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White Catholic support grows for Obama

Tom Roberts NCR Staff | Oct. 31, 2008

Within days of the general election, as the abortion debate flares in some Catholic circles, two prominent surveys show that Democratic candidate Barack Obama?s support among white Catholics has grown significantly since September and that less than a third of Catholic voters are making their decision based on the issue of abortion.

According to a report released October 30 by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, surveys show that support for Obama from white, non-Hispanic Catholics has grown from a 13 point deficit in late September to an eight-point lead in late October.

The Catholic vote is a much sought after swing vote because Catholics regularly choose the winner of the popular vote, regardless of party. John Green, a senior fellow at Pew, said that the largest shift toward Obama came among white Catholic independents, ?with only modest changes among white Catholics who identify as Republicans or Democrats.?

Green said that independent white Catholics may have been moved toward Obama by economic issues, the same factor accounting for growing support for Obama among other sectors of the population.

According to Green, Catholics have swung between parties for the past 20 years depending on candidates and issues ?and they almost always end up on the winning side. A lot of analysts look at white Catholics as a key barometer of where the election is going.?

This year, the Catholic vote has been rather mobile. ?Back in January 2007,? said Green, in a long interview statement released by Pew, ?a majority of white Catholics said they preferred a generic Democratic president over a generic Republican president.

Later in the year, when specific Republican and Democratic candidates were mentioned, white Catholics shifted around, sometimes favoring a Repuiblican candidate and sometimes favoring a Democratic candidate. The recent shift among white Catholics toward the Democratic candidate fits well within this overall pattern of change.?

But this may not be the last of the switches. Green said he would not be surprised, for instance, if some white

Catholics shift toward Republican John McCain on election day.

Green speculated that Obama was able to attract white Catholics when John Kerry was unable to do so in 2004 for several reasons: the faltering economy, his comfort at talking about his faith and the fact that he is conversant with the Catholic social tradition.

He also said that Obama?s opposition to the war in Iraq is one of the positions ?white Catholics may find very cogent on religious grounds.?
He also credited the recent ?revival of a ?religious left? in national politics.

?A final difference between 2004 and 2008 may be the more intensive campaigning within the Catholic community on behalf of Obama. New organizations, such as Catholic Alliance for the Common Good have been very active alongside older groups such as Pax Christi and Catholics for Choice.? (See previous NCR stories on new Catholic groups)

Still, for some Catholics, Obama?s support for legal abortion is too large an impediment.

While it is unknown whether this may be a year in which other issues, including the economy, will override Catholic objections to Obama?s abortion position, polls seem to suggest that may be the case.

In recent weeks a number of Catholic bishops (some observers put the number as high as 80) have made a major push to raise abortion as the primary issue on which Catholics should base their votes. The attempts by some who have written columns in their diocesan newspapers or issued personal statements appear to defy the point made in their collective pastoral statement, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, which rejects a single-issue approach to voting.

According to a recently released poll by the Le Moyne College/Zogby International Conteporary Catholic Trends project, however, only 29 percent of Catholics say they would be unlikely to vote for a candidate who disagrees with them on abortion rights, but with whom they agree ?on all issues except for abortion.?

According to Dr. Matt Loveland, LeMoyne sociologist, ?In essence, less than a third of Catholic voters appear to vote solely on abortion attitudes, but those who do tend to favor ?pro-life? candidates.?
According to the poll, said Loveland, ?44 percent of Catholics believe a ?good Catholic? could not vote for a candidate who supports abortion rights, but that 53 percent say a good Catholic could.?

The poll was a telephone survey of 1,000 people with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 points.

On a key Catholic social justice teaching, a keen concern for the poor, which some see as at odds with this year?s political emphasis on the middle class, the survey showed that only 38 percent of Cahtlics agreem, somewhat or strongly, that government policies should privilege the interests of the poorest Americans over middle and upper classs Americans. Four percent were undecided and 58 percent disagreed.

?Church teaching on this issue seems to run countrer to recent popular sentiment against ?spreading the wealth,? said Loveleand, who added that ?it looks like many lay Catholics agree with ?Joe the Plumber? on this issue.?

On other issues, the survey found that 60 percent polled believe a good Catholic could vote for candidates who support embryonic stem cell research; 55 percent agreed good catholics could vote for a candidate who supports the death penalty.

?On the other hand,? said the report, ?majorities say that good Catholics should not vote for candidates who support same-sex marriage (54 percent), euthanasia (59 percent), and human cloning (76 percent).

Roberts is NCR *Editor at Large.*

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