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The Catholic Bishops and the Rise of Evangelical Catholics

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Abstract: White Catholics are increasingly trending toward the Republican Party, both as voters and candidates. Many of these Republican-leaning Catholics are displaying a more outspoken, culture-war oriented form of Catholicism that has been dubbed Evangelical Catholicism. Through their forceful disciplining of pro-choice Catholics and treatment of abortion in their quadrennial voting guides, as well as their emphasis on “religious liberty”, the U.S. bishops have played a major role in the rise of these Evangelical Catholics.

Keywords: U.S. Catholic bishops; abortion; Republican; Democratic; voting

1. Introduction

While the Catholic Church is associated with opposition to legalized abortion, a review of the historical record shows that the anti-abortion movement was largely fomented by the Catholic hierarchy and fueled by grassroots Evangelical opposition to abortion [1]. Lay Catholics have largely tracked general public opinion on abortion, with just over half of white Catholics saying it should be legal; polls have consistently found that only about 13% of Catholics support the position of the Catholic Church that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances [2,3]. As a result, Catholic voters have been comfortable supporting candidates who favor abortion rights, adding to their reputation as swing voters who have backed both successful Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. However, a substantial subset of white Catholic voters now appears more firmly committed to the Republican Party.

The run-up to the 2016 presidential election witnessed several historic turning points in religion and party affiliation that point to an ongoing political realignment of white Catholics. In 2014, the Pew Research Center found in a poll of 2000 adults conducted shortly before the 2014 midterm elections that 53% of white Catholics identified as Republicans versus 39% who called themselves Democrats, the largest point spread between Republican and Democratic Party affiliation in the history of the Pew Center’s tracking of religion and party affiliation [4]. According to a Pew analysis of the midterm House vote, white Catholics favored the Republican Party by a historic 22 points (60% versus 38%). As recently as 2006, the white Catholic vote was nearly evenly split (49% Republican versus 50% Democratic); in 2010, white Catholics favored the Republican Party by 20 points (59% to 39%) [5].

The Pew Center also found that, for the first time, white Catholics were more Republican than white mainline Protestants, long the bedrock of the GOP coalition, who now break toward the Republican Party by only eight points (49% versus 41%), versus 14 points for white Catholics [4]. While a separate Pew analysis of voter affiliation trends in 2014 found a slightly narrower spread for Catholic party identification, with 50% of white Catholics identifying as Republican versus 41% Democratic, and Catholics have long been swing voters, there appears to be a clear trend of white Catholics identifying with the Republican Party [6].

Republican politicians increasingly are also Catholic. In 2009, there were almost three times as many Catholic Democrats in the House as Catholic Republicans: 98 Democrats to 37 Republicans. However, as of 2015, House Republicans who identify as Catholic outnumber Catholic Democrats, 69 to 68, for the first time ever [7]. And nearly half of the initial Republican presidential candidates, including many of the presumed frontrunners, were Catholic: Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Bobby Jindal, Marco Rubio, and Rick Santorum. This is a startling departure for a party that historically has been dominated by Protestants and had seen only Catholic factional candidates like Pat Buchanan, vanity candidates like Newt Gingrich, or fringe candidates like Alan Keyes. Unlike the Democratic Party, which has nominated three Catholic presidential candidates (Al Smith, John F. Kennedy and John Kerry), the Republican Party has never nominated a Catholic as its presidential candidate (it has fielded two Catholic vice presidential candidates: Paul Ryan in 2012 and William Edward Miller in 1964).

Not only have white Catholics shed their allegiance to the Democratic Party, but these Republican Catholics are markedly different from moderate, swing-vote Catholics who have been so important to presidential aspirations since the 1970s. These Catholics marry strong support for orthodox Catholic social teaching on moral issues, particularly abortion, with equally strong support for Republican free-market economic policies. Many of these conservative Catholics, especially those in the public eye, have become more outspoken in asserting a “gospel-centered”, biblical morality in the public square as central to their Catholicism. This is a departure from more conventional notions of Catholicism that focus on private religious practice and charitable works.

