

Catholic Voting: The Influence of Abortion

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Abstract

Throughout the history of the United States, voting trends in American elections have evolved. One example of this is how the Catholic vote has changed since the 1960s. Factors such as race, gender, economics, and religious values may impact voting trends. These factors may have some impact on the shift in the Catholic voting trend. To determine this, I studied how Catholic voters feel about certain issues and how their responses may differ by income level, race, and gender. In my analysis I used data from the Congressional Campaign Election Study, which was gathered by a survey of voters in the United States. The results from the survey raised questions about why religious voters have shifted their voting tendencies. Previous research showed that issues such as abortion caused Catholic voting tendencies to change, but my results are consistent with studies that contradict that idea. My analysis challenges the conventional wisdom on the Catholic voter realignment.

Literature Review

Introduction

In Presidential elections, there are many factors that can lead to a change in voting trends. One factor is that certain issues become more or less significant over time. Another factor is religion. Also, race and religion can be tied together when measuring voting trends. Additionally, cultural changes may also impact religious voters. Religion can impact people's voting decisions because individuals will support candidates whose policy positions align with their religious beliefs and principles (Brooks 2002). Knowing how religious beliefs can impact people's opinion regarding political issues is important in understanding religious voting trends.

Religious Political Alignment

Historically, Catholics have leaned Democrat in Presidential elections, while other Christian denominations such as Protestants have supported Republicans. Since the Presidency of Jimmy Carter, there has been a significant realignment of religious voting in the United States (Moore 2011). During the Carter Presidency, American Protestants shifted towards the Republican Party because there was a significant cultural shift. The Democratic Party embraced issues such as gay rights and abortion, which did not align with Evangelical Protestant religious teaching. Catholics stayed with the Democratic Party during this time because of their views of social justice even though the Democratic Party became more supportive of abortion and gay rights (Moore 2011).

In recent Presidential elections however, the Catholic vote has shifted (Sullivan 2020). In both the 2016 and 2020 elections, Catholics have supported the Republican candidate over the Democratic candidate. In 2016, the Republican candidate received 52 percent of the vote compared to 45 percent for the Democratic candidate. In the 2020 Presidential election, the

Republican candidate received 50 percent of the Catholic vote while the Democratic candidate received 49 percent of the Catholic vote. This demonstrates a shift because the 2020 Democratic Candidate was Catholic and the last time a Catholic was elected President of the United States was in the 1960 election and in that election the Catholic Democrat received 80 percent of the Catholic vote.

Political Issues that Impact Religious Voters

One issue that potentially impacts how Catholics vote is abortion. Since the polarizing decision of *Roe v Wade*, the politics of abortion have shifted (Formicola 2009). The Democratic Party has become predominantly pro-abortion while the Republican Party has become mostly pro-life. Prior to the 1970s, both of the major American political parties were split on the abortion issue. Southern Democrats were pro-life and Northern Democrats were considered to be pro-abortion. While Northeast Republicans were pro-abortion and Western Republicans were considered pro-life.

Planned Parenthood plays a central role in the abortion debate in American politics and is a divisive topic among Catholics in the United States. The debate is whether Planned Parenthood should continue to receive government funding. Some Catholics are opposed to funding Planned Parenthood because they provide abortions at some of their clinics. Other Catholics support Planned Parenthood because of the principles of Catholic social justice. Planned Parenthood provides numerous services to assist women such as cancer screenings, and pregnancy ultrasounds. These services are popular with Catholics who put an emphasis on social services.

Additionally, birth control is another issue that impacts the religious values of Catholics. In the past, the Catholic Church has promoted abstinence instead of using contraception. The Catholic Doctrine supports the idea that sexual relations should be used for reproductive purposes and not for personal pleasure. Public opinion regarding birth control among Catholics

has shifted significantly within the last fifty years, however. The majority of Catholics in the United States today now support women having access to birth control.

