

Religion and political affiliation

William D'Antonio | Oct. 24, 2011
Catholics in America



A woman casts her ballot in Glendale, Wis., during a recall election in early August. (CNS photo/Darren Hauck, Reuters)

Politics

Reports in the media based on national surveys in recent years indicate that voters see Republicans as more religious, or friendlier to religion than Democrats, in particular because of their support for core moral values centering on human sexuality and family life. Our survey provides an opportunity to see whether and how Catholics who are Democrats or Republicans vary in their religious practices and in moral and political attitudes.

American Catholics are the single largest religious denomination in the United States (at just under 25 percent of the total population), and have played significant roles in American politics for many years now. The total number of Catholics in the U.S. House and Senate has now eclipsed all other religions, with 69 Democrats and 63 Republicans in the House, and 15 Democrats and 9 Republicans in the Senate in the current 112th Congress. Catholics have also been candidates for the presidency and vice presidency. In recent national elections, a majority of Catholics supported the re-election of President George W. Bush in 2004, and of President Barack Obama in 2008. They played a visible role in the battle over the new health care reform bill that passed Congress in March 2010. There is every reason to expect them to play a significant role in the national elections of 2012. The U.S. Catholic bishops have become an important lobbying group on issues ranging from abortion to nuclear weapons, health care, Medicaid, lifting the U.S. embargo against Cuba, the death penalty, and the economy. Their Labor Day statement issued Aug. 24, 2011, addressed the "Human Costs and Moral Challenges of a Broken Economy." Their statement calls Americans to get beyond political conflicts to confront the "often invisible burdens of ordinary workers and their families, many of whom are hurting, discouraged, and left behind by this economy."

This, our fifth survey, took place six months after the House and Senate elections of 2010, in the midst of the confrontation over budget deficits, spending cuts, and tax reform. This essay begins with a demographic

overview of political party alignments in 2011. The 2011 question allowed respondents to indicate if they were strong, not strong, or leaning Republican or Democratic; undecided/independent; or other. We have chosen to place those leaning either toward the Democratic or Republican Parties in their respective parties, reducing the independents to 3 percent of the total. These independents will not be included in this essay.

Overall, 57 percent of Catholics affiliate with the Democrats and 40 percent with the Republicans when those leaning toward one or the other party are included. The Democrats held a three-to-two lead before we included the leaners.

The "within generation" comparisons for 2011 show more Catholics affiliated with the Democrats than with the Republicans in all four generations.

Education and income figures reveal sharp differences ([Table 15](#)). More than half the Democrats had a high school or less education, true of only one in three Republicans. At the other end, more than one in three Republicans (36 percent) have earned a bachelor's degree or more, true of only one in five Democrats (22 percent). The income figures reflect these differences: Thirty-eight percent of Republicans reported incomes under \$50,000; among Democrats it was two out of three (65 percent). At the other end of the income ladder, three in 10 Republicans reported incomes of \$100,000 or more, a figure reported by 18 percent of the Democrats.

We turn now to the beliefs, practices and attitudes of Catholics who have identified themselves as Republicans or Democrats. No significant differences existed among the parties in responses to three of the four core beliefs that have consistently been ranked as very important to Catholics: Jesus's life, death and resurrection; the sacraments; and Mary as the mother of God. On the fourth core item, helping the poor, although a majority of both parties said this was very important, Democrats (72 percent) were more likely than Republicans (61 percent) to say this.

Three beliefs drew minimum support as very important to Republicans and Democrats alike: the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican (33 percent and 28 percent respectively); the church's teaching opposing the death penalty (22 percent and 33 percent); and a celibate male clergy (23 percent and 19 percent respectively).

Finally, the largest difference between the two parties was found regarding the church's teaching opposing abortion: In this case 48 percent of Republican Catholics said it was very important to them as Catholics, a position taken by 35 percent of the Democrats.

Large majorities of both Democrats and Republicans affirm their Catholic identity in phrases like "Being a Catholic is a very important part of who I am."

Regarding church practices, there were no differences in Mass attendance, with similar percentages attending Mass weekly, monthly or less frequently. There was little difference among them regarding the two most important reasons they do go to Mass, that is, the felt need to receive Communion, and the enjoyment of participating in the liturgy (78 percent of Republicans and 88 percent of Democrats gave these reasons).

When it comes to why they do not attend Mass more often, no response reached 50 percent as an important reason. Democrats (45 percent) cited family responsibilities as an important reason, more than did Republicans (33 percent). Finally, as an important reason they did not attend Mass more frequently, Democrats and Republicans (45 percent and 38 percent respectively) said they were just not very religious. That the Mass is boring, the sermons are poor, that it is not a mortal sin to miss Mass, that they are too busy have all been bandied about as possible reasons for not going to Mass more often. But none of these possible reasons yielded even 40 percent support across or within party lines. The fact that four in 10 say they are just not religious fits well with our finding that two-thirds of American Catholics have only a medium level of commitment to the

church when measured by our commitment index ([see story](#) [1]). And this level has been steady over now five surveys.

There were also no differences in the percentages of Democrats and Republicans who said their marriage was viewed as valid by the church (70 percent). Three out of four said their spouses are Catholics.