Conservative author George Weigel has dubbed this outspoken, conservative Catholicism “Evangelical Catholicism”, as it differs from the “cultural Catholicism of the past that was ‘comfortable’ . . . within the ambient public culture”:

Evangelical Catholicism . . . is a counterculture that seeks to convert the ambient public culture by proclaiming certain truths, by worshipping in spirit and in truth, and by modeling a more human way of life. Evangelical Catholicism does not seek to “get along”; it seeks to convert [8].

Since the 2000 election of George W. Bush, these Evangelical Catholics have been an increasingly potent, but somewhat unrecognized force, in U.S. politics, helping to shore-up the fading political power of Protestant Evangelicals. This paper examines their creation and rise as a political force as a consequence of the long-term efforts of the U.S. Catholic bishops’ conference to emphasize abortion and religious liberty as key issues for Catholics.

2. Abortion and the “Catholic Vote”

Abortion first surfaced as a major concern for Catholic voters in the presidential election of 1976, when both the Democratic candidate, Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter, and the Republican Candidate, President Gerald Ford, sought to win the Catholic vote by courting the leadership of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB¹). When the bishops said they were “disappointed” with Carter’s opposition to a constitutional amendment to ban abortion but “encouraged” by Ford’s support of some form of amendment, it was widely perceived that they were backing the Republican candidate [9]. The NCCB leadership “stopped short of donning Ford buttons, but there was no mistaking the effect, if not the intent, of their extraordinary press conference in the White House briefing room”, wrote columnist Mary McGrory [10].

Despite the fact that Ford lost the Catholic vote and the election, the overt involvement of the bishops caused a backlash among some of the more progressive members of the bishops’ conference, who felt the church had been used politically and that the issue of abortion had been inappropriately

¹ In 2001, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops was renamed the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

singled out as the sole policy consideration for Catholics. In an attempt to rebalance the ledger, in 1983, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin proposed a “consistent ethic of life”, or “seamless garment”, that united opposition to abortion with other “pro-life” concerns, including opposition to nuclear proliferation and the death penalty. At a time when the ascendant conservative Republican Party was championing cuts in welfare and other social programs, Bernardin’s effort was clearly intended to diffuse abortion as a political wedge issue:

If one contends, as we do, that the right of every fetus to be born should be protected by civil law and supported by civil consensus, then our moral, political and economic responsibilities do not stop at the moment of birth. Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker [11].

However, Bernardin’s seamless garment was shredded by the presidential election of 1984, when New York Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, who supported abortion rights, was selected as the running mate for Democratic presidential candidate Vice President Walter Mondale. Her selection came at a time when pro-choice New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and New York Archbishop John O’Connor were already in the midst of a very public exchange about whether a faithful Catholic public official could support legal abortion. The issue became so heated that Cuomo felt the need to give a public explanation for his stance in an historic speech at Notre Dame University in which he asserted, “My church and my conscience require me to believe certain things about divorce, birth control and abortion. My church does not order me, under pain of sin or expulsion, to pursue my salvific mission according to a precisely defined political plan” [12].

Despite Cuomo’s assertion that good Catholics could support abortion rights, O’Connor publicly denounced Ferraro’s contention, voiced in a cover letter for the proceedings of a congressional briefing held by the abortion rights organization Catholics for a Free Choice, that “the Catholic position on abortion is not monolithic”. The subsequent back-and-forth between O’Connor and Ferraro on the duty of Catholics to uphold the church’s abortion teaching became a consuming issue in the 1984 race and resulted in the publication in the *New York Times* on 7 October 1984, of the “Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion”, signed by 97 Catholic scholars, theologians, priests, and nuns under the headline “A Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists Among Committed Catholics”. The statement asserted that “a large number of Catholic theologians hold that even direct abortion, though tragic, can sometimes be a moral choice” and that “Catholics should not seek the kind of legislation that curtails the legitimate exercise of the freedom of religion and moral choice” ([1], pp. 107–12).