Another issue that may impact Catholic voters is LGBTQ rights. The Catholic Church doctrine regarding the LGBTQ community describes homosexuality and other acts as sinful (Formicola 2009). Recently, Catholic social teaching led by the Pope Francis has taken a softer stance on issues regarding the LGBTQ community. In recent years, the Vatican has released statements offering compassion and love for the LGBTQ community. While current Catholic Church doctrine opposes homosexuality and transgenderism, the Catholic Church is advocating for Catholics to be more open to members of the LGBTQ community. This is a reflection of a changing attitude among Catholics. Older Catholics are still very much opposed to homosexuality while younger Catholics feel less strongly about LGBTQ issues. This feeling among younger Catholics may be associated with the opinion of younger individuals as a whole. The Democratic Party in the Twenty First century has affirmed their support of abortion rights and gay rights, while the Republican Party has taken a pro-life stance, and is ambiguous in their support for gay rights.

The death penalty is another issue that impacts the religious values of Catholics in the United States. The current Catholic Church doctrine affirms support for natural birth and natural death. This means that officially the Catholic Church is opposed to the death penalty. Most Catholic voters in the United States are opposed to the death penalty, but Republican Presidential candidates have still increased their support among Catholics even though the Republican Party supports the death penalty. This is potentially significant because it may show that the death penalty is no longer significant enough to Catholic voters to hold their support to the Democratic Party.

Another issue that impacted how Catholics decided to vote were programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. President Johnson's Great Society policy plan was politically popular with Catholics because it appealed to the Catholic doctrine of social justice. Republicans at the time such as Barry Goldwater, campaigned heavily against President Johnson's Great Society. Catholics were in favor of the Great Society and voted to reelect President Johnson by a wide margin. As support for programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid have become more bipartisan, their defining influence in elections has declined. Recent Republican Presidential candidates have expressed their support for these programs which has led to this particular issue becoming a less prevalent issue for Catholic voters.

Another issue that used to be a main focus for Catholic voters is the political strength of unions. When Irish Catholics immigrated to the United States in the Twentieth century, many immigrants took union jobs and their children followed in their footsteps. The Republican Party during the Twentieth century was largely anti-union, which led to these Catholic families supporting the Democratic Party in elections. Since then, however, the United States has seen substantial economic change since the beginning of the Twentieth century. Many Catholic families have transitioned from working blue collar jobs to working white collar jobs. The economic position of the Catholics in the United States has improved greatly meaning the percentage of Catholics working in a union has declined. As a result, some Catholics are less likely to vote for pro-unionization candidates than they did in the past.

Cultural Changes Impacting Voters

One cultural factor that may impact Catholic voters is perceived anti-Catholic bias in politics. Catholic voters seem to favor in elections, the political party that is most welcoming to Catholics (Perl 2002). One cultural change that may have impacted Catholic voting trends in the United States is the politics of nativism. At the beginning of the Twentieth century, the largest

group of immigrants to the United States were Irish Catholics. Many organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan promoted anti-Catholicism and viewed the Irish immigrants as racially and religiously inferior. During this time, the Ku Klux Klan had tremendous influence in government because many government officials were members. This allowed for the government to pursue discriminatory policies against Catholics. As organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan declined so did the anti-Catholic sentiment and nativists focused their ire towards Muslim immigrants instead.

Shifting Alliances

Shifting political alliances have also been considered a factor in why the Catholic voting base in the United States has been trending towards the Republican Party. Since the 1980s, Republican Protestants have made a considerable effort to court Catholic voters. To do so, they have been focused on appealing to Catholics by making a Christian morality appeal.

