

Panel deconstructs notion of a 'Catholic vote' and what defines it

WASHINGTON – The first Catholic from a major political party to appear on a U.S. presidential ticket wasn't nominated in 1928 because the Democrats were consciously trying to attract Catholic voters but because the party leaders figured they had nothing to lose.

John White, professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, told a colloquium on the Catholic vote Oct. 22 that the nomination of Al Smith as the Democratic nominee for president was less about appealing to Catholics in particular than it was about attracting votes of recent immigrants from Europe, many of whom were Catholic.

Mr. Smith, the governor of New York, had grandparents who were Irish, German, Italian and English and he was from a multiethnic section of New York.

As this year's presidential election approached, the question of whether there is a cohesive Catholic vote and how to win it arose among those who have pointed out that a majority of Catholics have voted for the winner of the popular vote in nearly every election since 1972; 1988 was the exception.

At the colloquium, White described Smith's nomination in 1928 as a political "what the heck, what have we got to lose" play. Going into the 1928 Democratic convention, Herbert Hoover, the Republican secretary of commerce, was popular and strongly favored to win the White House.

That helped give Smith the nomination, White said.

"When the parties know they're going to lose, they take bold gambits, as the Democrats did in 1928," he said. The effort won Catholic voters to the Democrats, but failed to get Smith elected president.

He described the nomination of John F. Kennedy in 1960, the first Catholic to win the White House, as more about trying to pull Catholic voters back to the

Democratic Party than about anyone in power in the party thinking it was high time a Catholic became president.

In the 1970s and '80s, Catholic voters began to shift from being reliably Democratic votes to more closely mirroring the general public's voting, White said.

For some voters that shift was about supporting the party that, beginning with Republican President Ronald Reagan, was more closely identified with anti-abortion policies. But White said it was more rooted in the upward mobility of Catholics whose parents had been blue-collar workers but who themselves had higher incomes and higher standards of living.

"Catholics became the 'haves,'" he said.

Gregory Smith, a research fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, said Catholics this year were closely mirroring overall support being shown in polls for Sen. Barack Obama, an Illinois Democrat.

Pew polling through mid-October showed white Catholics supporting Obama by 8 points, a shift since September when white Catholics favored Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona by 13 points. Pew divides its religion subgroups into white Catholics and Hispanic Catholics, but Smith did not provide information on Hispanic Catholics or for all Catholics.

Zogby International's daily tracking poll of Oct. 23 showed Obama favored by 56 to 37 points among Catholics and with a lead of 52 to 41 points among all voters surveyed.

This year, much has been made of the back and forth between those who argue that church teaching obligates Catholics to base their votes only on the issue of abortion and those who say church teaching calls Catholics to consider a broader range of issues.

But Smith said fewer than half of Catholics say they believe abortion should be illegal in most or all cases and he said even fewer base their votes primarily on the issue of abortion.

“While pro-life Catholics who say abortion is very important to them as an issue are much more likely to support McCain,” Smith said, “they constitute less than one-quarter of all Catholics. In that way, Catholics are very much like the population overall.”

Catholic University sociology professor William D’Antonio looked at data showing how Catholic members of Congress have voted on legislation that had a clear pro-life position. By that standard, D’Antonio said, the politicians’ votes “were much more defined by party line than they were by religious affiliation.”