

## Lessons bishops should learn from the '08 election

Richard McBrien | Nov. 24, 2008 Essays in Theology

Regardless of how individual Catholics voted in this year's historic presidential election, there are at least three important lessons for their pastoral leadership to absorb.

First, Catholic voters are paying less and less attention to the urgings of the most theologically rigid and politically partisan bishops of the U.S. bishops' conference. Catholics this year returned to their traditional allegiance to the Democratic Party by a margin of 53 percent to 45 percent. And Hispanic voters, most of whom are Catholics, supported the Democratic ticket by an astonishing margin of 66 percent to 31 percent.

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### Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

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This was in spite of the efforts of a vocal handful of bishops, including Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver and Bishop Joseph Martino of Scranton, to try to persuade Catholics that a vote for the Democratic ticket was tantamount to a vote for abortion and, therefore, gravely sinful.

Some Catholics evidently accepted this line of argument, but one can at least ask how many of them would have voted Republican for other reasons, even if the abortion issue had not been a factor.

By an overwhelming margin of some 60 percent, voters this year identified the economy as their number one concern. The issues that right-wing pressure groups tried to use on fellow Catholics with voter-guides -- abortion, gay marriage, homosexuality and embryonic stem-cell research -- gained little or no traction this time around.

This vocal minority of bishops have to ask themselves whether their one-issue approach is actually counter-productive, not only in terms of its effectiveness with Catholic voters but also in its effectiveness in actually reducing the number of abortions in the United States.

This year, in any case, their narrow approach to life issues has stirred other pro-life Catholics to fight back and to reject the focus on the abortion issue to the practical exclusion of all others.

Second, there is also a question to be put to the all-too-silent majority of bishops who have failed to remind Catholic voters that the bishops' conference supports a 'consistent-ethic-of-life' approach to moral issues, that it has gone on record as neither endorsing *nor oppos-ing* candidates for public office, and that it insists that the Catholic church is not a one-issue church, notwithstanding the moral urgency of the abortion issue.

While it is true that bishops do not wish to interfere in their fellow bishops' governing of their own dioceses, the vocal minority of bishops who have spoken out in politically partisan fashion have a national impact beyond the confines of Denver, Scranton, or wherever else.

The media and many in the general public do not usually make a distinction between the personal views of a few outspoken bishops and the official teachings and policies of the entire bishops' conference.

In the future, conference leaders must make it unmistakably clear that, while individual bishops are free to issue statements and take stands within and for their own dioceses, such bishops have no personal authority beyond their dioceses, and indeed that their views are contrary to the stated teachings and policies of the conference itself.

Third, beyond the concern for political and moral credibility and effectiveness, there are other, equally significant statistics to be drawn from the recent presidential election. The Democratic ticket won the support of 66 percent of voters between the ages of 18 and 29, and 57 percent between the ages of 30 and 44.

These voters are not only the future of the country; many of them are also the future of the Catholic church. Do our pastoral leaders really want to be so far out of step with this crucially important constituency?

Can our leadership not make a more concerted effort to understand the thinking of under-45 Catholics, as well as of many older Catholics who are aware of, and in full agreement with, the official teachings and policies of the conference but who disagree strongly with the views of the conference's aggressively conservative minority?

And what, again, of the 66 percent of Hispanic voters, many of whom are Catholics? The same questions should be applied to the bishops' pastoral responsibility toward Hispanic Catholics, young and old alike.

Ninety-five percent of African Americans voted for Sen. Barack Obama. Relatively few are Catholic, but should the entire black community be written off?

**NCR e-mail alerts** Privacy by SafeSubscribe realize that women voted for the Democratic ticket by a margin of 56 percent to 43 percent What's this? [2] apply to Catholics in general and to younger and Hispanic Catholics in particular apply also to the leadership's pastoral challenge of addressing the alienation of many Catholic women. The sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood has had a devastating effect on the credibility of our bishops. They must take care not to worsen the problem.

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