Traditionally, Catholics have been opposed to abortion and homosexuality, which is similar to the traditional Evangelical Protestant Republican view. This plan has been viewed as a limited success because only Catholics who attend church regularly seem to feel strongly about whether homosexuality is right or wrong. Additionally, Protestant Republicans have tried to earn the support of Catholics by promoting school choice policies that encourage people to send their children to private schools. Catholic schools are some of the most common private schools in the United States, but tuition can be expensive and straining for Catholic families. Republicans targeting Catholics with this appeal is a direct effort to court the Catholic vote. This has been viewed as a limited success because the Catholics that feel strongly about Catholic schools are the ones who attend church regularly and are already probable Republican voters.

Racial Divisions

Racial divisions have also been attributed to the shift in the Catholic vote. In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in racial polarization in elections. This racial polarization includes members of the Catholic Church. In the 2008 and 2012, the Republican Presidential candidate received 55 percent of the White Catholic vote. In 2016 that percentage increased to over 60 percent. In comparison, over 60 percent of Hispanic Catholics supported the Democratic candidate in 2016 and in 2020. This shows that the Catholic voting base in the United States is significantly divided by race. Currently Hispanics are 25 percent of the Catholic vote in the United States. Republican gains with Catholics can be attributed to increased Republican support among White Catholics.

Methods and Analysis

The data I utilized is from the 2019 edition of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is a large-scale survey conducted by a team that includes members from forty different universities. This data set includes partisan affiliation, religious affiliation, and certain political issues. The data was collected in November of 2019.

The unit of analysis is respondents that participated in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. I used several different dependent variables to analyze Catholic voters. One of the dependent variables I used is abortion. To create a more comprehensive abortion variable, I created a variable index of the four different abortion variables included in the CCES Dataset. These four abortion variables are: always allow women to have an abortion as a matter of choice, only permit abortion in cases of rape, incest, or when a woman's life is in danger, ban abortions after the twentieth week of pregnancy, and make abortion illegal in all circumstances. After developing the index, I recoded the variable into an ordinal variable that ranged from strongly pro-choice to strongly pro-life. I decided to layer the abortion variable with a religion variable. I did this because I wanted to determine whether religious orientation impacts people's opinion of abortion. I recoded the religion variable into three groups, Protestants, Catholics, and Non-Believers. I decided to use Protestants and Non-Believer groups in my comparative analysis of support for abortion because Protestants are primarily a Republican group of voters and Non-Believers are primarily a democratic group of voters. Using these two groups and comparing them against Catholic voters allows for me to figure out whether or not abortion may be a definitive issue in determining who Catholic voters may be inclined to support.

Additionally, I analyzed Catholic voters by race as well. To do so, I recoded the race variable in the CCES data set into three groups. These three groups are: White, Hispanic, and

Black. I did this because the other racial groups included in the initial race variable did not have a substantial number of Catholics.

Abortion Hypothesis

Among Catholics, the majority will not identify as being pro-life. In the analysis of this hypothesis, the independent variable is Three Religions, which divides religious respondents into three groups which are Protestants, Catholics, and Non-Believers.

(Table 1 about here)

In Table 1, the results show that my hypothesis is correct. As shown in the table, only 49.4% of Catholics identify as pro-life, while 50.6% identify as pro-choice. As expected, non-religious individuals identify as only 26.8% pro-life. The interesting part of the table is how Protestants identify as pro-choice. This was completely unexpected because conventional wisdom indicates that Protestants are one of the most pro-life groups in the United States. The result among Catholics differs from the literature that previous researchers developed and may disprove their hypothesis. The chi-square tests from this tabular analysis, show that the results are not from random sampling error.

(Table 2 about here)

The results shown in Table 2, shows how support for abortion can differ depending on gender and religious identity. As shown, Protestant males are mostly pro-life, while Protestant females tend to be a bit more divided. Catholic males compared to Protestant males are less pro-life. The same is true for Catholic females compared to Protestant females. The surprising result is that men who are non-believers have similar results compared to women who are non-believers. I had anticipated that there would have been difference between genders across all of the religious orientations. The results in Table 2, supports my hypothesis that Catholics are not as pro-life as the literature indicates.

