

New CARA report assesses likely Catholic influence on 2008 elections

WASHINGTON - Although Catholic Democrats outnumber Catholic Republicans in the United States, both are outnumbered by the 41 percent of U.S. Catholic voters who are not affiliated with either party, according to new data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

In a report titled "Election '08 Forecast," released June 20, CARA compared data on party identification and the social, political and moral views of the estimated 47 million potential Catholic voters in the November election.

Currently, 38 percent of Catholic voters identify themselves, either strongly or weakly, with the Democratic Party, while 21 percent said they were affiliated with the Republican Party, strongly or weakly.

"If Catholics stick to their current party identification when voting for president, (presumptive Democratic nominee Sen.) Barack Obama would have the potential edge over (presumptive Republican nominee Sen.) John McCain among Catholics by more than 8 million," the report said, noting there would be 18 million Democrats compared to 10 million Republicans if they stay with their party affiliation.

But more than 19.5 million Catholics say they lean toward one party or the other, are independents, belong to third parties or are apolitical, the report said.

The data showed a decrease since 2004 in the percentage of Catholics affiliated with both parties. Four years ago, 39 percent of Catholics said they were Democrats and 31 percent said they were Republicans, with only 30 percent unaffiliated with either party.

The margin of error for the 2004 and 2008 data was plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

The report disputed the belief – based only on exit polls – that Catholics have “a near perfect winning streak” in backing the winner in recent presidential elections. By also using data from the American National Election Studies and Gallup polls, CARA found that Catholics voted for the winner in the overall popular vote 71 percent of the time between 1952 and 2004 and the Electoral College winner 64 percent of the time.

“In the past five elections, a majority of Catholics voted with the winning candidate only when Bill Clinton was on the ballot,” the report said.

CARA also found major shifts in Catholics’ attitudes between 2002 and 2006 on two issues – the use of military force to overthrow governments that support terrorism and increased taxes for “the wealthiest Americans.”

In 2002, 63 percent of Catholics agreed somewhat or strongly that “the U.S. should be willing to use military force to overthrow governments that support terrorism against the U.S., even if it means losing lives of U.S. service members.” Four years later, the percentage in agreement with that statement dropped 20 points to 43 percent.

Slightly more than half (52 percent of American Catholics) agreed in 2002 that there should be a tax increase for the wealthiest Americans but the percentage increased 13 points to 65 percent in 2006.

A smaller change was seen in attitudes toward immigration, with 60 percent of Catholics in 2002 and 54 percent in 2006 agreeing that “the number of immigrants who are permitted to come to the United States should be decreased.”

There was a slight decrease, from 45 percent in 2002 to 41 percent in 2006, in Catholics who agreed “the taking of life – whether through abortion, the death penalty or assisted suicide – is wrong,” and an increase from 55 percent in 2002 to 58 percent in 2006 of those who said “a woman should have the right to choose whether or not to abort an unwanted pregnancy.”

Support remained relatively steady for government-provided health care for all Americans (78 percent in 2006), the right of workers to a living wage and to form

unions (82 percent) and use of the death penalty for those convicted of premeditated murder (67 percent).

The margin of error was plus or minus 2.3 percentage points for the 2006 figures and 2.7 percentage points for 2002.

CARA also compared data on party identification of Catholics in 2008 with their responses to questions about how important “living a life consistent with church teaching” is to them and whether they “look to Catholic Church teachings and statements made by the pope and bishops to form (their) conscience.”

“The more important Catholics say that ‘living a life consistent with church teaching’ is to them, the more likely they are to say they identify as Republicans,” the report said.

Similarly, those who said they strongly or somewhat agreed that they looked to the pope and bishops in forming their consciences about what is morally acceptable were more likely than others to say they were Republicans.