

Growing divide seen in political worldviews of Catholic constituencies

WASHINGTON - As in other recent election years, Catholic voting behavior is likely to resemble the voting of the population at large, but there is a growing divide in the political worldviews of various Catholic constituencies.

That was the conclusion reached by a panel of pollsters and academics convened by the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America, which found increasing divergence in the views of older and younger voters and Hispanic and white Catholics.

Introducing the Oct. 13 session at the National Press Club, John H. Garvey, the new president of Catholic University, said political pundits have predicted time and again that "the role of religion in public policy is changing or diminishing." But, he said, "religion and religious issues are still critical."

Up for grabs this year are all 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, 37 seats in the U.S. Senate, 37 governorships and the seats in 88 chambers of state legislatures - 42 states have two chambers, and four are one-chamber states.

Voters in the 2010 midterm election - across all religious groups and even among those not affiliated with any religion - are showing significantly less support for Democratic candidates than they did in 2008 for President Barack Obama, said Robert P. Jones, CEO and founder of Public Religion Research Institute.

Using data from the American Values Survey conducted in early September, about two months before the Nov. 2 election, Jones found an 8 percent decline in Democratic support among both white Catholic voters and white mainline Protestant voters. Among unaffiliated voters, the decrease was 11 percent.

Gregory A. Smith, a senior researcher with the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, found an even greater differential between the vote in 2008 and the stated

intentions of Catholic registered voters in 2010, using data gathered by his organization in late August and early September.

A majority of Catholics voted for Obama in 2008, except for the subgroup of white Catholics who attend Mass more than once a week, according to Pew statistics. But in the latest Pew polling, Smith said, 50 percent of white Catholics said they would support Republican candidates this year, with 39 percent stating support for the Democratic candidate and 11 percent undecided.

Among white Catholics who attend Mass weekly, 53 percent said they supported the GOP candidate, while 37 percent backed the Democrat, he said.

The margin of error for both the Pew and Public Religion surveys was plus or minus 2 percentage points, although it was larger for some subgroups.

A shift away from the party in power is not unusual, said Matthew Green, assistant professor of politics at Catholic University and a fellow at the institute.

"The presidential party almost always does badly in the midterm elections," he said, citing an average loss of 30 House seats and three Senate seats for the party that holds the presidency.

The issues that brought voters out earlier in the 2000s are no longer motivating them. Asked in the American Values Survey what issues they considered important, registered voters put the economy, jobs and terrorism at the top, as did Catholic registered voters.

But two issues that had dominated political discussions in 2004 - abortion and same-sex marriage - were at the bottom of the list, with only 43 percent of both Catholics and all voters naming abortion as an important issue. Less than a third (31 percent) of registered voters and less than a quarter (23 percent) of Catholic voters said same-sex marriage was an important issue in the 2010 electoral cycle.

But looking at Catholic voters as a body can give the false impression of unanimity, Smith said, adding that "it's a misnomer to say that there is a single Catholic vote."

On such issues as the role of government, equal opportunity and whether the United

States is or was a Christian nation, there were significant differences in opinion between white and Hispanic Catholics:

- Asked whether “government has become bigger because it has gotten involved in things that people should do for themselves” or because “the problems we face have become bigger,” 62 percent of white Catholics said it was because government was involved in things people should do for themselves. Hispanic Catholics were evenly split on the question, with 48 percent agreeing with each statement.

- Asked if it was “not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others” or if “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life,” only 48 percent of white Catholics said it was a big problem, compared to 67 percent of Hispanic Catholics.

- On whether America is a Christian nation, respondents were asked to choose one of three possible responses: America “has always been and is currently a Christian nation,” it “has been a Christian nation in the past but it is not now” or it “has never been a Christian nation.”

While 57 percent of white Catholics said America was and is now a Christian nation, only 43 percent of Hispanic Catholics gave that response. Twelve percent of white Catholics and nearly one in five (19 percent) Hispanic Catholics said America has never been a Christian nation.

A similar divergence exists between old and young respondents, although Jones did not break the results down by religion. Younger Americans were about half as likely as older Americans (26 percent to 53 percent) to say that America was and always has been a Christian nation.