The statement was seen as a major challenge to the authority of the NCCB and the Vatican, which demanded and received retractions from the priests and all but two of the nuns among the signatories. This marked the beginning of a crackdown by the Catholic hierarchy on public dissent from the Vatican’s abortion position that would have long-term implications for the church and U.S. politics. Theologians who signed the statement, like Jane Via and Daniel Maguire, reported that their lectures and seminars at Catholic colleges and universities were cancelled. Sister Agnes Mansour, a Sister of Mercy who ran Michigan’s Medicaid program, was ordered to resign from her job because a small portion of the program’s funding went to abortions for poor women; she chose to resign as a Sister of Mercy instead. In August 1986, the Vatican revoked the teaching authority of one of the nation’s most respected Catholic moral theologians, Father Charles Curran, because he held that contraception, abortion and homosexuality could be moral in certain circumstances ([1], pp. 132–33).

In 1989, following the landmark *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services* Supreme Court decision, which held that states could impose some limits on abortion, the Catholic bishops increasingly looked to hold Catholic officials publicly accountable for their abortion votes. What followed was what political commentator John McLaughlin called a “full court press” by Catholic bishops against pro-choice Catholic politicians “the likes of which has never been seen by American Catholics”. San Diego Bishop Leo Maher issued an edict banning priests from giving communion to pro-choice state Senate

candidate Lucy Killea. Montana Bishop Elden Curtis asked four Catholic state officials to fill out a questionnaire regarding their support of abortion rights. New York Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughan warned Gov. Cuomo that he was “in danger of going to hell”, and Brooklyn Bishop Thomas Daily barred him from speaking in Brooklyn parishes ([1] pp. 134–37). Archbishop O’Connor published a statement in the diocesan newspaper that threatened pro-choice politicians with excommunication:

... where Catholics are perceived not only as treating church teaching on abortion with contempt but helping to multiply abortions by advocating legislation supporting abortion or by making public funds available for abortion ... bishops may consider excommunication the only option [13].

The Pennsylvania bishops released a pastoral letter saying that public officials “cannot be a Catholic in good standing in the church while publicly rejecting and advocating the abandonment of its teaching”. As a result, a pro-choice candidate for the Pennsylvania Assembly was fired from her volunteer position at a local church, another local candidate was removed from her position on the parochial school board. In Maryland, a pro-choice candidate for the House of Delegates was removed from the parish council of Our Lady of Lourdes in Bethesda. Peoria, Illinois Bishop John Myers told pro-choice Catholics they should abstain from receiving communion ([1], p. 137).

Despite the bishops’ “full court press” on abortion, Catholic support of the Republican Party, the party of opposition to legalized abortion, remained relatively low during the first half of the 1990s. According to the Pew Research Center, about 40% of registered Catholic voters identified as Republican in 1992, with a slight uptick in 1994, the year of the Newt Gingrich-led “Republican Revolution” [6]. Democratic Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton won the backing of Catholic voters in 1992 and again in 1996. However, beginning in the late to mid-1990s, there was a divergence of Catholic voters, with less committed Catholics staying with the Democratic Party and more committed Catholics migrating to the Republican Party. By “1998 and 2000, a majority of Catholic voters who register as committed religious adherents began to identify as Republican”, according to one analysis [14].

This realignment occurred at the time of a concomitant party sorting regarding abortion, as pro-life Democrats became anathema in the party, as signaled by the silencing of pro-life Pennsylvania Gov. Bob Casey at the 1992 Democratic convention. While 57% of Democrats opposed abortion in 1979, by 1996 only 15% were opposed. Similarly by 1998, all the candidates for the GOP’s leadership positions were opposed to abortion, as pro-choice Republicans became a rarity [15].

A number of factors related to the bishops’ anti-abortion advocacy likely contributed to this realignment, the first being the cumulative effect of a decade of pointed reminders to Catholics that they should avoid voting for pro-choice candidates, which increasingly meant Democrats. The Catholic bishops also lobbied extraordinarily hard for an override of Clinton’s 1996 veto of a measure banning “partial-birth” abortion, charging that the president had “move(d) our nation one step further toward acceptance of infanticide”. The NCCB ran full-page ads against the veto in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* during the Republican National Convention, criticized Clinton from a number of prominent pulpits, and held an unprecedented vigil of the entire membership of the bishops’ conference on the steps of Capitol Hill the night before a failed effort to override the veto ([1], pp. 176–78).