(Table 3 about here)

The results shown in Table 3, displays how opinion of abortion varies by race. As shown, White Protestants are more pro-life than White Catholics. Additionally, Black Protestants are more pro-life than Black Catholics. Among Hispanics, however, there was a different result. Hispanic Catholics happen to be more pro-life than Hispanic Protestants. This was surprising because the literature when discussing race, never mentioned that Hispanic Catholics would be more pro-life than Hispanic Protestants. The results when analyzed by racial groups, shows that each race is unique when it comes to their opinions of abortion.

Religious Integration Hypothesis

Protestants and Catholics who attend church more frequently will have a party identification that favors the Republican Party compared to those who do not attend church regularly. This concept can be described as religiosity. This will demonstrate that Catholics who attend church more often will have more in common politically with Protestants who also attend church more often and show that some Catholics are becoming more like Protestants politically.

(Table 4 about here)

In Table 4, the results show that Protestants and Catholics who attend church more than once a week are more likely to be Republican, while Catholics who attend church only a few times a year are more likely to be Democrat. This shows that there is a relationship between attending church more frequently and the likelihood that a Protestant or a Catholic will be Republican. Additionally, this supports my hypothesis that religiosity is a common trend connecting Protestants with Catholics.

Conclusion

The results support my main hypothesis that abortion is not the reason that Catholics have voted for Trump in the last two Presidential elections. As indicated by Table 3, the only Catholic racial group that is pro-life is the Hispanic Catholics. The majority of White Catholics identify as pro-choice which contradicts the conventional wisdom produced by previous researchers. The shift within the Catholic vote in the United States, is not caused by abortion but may be attributed to current issues and events.

Appendix

Table 1: Opinion of Abortion Crosstabs

Opinions	Protestants		Catholics		Non-Believers	
Strongly Pro-Life	370	5.90%	333	9.80%	294	4.80%
Pro Life	2701	43.30%	1349	39.60%	1358	22.00%
Somewhat Pro Choice	1749	28.00%	962	28.20%	1529	24.80%
Pro Choice	1211	19.40%	662	19.40%	2813	45.60%
Strongly Pro Choice	210	3.40%	101	3.00%	181	2.90%
Total	6241	100.0%	3407	100.0%	6175	100.0%

Chi-Square: 142.528

Asymptotic Significance: 0.00

Phi: 0.300

Cramer's V: 0.212

Table 2: Opinion of Abortion Layered by Gender

Gender	Abortion Stance		Protestants	Catholics	Non-Believers	Total	
Male	Strongly Pro Life	Count	147	156	123	426	
		%	5.7%	10.5%	4.4%	6.2%	
	Pro Life	Count	1250	662	651	2563	
		%	48.4%	44.6%	23.2%	37.3%	
	Somewhat Pro-Choice	Count	678	390	669	1737	
		%	26.2%	26.3%	23.9%	25.3%	
	Pro Choice	Count	434	245	1295	1974	
		%	16.8%	16.5%	46.2%	28.7%	
	Strongly Pro Choice	Count	75	32	66	173	
		%	2.9%	2.2%	2.4%	2.5%	
	Total	Count	2584	1485	2804	6873	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	Female	Strongly Pro Life	Count	223	177	171	571
			%	6.1%	9.2%	5.1%	6.4%
Pro Life		Count	1451	687	707	2845	
		%	39.7%	35.7%	21.0%	31.8%	

Somewhat Pro-Choice	Count	1071	572	860	2503
	%	29.3%	29.8%	25.5%	28.0%
Pro Choice	Count	777	417	1518	2712
	%	21.2%	21.7%	45.0%	30.3%
Strongly Pro Choice	Count	135	69	115	319
	%	3.7%	3.6%	3.4%	3.6%
Total	Count	3657	1922	3371	8950
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Male Chi-Square: 824.849 Female Chi-Square: 638.131

