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New Data from Pew

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 9, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, the blogging was a little thin because I attended an all-day conference at the Pew Research Center on media coverage of religion and politics. The event brought together journalists and scholars to look at past coverage, analyze current polling data, and discuss issues regarding news coverage of religion.

John Green, a senior research adviser at Pew and professor at the University of Akron, and Alan Cooperman, the Pew Forum?s associate director for research, provided some interesting data on a survey conducted in the beginning of November. The Republican race has changed quite a bit since then ? Cain was then in the lead and Gingrich had not begun his race to the top of the polls ? but much of the data was still enlightening.

For example, one set of questions asked voters what traits in a candidate would make them more or less likely to vote for a given candidate. Only 5 percent of voters said that being a Mormon would make them more likely to vote for a given candidate, compared to 25 percent who said it would make them less likely to vote for that candidate. 68 percent said it would make no difference. These numbers were largely unchanged from a similar 2007 survey. By way of comparison, 49 percent said they would be more likely to support a candidate who had served in the military while only 4 percent said military service would make them less likely to support that candidate. 11 percent said they would be less likely to vote for a divorced candidate and 3 percent said more likely. The biggest negative effect would be faced by a candidate who is an atheist: 61 percent said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate if her or she was an atheist. Interestingly, the factor that tracked most closely with being a Mormon was previous marijuana use: 5 percent said such use would make them more likely to vote for a candidate and 24 percent said less likely.

When you put a face on Mormonism, the results remain largely the same since 2008. According to a February 2008 Pew survey, 42 percent of white evangelicals had a favorable impression of Mitt Romney, compared to 33 percent who had an unfavorable view. Today, those numbers are almost the same: 46 percent of white evangelicals have a favorable impression of Romney compared to 40 percent who have an unfavorable view. For white Catholics, the numbers remain the same too: In 2008, 39 percent of white Catholics had a favorable view of Romney against 43 percent who had an unfavorable view. The numbers today are 45 percent favorable and 41 percent unfavorable.

The most interesting findings for me had to do with the correlation between Tea Party support and evangelical beliefs. At the time of the survey, among all Republican and republican-leaning voters, Romney was in the lead with 23 percent, Cain had 22 percent and Gingrich had 16 percent. Among white evangelicals, Cain led with 26 percent, followed by Gingrich with 19 percent and Romney trailed with 17 percent. These numbers are almost identical with the levels of support among those who support the Tea Party: Cain, 29 percent, Gingrich 21 percent, and Romney 18 percent. But, what is really interesting is when you dig down one step further. Among those voters who are both white evangelicals and who support the tea Party, Romney?s number?s collapse: Only 11 percent of white evangelicals who also support the Tea Party backed Romney compared to 39 percent for Cain and 21 percent for Gingrich. Conversely, among Republicans who do not support the Tea Party, Romney emerges as the favorite with 27 percent compared with Cain?s 16 percent and Gingrich?s 12 percent. The big

picture? The base of the base is white evangelical Tea Party supporters. And, I wish the data had included Ron Paul, whose libertarian creed is significantly different from that of white evangelicals.

Another key finding of the poll ? again, to be taken with the caveat that the poll was taken before Gingrich?s surge and Cain?s collapse ? is that white Catholics are none to fond of their co-religionist Newt Gingrich. 50 percent of white Catholics have a favorable view of Obama, 45 percent have a favorable view of Romney, but only 39 percent have a favorable view of Gingrich. When you look at all Catholics, the numbers are even worse for the former Speaker: Only 36 percent have a favorable view of him compared to 53 percent for Obama and 43 percent for Romney. In head-to-head matchups, Romney leads Obama among less observant Catholics and by a wider margin among more observant Catholics. Gingrich loses to Obama among both groups.

The survey results were followed by a very interesting discussion about press coverage of evangelicals and Mormons. Then, I had to run off to Mass ? yesterday was, of course, a Holy Day of Obligation. Perhaps that fact tells you something important about the relationship of the mainstream press culture and the Catholic Church: Scheduling an all day conference on a Holy Day of Obligation?

You can find the Pew survey info here [1].

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[1] http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2136/mormon-mormonism-evangelical-christian-catholic-protestant-rligion-politics-presidential-primaries-race-mitt-romney-barack-obama-herman-cain