3. Catholics and Evangelicals Together

The migration of more conservative Catholics to the Republican Party coincided with a growing effort among conservative Catholic and Evangelical leaders to put aside their theological differences in favor of a united front on culture-war issues. They saw opposition to abortion as both the biggest unifier of the two religious traditions and a model for future activism to battle what they saw as the rise of secular society.

In 1990, Keith Fournier published *Evangelical Catholics*, in which he called for “evangelical Christians of all traditions to join forces” despite their doctrinal differences to fight the increasing

acceptance of “immoral” practices such as homosexuality, sexual promiscuity and abortion, as well as what he called the increasing paganism of society, noting:

Perhaps the area that holds the most promise is our common fight for life. . . . I believe more strongly than ever that the pro-life movement is a model for action-oriented, sacrificial ecumenism on all fronts [16].

In 1994, some 40 Catholic and Evangelical leaders endorsed the Evangelicals and Catholics Together statement, which called on Catholics and Evangelicals to work together as believers in Jesus Christ for the “right ordering of civil society”, including the abolition of abortion, a greater emphasis on traditional moral values, an expanded role for religion in public life and education, and a “vibrant market economy”. The statement recognized abortion as the foundational issue for the alliance to battle encroaching secularism: “The pattern of convergence and cooperation between Evangelicals and Catholics is, in large part, a result of common effort to protect human life”. The statement, which was notable for its evangelical, Gospel-centered language, was signed by a number of prominent Catholics, including Fr. Avery Dulles and Richard John Neuhaus, and Catholic bishops, including Cardinal O’Connor, who had recently served as the head of the NCCB’s Committee on Pro-Life Activities, Bishop Francis George, and Archbishop Francis Stafford [17].

4. The Gospel of Life and Faithful Citizenship

In 1998, the NCCB released *Living the Gospel of Life*, one of its quadrennial voting guides for Catholics. Instead of the “consistent ethic of life”, *Living the Gospel of Life* said that opposition to abortion and euthanasia was foundational for Catholics and that Catholics should weigh candidates’ positions on abortion above other social justice issues such as poverty and war. It urged bishops to confront pro-choice Catholic politicians, privately at first and then publicly if necessary [18]. The *Washington Post* called *Living the Gospel of Life*, “a new era in the church’s political activism” that thrust the Catholic bishops into the center of the abortion debate just as the presidential election of 2000 was heating up [19].

The mandate for the Catholic bishops to instruct the faithful more forcefully on the issue of abortion was soon in full view, as a number of prominent bishops, including Los Angeles Bishop Roger Mahony, Pittsburgh Bishop Donald Wuerl, Philadelphia Bishop Anthony Bevilacqua and New York Archbishop Edward Egan, met with anti-abortion Republican Presidential nominee Texas Gov. George W. Bush and appeared to give their imprimatur to a coordinated Republican effort to attract Catholic voters. The bishops of New York and Washington, for example, told congregants in their dioceses that they should vote for candidates who protected the unborn ([1], p. 204).

The 2004 election also saw the Catholic bishops bring abortion to the forefront for Catholic voters in a way that had not been as visible since 1984, due to the nomination of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry to the Democratic presidential ticket. Kerry, a practicing Catholic, said he respected the church’s teaching but as a public servant believed in the separation of church and state and wouldn’t legislate articles of faith. Following the Vatican’s first formal statement on the participation of Catholics in public life, however, formulated by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, which said the protection of life was an inalienable moral precept, conservatives within the bishops’ conference campaigned to update the USCCB’s *Faithful Citizenship* voting guide to emphasize abortion. Others in the conference, such as Washington, D.C. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, sought a more balanced approach that included abortion as one of a set of issues of concern to Catholics, an approach that was largely codified in the final document. This, however, did not prevent several prominent bishops, including Newark Archbishop John Myers, Colorado Springs Bishop Michael Sheridan, and Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, from denouncing Kerry and saying they would deny him communion or that it was a sin for Catholics to vote for him. The *National Catholic Reporter* called it a “deliberate attempt to delegitimize the Democratic Party in the eyes of American Catholic voters” [20].