Significance: 0.00 Significance: 0.00

Phi:0.346 Phi: 0.267

Cramer's V:0.245 Cramer's V: 0.189

Table 3: Opinion of Abortion Layered by Race

Race	Abortion Stance		Protestants	Catholics	Non-Believers	Totals
White	Strongly Pro Life	Count	203	197	166	566
		%	4.5%	8.8%	3.8%	5.1%
	Pro Life	Count	2078	924	969	3971
		%	46.4%	41.5%	22.0%	35.7%
	Somewhat Pro-Choice	Count	1231	659	1050	2940
		%	27.5%	29.6%	23.8%	26.5%
	Pro Choice	Count	833	401	2126	3360
		%	18.6%	18.0%	48.2%	30.2%
	Strongly Pro Choice	Count	129	48	101	278
		%	2.9%	2.2%	2.3%	2.5%
Total	Count	4474	2229	4412	11115	
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Black	Strongly Pro Life	Count	110	18	69	197
		%	11.2%	13.8%	11.3%	11.4%
	Pro Life	Count	302	31	144	477
		%	30.7%	23.8%	23.6%	27.7%
	Somewhat Pro Choice	Count	296	34	184	514
		%	30.1%	26.2%	30.2%	29.8%

	Pro Choice	Count	229	42	186	457	
		%	23.3%	32.3%	30.5%	26.5%	
	Strongly Pro Choice	Count	46	5	27	78	
		%	4.7%	3.8%	4.4%	4.5%	
	Total	Count	983	130	610	1723	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	Hispanic	Strongly Pro Life	Count	38	92	37	167
			%	8.0%	11.1%	5.5%	8.4%
Pro Life		Count	192	315	154	661	
		%	40.6%	38.0%	22.8%	33.4%	
Somewhat Pro-Choice		Count	131	211	188	530	
		%	27.7%	25.5%	27.8%	26.8%	
Pro Choice		Count	89	170	258	517	
		%	18.8%	20.5%	38.2%	26.2%	
Strongly Pro Choice		Count	23	40	39	102	
		%	4.9%	4.8%	5.8%	5.2%	
Total		Count	473	828	676	1977	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

White Chi- Square: 124.672
Significance: 0.00
Phi:0.340
Cramer's V: 0.240

Black Chi-Square: 18.311
Significance: 0.00
Phi: 0.103
Cramer's V: 0.073

Hispanic Chi-Square: 108.306
Significance: 0.00
Phi: 0.234
Cramer's V: 0.166

Table 4: Church Attendance and Political Affiliation

			Protestants	Catholics	Non-Believers	Total
Democrat	More than once a week	Count	209	69	23	301
		%	11.5%	5.7%	0.9%	5.3%
	Once a week	Count	467	284	53	804
		%	25.8%	23.6%	2.0%	14.2%
	Once or twice a month	Count	233	106	55	394
		%	12.9%	8.8%	2.1%	7.0%
	A few times a year	Count	291	229	146	666
		%	16.1%	19.0%	5.5%	11.8%
	Seldom	Count	421	321	530	1272
		%	23.2%	26.6%	20.1%	22.5%
	Never	Count	192	196	1827	2215
		%	10.6%	16.3%	69.4%	39.2%
	Total	Count	1813	1205	2634	5652
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Republican	More than once a week	Count	458	113	11	582
		%	18.6%	9.9%	1.4%	13.2%
	Once a week	Count	706	323	43	1072
		%	28.7%	28.3%	5.3%	24.3%
	Once or twice a month	Count	213	114	22	349
		%	8.7%	10.0%	2.7%	7.9%
	A few times a year	Count	363	214	70	647
		%	14.8%	18.7%	8.7%	14.7%
	Seldom	Count	501	227	215	943
		%	20.4%	19.9%	26.6%	21.4%
	Never	Count	217	152	446	815
		%	8.8%	13.3%	55.3%	18.5%
	Total	Count	2458	1143	807	4408

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