to do so. This is not hard. Do you remember the little girl with a pre-existing condition and her mother who spoke at the Democratic National Convention? It was very moving. Do you remember her name? Of course not, because that was the last we saw

of her. Why have there been no ads featuring her story? Why is she not a household name as Ryan White became a household name in the fight for more funding to combat AIDS? This inability to defend his policies leads me to think Obama grasps their importance only in an intellectual, wonky way, and political leadership requires something deeper than that, something in the gut, not the head.

In fairness, President Obama was dealt a dreadful economic hand. Every time a Republican states that the recovery today is anemic compared to Reagan's recovery in the 80s, I cringe because, of course, the economic downturn Reagan inherited was nothing compared to the mess Obama inherited. I understand that the President had to do triage. And, I think he did a pretty good job of making decisions that halted the economic free fall. But, I wonder if he gets it? He has rightly criticized Gov. Romney for the latter's opposition to the government bailout of the auto industry. But, Obama and his team have not made the larger point that Mr. Romney supported the bailout of Wall Street before declining to support the bailout of Detroit. There is a principled position to be had, wrong but principled, that states government should never intervene. (John Stossel took that position on the O'Reilly Factor last night regarding government help to the victims of Hurricane Sandy, leaving even O'Reilly dumbstruck!) Can you imagine Harry S. Truman failing to make the larger point about the Republicans standing for Wall Street and not Main Street, that Obama failed to make? Of course, Truman lived before focus groups. Then, polling was still young and, as he proved in 1948, prone to mistakes. Perhaps, Mr. Obama, freed from the prospect of another election can find his inner Truman. I am not confident it is there. Like his inability to defend the ACA, Obama's inability to defend government intervention in the market when needed and on behalf of the little guy suggests to me that I cannot, in good conscience, entrust to him the leadership of the Democratic Party for the next four years.

To be clear, I hope the President does win re-election next Tuesday. And, if I lived in a swing state, I would be voting for him if for no other reason than the prospect of Mr. Romney overturning the ACA and denying millions of Americans the opportunity access health care. But, I don't live in a swing state, I live in Maryland. I do not have a binary choice for President, I do not have a meaningful choice at all. On Monday, I will discuss how I think those of us who live in non-swing states should start using our ballots to alter the political landscape, and also disclose whose name I will be writing in for the presidency. But, for this election, and living where I do, while I do not recoil at the prospect of a second Obama term, the thought of Valerie Jarrett just down the hall from the Oval Office fills me with dread. I do worry that four years of Obama's leadership might diminish further the hope many of us had in 2008 and which he encouraged: The hope that we could begin to heal the culture wars, and find ways to meaningfully address the growing disparity of wealth and influence in our society. I no longer associate that hope with Mr. Obama's 2012 version, and so I will not be associating my vote with him either.

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