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Panel: U.S. Catholic vote is important, even if it doesn't exist

by Jerry Filteau

Washington, D.C. — It's become almost a cliché in recent U.S. presidential election cycles: There is no such thing as a "Catholic vote" anymore, but whoever wins it will almost certainly be the next president.

In a two-hour discussion Sept. 27 at The Catholic University of America, four panelists agreed that U.S. voters are more divided and partisan today than in the past, and Catholic voters are fully part of those divisions and partisan positions.

But today's Catholic vote is critical only because U.S. Catholics thoroughly represent the social and political diversity of the entire country, and how they vote is likely to serve as one of the surest predictors of the national vote.

"I'm not sure Catholics bring their religious identity into the voting booth. ... Other things trump it," said John White, a professor of politics at The Catholic University of America and a longtime expert on presidential elections.

There's no such thing as a Catholic vote, but "there are a lot of smaller slices of Catholic votes, and these are gettable" for presidential candidates seeking to swing an election their way, said Stephen Schneck, also a professor of politics and director of the university's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.

Schneck singled out three major U.S. Catholic constituencies that are important in any presidential race today:

- Hispanic/Latino Catholics, who now form roughly one-third of the U.S. Catholic electorate. The

group went 70 percent for President Barack Obama four years ago and is likely to vote for him in roughly the same proportions this November.

- "Intentional Catholics," meaning frequent churchgoers whose religion is important to them when they vote, who are generally white and older and form about another third of the U.S. Catholic voting population. This group has moved increasingly into the Republican camp in recent decades, and Schneck predicted they will probably vote about 60 percent for Romney.
- "Cultural Catholics," who grew up Catholic but attend Mass less frequently, and whose religion is not as important in their political decisions. "That group is split down the middle" in terms of Democratic or Republican leanings, Schneck said.

White criticized Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney for not having made a clear campaign speech about his Mormonism. He recalled John F. Kennedy's 1960 Houston address to Baptist leaders as a crucial turning point for the election of the nation's first Catholic president, as well as Obama's speech about his religious beliefs four years ago in response to controversy over his membership in the congregation of the controversial United Church of Christ pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Romney, White said, "hurts among evangelicals," who generally share the Republican candidate's socio-political views but who view the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints suspiciously as a non-Christian religion.

Polls show that about 40 percent of born-again Christians favor Obama and 48 percent support Romney, White said.

"To me, that (Romney) figure should be at least 60 percent," he said. "To me, it's a failure" of Romney not to be saying clearly and publicly, "I'm a Mormon, and I share your values."

A third panelist, theology professor William Dinges, whose special areas of study include religion and politics, noted that "for a significant number of Americans" today, the question of whether or not the candidate is a good person is increasingly important.

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"What your religion is is significantly less important," he said.

White agreed in part, but noted that Americans still consider religious belief, in some form, a very important factor in evaluating political candidates. When polls ask if people would vote for an atheist, vast majorities say no, he said.

"Americans really want their president to be religious," Schneck said.

In a question-and-answer period, the fourth panelist, CUA politics professor Matthew Green, said he found it ironic that the so-called 47 percent of Americans whom Romney dismissed as not paying taxes, saying they're dependent on government aid and not taking responsibility for their life, are "primarily concentrated in the South," which in recent decades has become a Republican stronghold.

The panel discussion was sponsored by The Catholic University of America Alumni Association. More than 200 alumni and students participated.

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