Bishops? positions

The bishops have spoken out recently on a wide range of political issues. We have selected eight for comparison of the responses of Catholic Republicans and Democrats.

The greatest difference between the Republicans and Democrats on these eight political issues was found regarding their response to the bishops? opposition to the health care bill that was passed in March 2010. Sixty-eight percent of the Republicans supported the bishops? opposition compared to 42 percent of Catholic Democrats. Republicans and Democrats supported the bishops in their immigration reform efforts. Republicans had a strong majority (63 percent) supporting the bishop?s opposition to same-sex marriage; a minority of Democrats (44 percent) also supported the bishops? position. Democrats (89 percent) and Republicans (68 percent) supported more government funds for health care for poor children; Republicans (63 percent) favored more funds for the military while 50 percent of Democrats favored the bishops? general opposition to more funds for the military. In the 1999 survey, before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both Republicans and Democrats opposed more funding for the military.

The two political groups are strongly supportive of the bishops? opposition to more funds for nuclear weapons. Neither Republicans nor Democrats stand with the bishops in their opposition to the death penalty. Republicans (70 percent) favored more cutbacks in welfare funds for the poor while a majority of Democrats opposed further welfare cutbacks for the poor.

The final set of issues reviews how Catholic Democrats and Republicans view the proper locus of moral authority on five issues we have been tracking since the very first survey in 1987.

Looking within and across parties, a number of points are clear.

Only a small minority of Republicans and Democrats believe the locus of moral authority on these issues should rest with church leaders alone. Findings presented here and elsewhere ([see the research team?s essay on moral authority](#) [2]) make clear that Catholics look first to their own consciences, then to some sort of dialogue between church leaders and the laity. The laity has moved slowly but steadily away from seeing the church leaders as the sole source of moral authority in hot-button sexual issues.

While only one in four Republicans said the locus of moral authority should rest with the church leaders on the matter of homosexual activity, a majority, as noted elsewhere, supported the bishops on the question of same-sex marriage. The Democrats were split on that question.

The church?s position on abortion continues to be an issue that, no matter how questions are phrased, gains considerable support from Republicans, but less and less from Democrats.

Summary

In summary, there has arisen among the public and the press a conventional wisdom that Republicans are friendlier to religion than are Democrats. This conventional wisdom is said to hold across all religious groups; however, we address it here only as it relates to our findings about Catholics. Much of this wisdom seems to be based on a number of beliefs and practices. The beliefs center especially and almost exclusively on sexual issues

like abortion, homosexuality, and non-marital or premarital sex.

The practice of religion centers especially on church attendance, in this case, Mass attendance. Our survey finds Catholic Democrats as churchgoing on a regular basis as are Republicans. Republicans do have a slightly higher percentage registered as members of a parish. But there are no significant differences in matters of having a valid marriage in the eyes of the church, or being married to a spouse who is Catholic. Republicans have attended Catholic schools at a higher rate than Democrats. However, when it comes to the three core beliefs that Catholics have identified with throughout our five surveys, there are no differences. As for the fourth core belief, the concern for the poor, Democrats have led the way in this and the prior survey. Only a minority of Catholics of either party see the moral authority claimed by the Vatican as very important to them, and even fewer see the locus of moral authority as resting with church leaders.

On the issues that involve support or opposition for the political positions taken by the bishops, Democrats tend to support the non-sex-oriented social teachings of the church as spelled out in the bishops' pastoral letters and other documents, while the Republicans are more supportive of the bishops on issues involving human sexuality.

Our research finds Catholics across party lines still attentive to key church teachings that go back to the early church; attending Mass or not, without any clear distinctions regarding reasons; and divided on sociopolitical issues that have marked the political polarization of the government. There is some irony in that Republican Catholics give much more support to prenatal life, while Democrats give more support to postnatal life, both in the name of church teachings. And they are able to do this in good conscience, as 85 percent of both Republicans and Democrats agree that one of the things most meaningful to them is that you can disagree with church teachings and still be loyal Catholics.

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TABLE 15

DEMOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN CATHOLICS

By political party, 2011

	REPUBLICAN	DEMOCRAT
PARTY AFFILIATION		
Total percentages of Catholics saying they are strong, not strong, or leaning	40% 	57% 
GENDER		
Female	40% 	56% 
Male	40% 	57% 
PARTY AFFILIATION WITHIN EACH GENERATION		
Pre-Vatican II	38% 	62% 
Vatican II	40% 	57% 
Post-Vatican II	40% 	57% 
Millennials	45% 	55% 
EDUCATION WITHIN PARTY TOTALS		
Less than high school	9% 	17% 
High school	26% 	38% 
Some college	30% 	24% 
Bachelor's or higher	36% 	22% 

CATHOLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION WITHIN PARTY TOTALS		
Primary school	44% ●	33% ●
High school	22 ●	17 ●
College	10 ●	7 ●
INCOME		
Less than \$25,000	17% ●	28% ●
\$25,000-\$49,999	21 ●	37 ●
\$50,000-\$99,999	33 ●	27 ●
\$100,000 or higher	29 ●	18 ●

*When those leaning either toward the Republican or Democratic Party are included within the party totals, there are only 3 percent remaining "independent"; they are not included in this table.

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