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Catholic role could be minor in swing state of New Hampshire

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 19, 2012

President Barack Obama greets patrons as he visits Mack's Apples during a campaign event in Londonderry, N.H., Aug. 18. (Getty Images/AFP/Nicholas Kammnicholas)

PLYMOUTH, N.H. -- Plymouth is a small college town of just under 5,000 souls. It is located near the geographic center of the state, where the New England Uplands give way to the White Mountains. Main Street hosts some of the old buildings of Plymouth State University, a white clapboard church, and a variety of storefronts. On the August morning when I drove into town, it was anything but sleepy, filled with people buying coffee and reading their papers, 20-somethings loading a beer keg into the back of a pickup truck, hikers emerging from a sporting goods store with last-minute additions to their gear.
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Fran Taylor was decidedly unhurried as she made her way into Cafe Monte Alto. A retired school teacher, Taylor is now the chair of the Democratic Town Committee in the neighboring town of Holderness. She greeted a woman who was sitting outside. "She's a Democrat too!" Taylor told me. The woman excitedly told Taylor that when making phone calls on behalf of the Obama campaign, almost everyone she spoke with wanted tickets to an upcoming event with the president.

New Hampshirites are accustomed to meeting candidates. The quadrennial New Hampshire primary requires candidates to visit small towns, attend backyard barbecues, go to house parties, press the flesh. Taylor told me that in 2008, she met all the Democratic presidential contenders in person. "I liked Edwards," she said. "He was the only one who spoke about the poor." She was raised Catholic and said that "it still infuses my life" even though she usually worships at the Congregational Church, the white clapboard church across the town commons from the café. She is deeply committed to social justice. "We have decimated health and human services already," she said of the state's budget after Republicans claimed control of the state legislature in 2010.

Catholics make up about one-quarter of the state's population, but the church is not a dominant force in politics. "It is the least churched state and even that is dwindling," Taylor told me. She said that the religious liberty issue is "not really on the radar screen" as far as she can tell from conversations with neighbors. Last year, Bishop John McCormack of Manchester, the diocese that covers the entire state, attended a rally to protest budget cuts. "What he said was entirely legitimate," Taylor said, but his intervention was not well-received

because of his reputation as a one-time aide to Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law. Indeed, the House Republican leader, D.J. Bettencourt, who led the fight to cut the budget, got nasty in denouncing McCormack. "Would the bishop like to discuss his history of protecting the 'vulnerable'?" Bettencourt wrote on his Facebook page. "This man is a pedophile pimp who should have been led away from the State House in handcuffs with a raincoat over his head in disgrace. He has absolutely no moral credibility to lecture anyone." Bettencourt later apologized for his comments. He has since resigned, after it was revealed he had falsified documents regarding a required legal internship as part of his obtaining a law degree.

Beyond the drama, it is clear that unlike some states where the Catholic church's role in politics has taken a prominent and decidedly Republican turn, in New Hampshire, the Catholic church is not going to help decide this upcoming election. "In New Hampshire these days, the Catholic population is large, but the political divisions are within the Catholic population," said Professor Chris Galdieri of St. Anselm College in Manchester. "The real divergence is between more observant Catholics who tend to be more conservative versus less observant Catholics who are less ideologically identifiable." Long gone are the days when Yankees were Republicans and Catholics were Democrats.

This year, that divergence is likely to be seen at the local level. Ovide Lamontagne, profiled in *NCR* last November, is the leading GOP candidate for governor. "Ovide's competition in the GOP primary is very, very, very conservative. Ovide is only very, very conservative," Galdieri said. While Lamontagne is known as a daily communicant and former general counsel to the diocese, "he is not running as an explicitly Catholic candidate," according to Galdieri, who also points out that the religious liberty campaign has not made much of a splash in the Granite State. That said, GOP vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan made mention of his Catholicism during a recent rally with Mitt Romney on the campus of St. Anselm.

