

How America Decides. By: Sullivan, Amy, Time South Pacific (Australia/New Zealand edition), 08180628, 7/14/2008, Issue 27

Database:

Business Source Premier

Section: CAMPAIGN '08

Catholic Voters in 2008. With the economy and Iraq topping voter concerns, abortion has receded into the political background. That puts Catholics up for grabs--and Obama is winning some converts

Douglas Kmiec is the kind of Catholic voter the GOP usually doesn't have to think twice about. The Pepperdine law professor and former Reagan Justice Department lawyer (Samuel Alito was an office mate) attends Mass each morning. He has actively opposed abortion for most of his adult life, working with crisis pregnancy centers to persuade women not to undergo the procedure. He is a member of the conservative Federalist Society and occasionally sends a contribution to Focus on the Family.

He is also a vocal supporter of Barack Obama. Kmiec made waves in the Catholic world in late March when he endorsed the Democratic candidate. But Kmiec insists that while he still considers himself a Republican, his choice is clear this election year. "I have grave moral doubts about the war, serious doubts about the economic course Republicans have followed over the last seven years, and believe that immigration reforms won't come about by Republican hands," he says. "Senator McCain would not be the strongest advocate for the balance of things that I care about."

A new TIME poll of Catholic voters reveals that Kmiec is part of a broader pattern. Although Obama was thought to have a "Catholic problem" during the Democratic primaries, in which Hillary Clinton won a majority of Catholic votes, he has pulled even with John McCain among that constituency--Obama now polls 44% to his GOP opponent's 45%.

appealing to Catholics on social issues, a courtship that culminated in George W. Bush's victory in 2004. The TIME poll confirmed that a majority of Catholics (59%) can be broadly defined as pro-life (opposing abortion except to protect a woman's life or health or in cases of rape or incest). But these pro-life Catholics are actually split into two voting camps.

Many conservative Catholics consider abortion to be the determining factor in their electoral decisions, and as a result they almost always

Pizza. One of these groups, Priests for Life, spent \$1 million on television and newspaper ads in the last month of the campaign.

The Catholic initiative was the most ambitious religious outreach effort ever undertaken by either party. And it paid off. Bush might have expected more competition for those votes from his Catholic opponent. But John Kerry found himself the target of stinging criticism from a few bishops who argued that he should be denied Communion because of his support for abortion rights. No one on the Kerry campaign was devoted to Catholic outreach, and Kerry chose not to respond to the attacks. Bush won the Catholic vote that year, 52% to 47%.

Faith of the Democrats

The GOP's success with Catholic voters in 2004 was an astounding victory born out of Bush's personal appeal to pro-life voters and six years of party organizing at the parish level. But it also sparked a backlash in

has called the Catholic Church "the great whore of Babylon," a phrase unlikely to warm the hearts of McCain's Catholic supporters.

Obama's campaign more closely resembles the 2004 Bush outreach effort. An extensive religious outreach team has focused the bulk of its work on training ordinary Catholics to reach out to friends and neighbors by holding "values" house parties and explaining their support for Obama. The Democrat also has a roster of high-powered Catholic surrogates who have fanned out across swing states--including Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey Jr., whose father, the pro-life former governor, was widely viewed by Catholics as a victim of Democratic intolerance after he was not allowed to speak at the party's 1992 convention.

Obama, whose work as a community organizer was partly funded by a Catholic social-justice group, recently laid out his plan for a new and improved faith-based initiative. It is a policy extension of the phrase he often uses--"I am my brother's keeper"--to express his belief that members of a society are responsible for one another. And it is an idea rooted in the Catholic concept of the common good.

This "bottom-up, personal responsibility" message, as he describes it, appeals to Kmiec, allowing him to be not just a McCain skeptic but also an Obama supporter. That decision has not come without a cost--this spring Kmiec was denied Communion by a priest who denounced his endorsement of Obama. But with Catholics almost twice as likely to name the economy, Iraq and terrorism as their top concerns over abortion and gay marriage, Kmiec has plenty of company. Come November, that priest may be holding on to a very full bowl of wafers.

America's Catholics...

They're about 24% of the population and could tip key states this fall

Race/ethnicity

65% White (non-Hispanic)

29% Hispanic

6% All others

Political affiliation

33% Republican

48% Democratic

10% Independent

... and how they view the candidates

A new TIME poll shows McCain and Obama virtually tied, but each man has perceived strengths

- * 45% of Catholics support John McCain
- * 44% of Catholics support Barack Obama

McCAIN'S ADVANTAGES WITH CATHOLICS

Would best protect the U.S. against terrorism

McCAIN 53%

OBAMA 31%

Would best handle the situation in Iraq

McCAIN 47% (57% of Catholics say the situation in Iraq is extremely important in this election)

OBAMA 42%

Is closest to my views on so-called values issues

McCAIN 46%

OBAMA 28%

In most comfortable talking about his religious beliefs

McCAIN 45%

OBAMA 35%

OBAMA'S ADVANTAGES WITH CATHOLICS

Is the most likable

OBAMA 67%

McCAIN 20%

Understands concerns of people like me

OBAMA 51%

McCAIN 30%

Would best be able to handle the economy

OBAMA 42% (63% say the economy is extremely important)

McCAIN 36%

Would take on special interests in Washington

OBAMA 38%

McCAIN 34%

Sources: Demographic data from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; map data from Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States; 200, Glenmary Research Center via the Association of Religion Data Archives. The TIME poll was conducted June 18-25 among a national random sample of 600 adult Catholic likely voters by SRBI Public Affairs. Catholics were identified both in a new cross-section sample and in other previous TIME random-digit-dial samples. The margin of error is +/-4 percentage points. The full questionnaire and trend data can be found at www.srbi.com.

MAP: Catholics as a percentage of population, by county

PHOTO (COLOR) Catholic convert: Kmiec, a Republican, supports Obama--and was denied Communion after endorsing the Democrat

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Amy Sullivan

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