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Latinos play significant role in Obama's Catholic win

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 20, 2012
Analysis

No one knows for sure how anyone votes, but a handful of bishops made it abundantly clear that they would not be voting to re-elect President Barack Obama and that the laity risked their very souls if they did so. Most bishops were relatively restrained, but even the quieter ones rallied against the contraception mandate in Obama's Affordable Care Act and urged Catholics to vote against same-sex marriage.

The Catholic laity did not listen. According to exit polls, Obama narrowly won the Catholic vote, 50 percent to 48 percent. By comparison, in 2008, Obama took 54 percent of the Catholic vote. But a closer look at the numbers shows that Obama's support among Latinos, most of whom are Catholic, went up: 74 percent this year compared to 67 percent four years ago.

Latinos and other minorities have been hit especially hard by the economic downturn, Obama racked up a record number of deportations in four years, and he failed to deliver on his promise to enact immigration reform. But Mitt Romney lost Latinos with his talk of "self-deportation," and his repeated use of the word "illegals" to describe undocumented immigrants. Romney even used the word during an appearance on Univision.

How then did Obama's overall support among Catholics drop? Because Obama garnered only 40 percent of the white Catholic vote, compared to 47 percent in 2008. It is difficult to know if this drop was related to the Health and Human Services contraception mandate. Some Catholics might not have been concerned about the mandate but were concerned by the Democrats' relentless talk about abortion rights.

Nonetheless, Obama won with a message that had a distinctly Catholic flavor. "He moved beyond liberal rhetoric about individual rights and autonomy to an embrace of communitarian themes that are not only at the heart of formal Catholic social thought, but also deeply appealing to millions of everyday Catholics who have never read an encyclical," said Robert Christian, who edits Millennial, a blog written by young Catholics.

The most immediate policy consequence of the election is that the Affordable Care Act will now be implemented. Some Catholics lamented this. At *National Review*, George Weigel opined, "The progressive campaign to turn ever-larger numbers of citizens into wards of the state has been given a tremendous boost."

Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, head of the Catholic Health Association, took a different view. "My hope for Obama's [second term] is first that the ACA gets rolled out well and that 30-32 million people get health insurance and access," she said. "I also hope that the fiscal cliff gets negotiated in a way that respects the values of our country and sensitivity to the most vulnerable and includes the jobs bill that was hung up."

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese of the Woodstock Theological Center also voiced his concern about the approaching fiscal cliff, but discerned a silver lining. "As someone who does not have to face re-election, he might push the country to make tough decisions to reduce health care spending and defense spending and raise taxes," Reese

said.

Many prominent Catholic supporters of the president hoped that the administration and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops would find common ground and resolve the standoff over the contraceptive mandate.

"There remains a chance to hammer out the needed exemption for all religious institutions and I'm hopeful that both the administration and the [bishops] see the wisdom of working toward that resolution," said Stephen Schneck, a national co-chair of Catholics for Obama.

Schneck, a professor at The Catholic University of America, noted that among the surprise Democratic winners on Election Day was Joe Donnelly, a pro-life Democrat who won the Senate seat in Indiana. Two other pro-life Democratic senators, Joe Manchin in West Virginia and Bob Casey in Pennsylvania, also won re-election. All three can be expected to push Obama to solve the HHS mandate issue.

Notre Dame Law Professor Richard Garnett expressed concern about the future makeup of the Supreme Court. "In a second term, President Obama could dramatically reshape the Supreme Court, in a way that would put religious freedom and school choice at increased risk, could set back for decades the pro-life cause, and that could result in *Roe*-type overreach on various social issues," Garnett said.

The decisive role of Latinos also makes it likely that immigration reform will be at the top of the president's agenda. Indeed, some prominent Republicans, surveying their dismal showing among the fast-growing demographic, said that they must come to the table and find a solution to the immigration issue. It remains to be seen if more moderate Republicans will be able to convince the tea party base of the party to sign on to an issue that provokes such strong emotions. A potential hurdle: Gay rights organizations are pushing for any immigration reform bill to grant federal recognition to same-sex partners. This would doom the bill with both the bishops and congressional Republicans.

The Republicans have deeper ideological issues with Latino voters, especially Latino Catholics, said Millennial editor Christian. "Republican pandering to anti-immigration hardliners hurt their standing among Latinos, but Obama's appeal to Latinos, particularly Catholic Latinos, extends far beyond this. Catholic Latinos ... largely share the Democratic Party's understanding of the role in government. Until the Republican Party turns away from the antigovernment mentality of social Darwinists, Randians and tea party radicals, gaining ground among Catholic Latinos will be difficult."

Election Day also marked a turning point in the nation's acceptance of same-sex marriage. Bishops, the Knights of Columbus and other groups that oppose same-sex marriage must decide how long they want to fight what is an increasingly losing battle as more and more young people support same-sex marriage.

In Massachusetts, voters rejected an effort to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Opposition to the measure was led by the Catholic church, but church leaders kept a low profile. They reached out to prominent liberal Catholics like Schneck, columnist E.J. Dionne, and Vicki Reggie Kennedy, widow of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy, all of whom oppose physician-assisted suicide.

American politics is as difficult to read after the election as it was before. And the intersection of Catholic social teaching with American politics highlights the difficulties. The communitarian sensibilities of the Democrats on economic issues resonate with that teaching, but not its impulses on hot-button cultural issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and the autonomy of ecclesial institutions. The Republicans seem as unalert as ever to countless encyclicals' concerns about impersonal market forces. One thing has not changed: The Catholic vote mirrors the general population almost exactly, this year 50-48 percent, and whoever wins the Catholic vote gets

to live in the White House for four years.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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