New Hampshire has been a swing state for many years. Franklin Delano Roosevelt won the state in three of his four presidential victories, but Thomas Dewey defeated Harry Truman here. Dwight Eisenhower won twice and New Hampshire backed Richard Nixon over John Kennedy in 1960 and over Hubert Humphrey in 1968. Bill Clinton won the state twice, but never broke 50 percent as Ross Perot took votes in both 1992 and 1996. George W. Bush won the state in 2000 but lost it in 2004. In 2008, Barack Obama trounced John McCain by 10 points, even though McCain had twice won the New Hampshire GOP primary. This year, New Hampshire is a swing state again, the only one in New England.

Almost every swing state this year has a sizable Catholic population. Wisconsin, Michigan and Ohio have large numbers of working-class Catholics who have been drifting toward the Republican Party since the 1970s. Colorado and Nevada have large Hispanic Catholic populations that are likely to break heavily toward the Democrats, given Romney's frequently stated opposition to any kind of immigration reform that would permit a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Florida is sui generis: a state with two distinct Latino populations, conservative Cubans in Miami and more progressive Puerto Ricans along the I-4 corridor in the center of the state, as well as many Anglo Catholic "snowbirds." And, in the suburbs of northern Virginia, the Latino vote may again put Obama over the top in that state. In his march to 270 electoral votes, Obama must not only keep his lead among Latino Catholics, he must motivate them to get to the polls.

How close are these swing states? Very close. According to the RealClearPolitics average of polls as of Sept. 1,

conducted before either party's convention, Obama led by 1.2 percent in Michigan, 1.4 percent in Ohio and 1.4 percent in Wisconsin. Among the Western swing states, with large Latino populations, Obama is doing marginally better, leading with 1.6 percent in Colorado and 3.3 percent in Nevada, but both numbers are within the margin of error. In Florida, Obama has a lead of 1 percent and in Virginia Obama's lead is a hair-splitting .06 percent.

In New Hampshire, Obama is ahead by 3.5 percent, better than the other swing states, but still perilously close to most polls' margin of error.

New Hampshire is different from the other swing states. Unlike the big Midwestern states, the working-class Catholic community has been dwindling for years: The mills in New Hampshire closed a generation before the plants in the Midwest, and New Hampshire's proximity to Boston and its Route 128 corridor, the East Coast's answer to Silicon Valley, makes southern New Hampshire look more like suburban New Jersey or Connecticut than Cleveland or Milwaukee. As well, the state has few Latinos. Taylor thinks the lack of minorities is part of the reason for opposition to Obama. "There is a racial component to the campaign," she said. "We have so few minorities in the state and people always fear what they don't know."

Additionally, New Hampshire is the one state where people not only know the state motto -- "Live Free or Die" -- they take it very seriously. Galdieri noted that last year, some social conservatives mounted an effort to overturn the state's same-sex marriage law, which passed in 2009. But they could not even muster a majority of Republican legislators for the effort.

Another challenge for both campaigns is New Hampshire's strange media market. There is only one stateside television station, and many of the people who live along the border with Massachusetts rely on Boston stations, which are very expensive. But money is the one thing not lacking in this year's election and already the airwaves are drowning in ads. "If they [the campaigns] keep up with so many campaign ads, people are going to find their mute button and never listen to another campaign ad again," Taylor said. She does think one ad might make a difference: The AARP, which Taylor calls "a legitimate organization," has run an ad against the GOP's efforts to change Medicare. "They are reaching out to their members," she said.

Mute button or not, the campaigns are unlikely to stop turning to the airwaves in their efforts to persuade undecided voters to support their candidate. There are a variety of scenarios in which New Hampshire's four Electoral College votes could prove decisive. And so the ads and the phone calls and the door-knocking and the text messages and the rallies and the flyers in the mail and all the accoutrements of American politics at the beginning of the 21st century will continue to inundate this state. This election may be like 1980, when all the undecideds break one way or the other, but 1980 was an exception. More likely, the 2012 contest will resemble the 2000 election, a nail-biter, in which every vote counts, even in little college towns like Plymouth.

[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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