Despite the criticism, bishops such as Chaput and Meyers continued their widely publicized campaign against Kerry, assisted by a network of conservative Catholic activists who amplified their message. They pointed Catholics to a voting guide produced by the conservative Catholic group Catholic Answers that listed abortion as one of five “nonnegotiable issues” for Catholics. Chaput and bishops in Phoenix and St. Louis allowed the guide to be distributed to parishioners in lieu of the USCCB guide [21]. Kerry lost the critical Catholic vote by five points, and many conservatives pointed to a poll showing that 80% of “values voters” had voted for Bush as evidence that church-going Catholics had abandoned Kerry because of his support for abortion rights [22].

After considerable criticism of their role in the 2004 election, the bishops released a new version of Faithful Citizenship in 2007 that said, in essence, that Catholics could vote for a candidate with a morally unacceptable position as long as they didn’t vote for the candidate for that reason and supported them for “other morally grave reasons”, such as their position on anti-poverty initiatives, which was seen as a boon to Democratic candidate Senator Barack Obama. It did, however, retain opposition to abortion and euthanasia as “foundational” issues for Catholics [23]. While overall Catholics voted for Obama 54% to GOP candidate Senator John McCain’s 45%, “white Catholics stayed on the Republican side of the ledger, and the most observant Catholics moved in a Republican direction by a few percentage points”, according to John Green. Green said the data suggest:

... a bit of a polarization among white Catholics, with the regular mass-attenders moving more Republican than they were in 2004, but the less-regular mass-attenders moving more Democratic. ... these internal political currents may reflect the kinds of mobilization that was going on in the Catholic community on both sides of an issue like abortion [24].

5. Religious Liberty and Evangelicalization

The most recent force in the evangelicalization of conservative-leaning Catholics was the Catholic bishops’ campaign against reproductive health measures in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as related to “religious liberty”. First, the USCCB worked with a coalition of pro-life Democrats in the House of Representatives to threaten to sink the ACA if it did not contain a provision banning private health plans participating in insurance exchanges from providing abortion. The bishops’ conference charged the act “would expand the role of the federal government in funding and facilitating abortion” and called on Catholics to pressure their representatives to reject the ACA if it didn’t contain the ban [25].

No sooner had the controversy died down, with the Obama Administration issuing an executive order that no federal funding could go to abortion services, when the bishops objected to a requirement in the ACA that employer-sponsored insurance policies cover all Food and Drug Administration-approved contraceptives as part of no-cost preventive care. Following objections from the bishops’ conference and Catholic institutions, the original exemption from the requirement (which applied only to faith-based organizations that were directly involved in the inculcation of religion and employed members of their own faith) was modified to include religious nonprofits. Under the modification, insurers would directly cover contraceptives for the employees of faith-based nonprofit groups like hospitals and universities. However, the USCCB contended that this still made Catholic institutions culpable in the provision of contraception and was, therefore, a violation of their religious liberty because of the official Catholic prohibition on the use of contraception.

Central to the bishops’ argument was their assertion that emergency contraceptives, a low dose of oral contraceptives that prevent pregnancy, were abortifacients. Despite the fact that this assertion had been largely dismissed—including by the Catholic Health Association’s own journal—the USCCB asserted that Catholic nonprofits were being required to provide “abortion-inducing drugs” in violation of their consciences [26]. “Never before has the federal government forced individuals and organizations to go out into the marketplace and buy a product that violates their conscience. This shouldn’t happen in a land where free exercise of religion ranks first in the Bill of Rights”, said Cardinal Timothy Dolan on behalf of the USCCB in a video designed to gin up opposition to the measure [27].

