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Young Catholics more progressive than older ones, poll finds

Tom Roberts NCR Staff | Oct. 8, 2008

Young Catholics are more progressive than older Catholics across a range of issues and on a number of topics are more progressive than their peers in other religious groups, according to a newly released survey by the group Faith in Public Life.

Young Catholics, 18 to 34 years, constituted one group in a survey titled ?The Young and the Faithful,? designed and conducted by Public Religion Research. Faith in Public Life is one of a number of religious groups organized following the 2004 election with the intent of broadening the public debate on religious and social issues.

?This is not the culture war generation,? said Robert P. Jones, president of Public Religion Research, in drawing a broad conclusion from the study during a conference call. ?From gay rights to the role of Americans around the world to working for the common good,? the young people surveyed represent a group that ?kind of works past the ideological divides? that have characterized the political debate of recent years.

Katie Paris, director of communications for Faith in Public Life, concurred. The lines of the culture wars ?are fading,? she said.

In the presidential race, the survey found that among all Catholic registered voters, Democratic candidate Barack Obama led Republican John McCain 51 percent to 40 percent, a figure similar to the 50 percent to 42 percent margin Obama held over McCain among all registered voters.

A significant generational difference exists, however, within the Catholic vote. Among older Catholics, those 34 and above, the vote was nearly evenly split between McCain (46 percent) and Obama (45 percent).

Registered Catholic voters ages 18-34 favored Obama over McCain by a wide margin, 55 percent to 40 percent, similar to the figures for all young adults, who favored Obama 59 percent to 35 percent for McCain.

There is a striking generational difference, too, among Catholics when it comes to party affiliation. Older Catholics are about evenly split, 45 percent and 48 percent between the Republican and Democratic parties respectively. Young adult Catholics overwhelmingly identify as Democrat (54 percent) over Republican (35 percent).

Forty two percent of older Catholics identify as conservative, while only 28 percent of younger Catholics do so.

?Younger Catholics are also less likely than older Catholics and even other young adults to see abortion and same-sex marriage as very important voting issues,? according to the report. Sixty one percent of young Catholics do not see abortion as a very important issue and 70 percent do not see same-sex marriage as very important when voting.
?Neither older nor younger Catholics are single-issue voters on abortion,? said the study. Seventy-one percent of all Catholics interviewed said they would vote for a candidate who disagreed with them on abortion.

Young Catholics (60 percent) polled nearly the same as their peers (58 percent) among Evangelicals and mainline Protestants on the issue of abortion rights, agreeing that ?abortion should be legal in all or most cases.? Among older Catholics, 51 percent say abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Two thirds of young Catholics prefer bigger government with more services, the most liberal measure on that topic of any group polled. Only 41 percent of older Catholics favored bigger government.

In terms of what was called ?the God gap? in 2004, the current study shows that ?the religious fault lines have changed modestly over the last four years.? The smallest change came among voters who most often and least often attend religious services. Among those who attend services more than once a week, McCain leads Obama 60 percent to 34 percent. Democrat John Kerry four years ago received 35 percent of that group.

The same goes for those who attend church weekly, Obama?s support is the same as that of John Kerry?s support four years ago ? 40 percent.

However, among those who attend religious services once or twice monthly, 16 percent of registered voters, Obama polls 60 percent, a significant jump above the 49 percent who polled for Kerry in 2004.

Amy Sullivan, a senior correspondent for Time Magazine and author of The Party Faithful, speculated during the conference call discussion that the new appeal to that group may reflect a greater outreach to the religious community, and particularly Catholics, by the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign.

In that same vein, Obama was viewed as slightly more friendly to religion than McCain (49 percent to 45 percent).

While the generational divide on candidate preference and voting was minimal among white evangelicals, there is a significant difference among older and younger evangelicals on a range of issues.

Most young white evangelicals, for instance, favor either same-sex marriage (24 percent) or civil unions (28 percent) while a majority of older evangelicals (61 percent) favor no legal recognition of gay couples.

Forty four percent of young white evangelicals compared to only 30 percent of older white evangelicals hold that a person can be moral without believing in God.

By a 56 percent to 44 percent margin, younger white evangelicals believe that diplomacy rather than military force is the best way to ensure peace. Younger white evangelicals also favor by 44 percent to 23 percent for older while evangelicals a larger government and more government services.

The survey was conducted from Aug. 28 to Sept. 19, over the period of the political conventions of both major parties and before the most severe news about the economic slowdown broke.

Surveyed were a national sample of 2000 adults 18 years of age and older and an ?oversample? of 974 young adults, ages 18-34, including 200 cell phone users, bringing the total number of young adults surveyed to 1,251. Eighty percent of respondents in the overall national sample are registered to vote and 69 percent of young

adults (age 18-34) are registered to vote.

Roberts is NCR *News Editor and Editor-at-Large.*

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