

Catholic Maryland voters shift to GOP?

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At a time when Catholics nationwide seem to be returning to their Democratic roots, Catholic voters in Maryland are increasingly casting their ballots for Republican candidates.

According to CNN exit polls, Maryland Catholics solidly favored the Republican candidates for governor and U.S. senator in November's election.

Incumbent Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. captured 53 percent of the Catholic vote over the Catholic Democratic challenger, while Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele earned 54 percent of the Catholic vote in his bid for a Senate seat.

In presidential races, the Catholic vote in the Free State has also tipped Republican, with President George W. Bush winning 57 percent of the Catholic vote in 2004 – a 14 point increase from his support among Maryland Catholics in the 2000 election, according to CNN exit polls.

Rick Vatz, a professor of political rhetoric at Towson University and a well-known Maryland political observer, called the apparent trend among Maryland Catholic voters “not all that surprising.”

“Democrats in Maryland tend to be much more liberal than Democrats in other parts of the country,” he explained. “Maryland is really going the way of Massachusetts and that’s probably having an effect on the Catholic vote.”

Catholics, historically identified with the Democratic Party, are generally opposed to abortion, gay marriage and embryonic stem cell research – issues that have been embraced by the Democratic leadership in this state, Mr. Vatz said.

“Most of the bellwether social issues that you would associate with the Republican

party are important to Catholics,” he said. “While Democrats in Maryland are putting up candidates that are farther to the left, nationally we’re seeing more conservative Democratic voices.”

James Pelura, Maryland Republican party chairman, agreed that more Catholics seem to be turning to the GOP because the Democratic Party is abandoning them on important social issues.

Consistent Republican support for more educational options for Marylanders has also played in his party’s favor, he said.

“Republicans in general favor school choice and that’s something the Democrats have fought against,” said Mr. Pelura, noting that many Maryland Republicans have embraced more state support for Catholic schools and have stood up for prolife issues such as parental notification for minors seeking an abortion.

Terry Lierman, chair of the Maryland Democratic Party, dismissed the validity of the CNN exit polls and said he has seen other poll numbers which show Maryland Catholics favor Democratic candidates. Mr. Lierman did not respond to two written requests by The Catholic Review to provide copies of his data.

Maryland Catholics support his party because the church’s teachings on equal rights and justice mesh with Democratic values, Mr. Lierman said.

“I think it’s a reflection of the doctrine of helping the poor and working families and human rights,” he said. “They are voting their consciences.”

Many Maryland Democrats have been supportive of increases in the minimum wage and ending capital punishment – other important concerns of Catholic leaders in Maryland.

According to the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life, Democrats nationally won 55 percent of the Catholic vote in House of Representative races last year, compared with 44 percent for the Republicans. Among white Catholics, Democrats and Republicans divided the vote almost evenly.