

Number of Catholics in Congress edging up; more are Democrats

WASHINGTON – The number of Catholic members of Congress is slowly creeping higher, but the Catholic contingent, like the full Congress itself, has taken a decided turn toward the Democratic Party.

When the 111th Congress is sworn in Jan. 6, more than a quarter of its members will be Catholics, roughly matching the percentage of Catholics in the U.S. population and consistent with the statistical trends of the past decade.

Four years ago when the 109th Congress convened, it included 153 Catholics. Two years later there were 155 Catholics in the 110th Congress. But the new group of senators and representatives has 162 members who identify themselves as Catholics.

With nearly all the 2008 electoral battles settled by early December, and the Senate seat of President-elect Barack Obama still not filled, the Catholic delegation included 17 Democrats and nine Republicans in the Senate and 98 Democrats and 38 Republicans in the House.

At the start of the 110th Congress in January 2007, there were 25 Catholic senators (16 Democrats and nine Republicans) and 130 Catholic representatives (88 Democrats and 42 Republicans). Two years earlier, the 109th Congress counted 24 Catholic senators (13 Democrats and 11 Republicans) and 129 Catholic House members (72 Democrats and 57 Republicans).

That's a far cry from the start of the 80th Congress in January 1947, when 11 senators and 67 House members were Catholic, according to an article by Jesuit Father Edward S. Dunn in the December 1948 issue of the American Catholic Sociological Review.

Only 26 of the 78 Catholic members of the 80th Congress were Republicans; one belonged to the American Labor Party of New York and the rest were Democrats.

“Catholics, then, make up 11.5 percent of the members of the Senate and 15.4 percent of the members of the House of Representatives,” Father Dunn wrote. “This is not up to the ratio of Catholics in the total population, which is estimated at about 18 percent.”

Today the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, based at Georgetown University in Washington, estimates that Catholics make up 22 percent of the U.S. population. But they are at least 26 percent of the Senate membership, depending on who fills President-elect Obama’s seat, and more than 30 percent of the House membership.

The numbers are fluid, however, as members of Congress resign to take different posts and their seats are filled by others.

Vice President-elect Joseph Biden, for example, still officially represents Delaware in the Senate, although he plans to step down sometime before the Jan. 20 inauguration. A Catholic, Sen. Biden is to be succeeded by one of his top political aides, Ted Kaufman, who was appointed to the post by Delaware Gov. Ruth Ann Minner. Mr. Kaufman’s religion has not been made public.

Among the Catholics who will have to resign from the incoming Congress if confirmed for Cabinet positions are Sen. Ken Salazar of Colorado, whom Obama has said he will nominate as interior secretary, and Rep. Hilda Solis of California, the president-elect’s choice as labor secretary.

Other Catholic Cabinet nominees not serving in the 111th Congress include New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, expected to serve as commerce secretary; former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota, Obama’s pick as secretary of health and human services; former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, to be nominated as agriculture secretary; and Rep. Ray LaHood, a Republican who has represented Illinois in Congress since 1994 but who did not run for re-election in 2008.

Depending on who gets appointed to fill the vacated seats of those in Congress, the number of Catholics could remain the same or even increase.

For example, the person most widely discussed to succeed New York Sen. Hillary

Rodham Clinton, a Methodist who is to be nominated as secretary of state in the Obama administration, is Caroline Kennedy, daughter of the nation's first Catholic president. Another congressional seat needing to be filled will be that of Rep. Rahm Emanuel, Obama's White House chief of staff, who is Jewish.

Overall, the religious breakdown in Congress has remained relatively stable in recent years. After the 162 Catholics, the religious denominations with the most members in the 111th Congress are Baptists, with 64; Methodists, with 55; and Jews, with 45.

Forty-two members of the 111th Congress identify themselves as either Protestant or Christian, with no denomination named, while seven said they had no religious affiliation.

Other religious groupings with more than a dozen members in the incoming Congress include Presbyterians (43); Episcopalians (39); Lutherans (24); and Mormons (13). Eight members identify themselves as belonging to an Orthodox church.

Two members of the incoming Congress are Muslim and two are Buddhist. The remainder are divided among more than a dozen other Christian denominations.