The bishops' conference coupled the fight against the contraception mandate with their battle against the legalization of same-sex marriage, asserting both were violations of religious liberty because they prevented Catholics and other religious believers from expressing their faith fully in the public square. In November of 2011, the U.S. bishops' conference announced a major effort to champion "religious liberty", including a new Committee for Religious Liberty, which was followed in 2012 by a "Fortnight for Freedom" for the two weeks leading up to the 4th of July to mobilize Catholics around the religious liberty issue ahead of the 2012 elections.

The bishops' rhetoric suggested that Catholics were being persecuted by the Obama administration for their religion, a charge that soon percolated through conservative Catholic circles. One bishop likened Obama's "anti-Catholic bias" to Hitler and Stalin. Carl Anderson, head of the Knights of Columbus, told the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast: "Never in the lifetime of anyone present here, has the religious liberty of the American people been as threatened as it is today" [28].

The escalation of the bishops' rhetoric regarding religious liberty coincided with a sharp increase in the percentage of white Catholics who identified themselves as Republican. In 2012, Obama lost the white Catholic vote to GOP candidate former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who called the ACA contraception requirement an "assault on religion", by 19 points versus only a five point spread to McCain in 2008 [29].

At the same time, former Republican Senator Rick Santorum, a Catholic and outspoken critic of the ACA, attracted significant Evangelical support for his presidential campaign, marking a true Catholic–Evangelical convergence in national politics. With his stringent opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, embrace of home schooling and the teaching of creationism, and support for a muscular military and cuts to social service programs, framed around his testimony of his personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Santorum was the prototypical Evangelical Catholic politician. Religion writer David Gibson called him "a new kind of religious hybrid, the result of a kind of cross-pollination between evangelicals and Catholics" that began with the collaboration "in the battle against abortion" [30].

By 2014, the balance between Republican and Democratic Catholics was almost exactly reversed from what it had been in the early 1990s, with not even 40% of Catholics identifying as Democratic and over 50% calling themselves Republicans. At the same time, between 2009 and 2014, the number of white Catholics who said the Obama Administration was "unfriendly to religion" more than doubled from 17% to 36%; nearly twice as many Catholics said the Republican Party was friendly to religion than was the Democratic Party [4]. This suggests that the Catholic bishops' emphasis on "religious liberty" resonated with Catholic voters who see themselves on the losing side of a culture war and feel the need to assert their religious identity in a more public and forceful manner—a manner that traditionally has been the territory of Evangelicals.

These white Catholic voters also displayed alliances to issues typically associated with conservative Evangelicals, and opposite to many Catholic social justice positions, rejecting spending on social programs, seeking punitive action against immigrants, and rejecting the Catholic Church's strong pro-environment social teachings. In 2014, nearly half of Catholic Republicans (47%) said the GOP was "too liberal" on spending, which was similar to the response of Evangelicals. One-quarter of Catholics said the Republican Party was too liberal on abortion and one-third said the party was too liberal on illegal immigration [4]. In addition, only about 40% of white Catholics believe that the earth is warming as the result of human activity or that there is a scientific consensus on the cause of climate change. White Catholic's lack of concern about climate change, with 60% somewhat or very unconcerned, is second only to white Evangelical Protestants at 64% [31].

6. Conclusions

The past 25 years have witnessed the emergence and growth of a bloc of Evangelical Catholics—white Catholics who lean heavily toward the Republican Party as a result of their radicalization on abortion, and subsequently "religious liberty", by the U.S. Catholic bishops. The

bishops championed opposition to abortion as the most important issue for Catholics and punished Catholic theologians, lay leaders, and public officials who support legal abortion. This had the effect of steering a subset of Catholics toward the Republican Party, the party of official opposition to abortion, where they embraced positions on domestic and foreign policy issues that contradict Catholic social teaching. Further radicalization occurred around the issue of religious liberty, with the bishops suggesting that nonnegotiable Catholic values were being stifled in the public square and, therefore, Catholics needed to be more outspoken and public about their faith, similar to the long-standing Evangelical contention that faith-based actors need to be assertive in public policy issues. The result is that a subset of the Catholic population is acting more like the firmly GOP-based Evangelical community in terms of its political activities and affiliations, an evolution that has long-term implications for party alignment in the United States.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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