

Field of Catholic presidential candidates shrinks

WASHINGTON - Whatever happened to the crowd of Catholics vying for the presidential nomination in 2008?

Less than a year ago, nearly a dozen Catholics - Republicans and Democrats - had either declared as candidates for president, started an exploratory committee or been widely mentioned as likely candidates.

But with New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's decision Jan. 10 to end his run for the Democratic nomination, Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio remains the most prominent Catholic candidate on the Democratic side.

Democratic Sens. Joseph Biden of Delaware and Christopher Dodd of Connecticut dropped out of the race a week before Richardson did. Early in 2007, Gov. Tom Vilsack of Iowa became the first Catholic to formally end his quest for the Democratic nomination.

Retired Gen. Wesley Clark, once considered a possible candidate for president in 2008, has instead endorsed Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York.

In addition to Clinton, a United Methodist, front-runners for the Democratic nomination include Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, a member of the United Church of Christ, and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, who was a Baptist growing up but now worships at a Methodist church.

With Kucinich on the so-called "second tier" of Democratic candidates is former Sen. Mike Gravel of Alaska, a Unitarian Universalist.

Among Republican candidates for president, the situation has been even more fluid in the past year. Former Secretary of Health and Human Services and former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson ended his run for the GOP nomination in August, and later endorsed a fellow Catholic, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

But another Thompson, former Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee, who belongs to the United Church of Christ, has entered the race in the past year, as have former ambassador Alan Keyes, a Catholic, and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister.

Catholic Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas ended his bid for the Republican nomination in October and endorsed Sen. John McCain of Arizona, who was raised in the Episcopal Church but now attends Baptist services.

Another Catholic, former New York Gov. George Pataki, had been reportedly considering a run for the Republican nomination but never entered the race.

In addition to Giuliani and Keyes, Catholic Republican presidential candidates also include long-shot candidate John Cox of Illinois, but he garnered only 40 votes in the New Hampshire primary.

McCain, Huckabee, Giuliani and former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have been the top GOP vote-getters in early polling.

Jessica Davis, president of Chicago Media Corporation and director of law student development at Southern Illinois University School of Law in Carbondale, Ill., said the main challenge for the Catholic presidential candidates who dropped out was not their religion but “the perception of viability or lack of viability.”

“In American politics, viability is defined by one having a broad enough appeal to

raise the level of funds needed to launch and sustain a national presidential campaign,” she told Catholic News Service. “These candidates could not create the momentum needed early in their campaign to achieve this level of viability.”

Marianist Father John Putka, who teaches in the political science department at the University of Dayton in Ohio, agrees with Davis that the Catholic candidates who dropped out lacked what he called “marketability.”

“They did not meet the criteria to be major presidential candidates,” he said, citing the need for an “extensive political network,” a significant donor base and “dynamic, marketable personalities.”

Giuliani, the most prominent Catholic remaining in the race, might have difficulty obtaining the Republican nomination because he “cuts against the mainstream of the Republican Party” on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, Father Putka said in a Jan. 15 telephone interview. “He’s a Republican in terms of economics and finances, but on the social issues, he’s very secular, more like a Democrat.”

Andrew Murphy, associate professor of humanities and political philosophy at Valparaiso University in Indiana, said he felt sure that none of the Catholic candidates’ campaigns failed because of their religion. “I wonder if people were even aware of the religious affiliation” of most of the candidates, he said.

Rather, the candidates who dropped out were “not compelling speakers, not people who were going to get people excited,” said Murphy, who co-chairs the religion, politics and the state group of the American Academy of Religion. “They just didn’t have a commanding presence.”

“Candidates need money or organization or a message that will resonate with voters,” said Martin Shaffer, an associate professor of political science at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Among the 2008 candidates who remain in the race,

Clinton and Obama have all three, with Obama “also having the charisma needed for a candidate to break out from the pack,” he added.

Although many Catholic presidential candidates have come and gone over the years, Shaffer said you’d have to look back several election cycles to find someone who might have had the right qualities to succeed.

“To see a Catholic candidate who could have run with the right attributes - charisma, message, speaking ability - you have to go back to Mario Cuomo,” the former New York governor who flirted with the idea of a run for the presidency in the 1980s and 1990s but never declared himself a candidate.