

**The Changing Catholic Voter:  
Comparing Responses to John Kennedy in 1960 and John Kerry in 2004**

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When John Fitzgerald Kennedy received the Democratic nomination for president in 1960, there was palpable excitement among America's Catholic community. Only one Catholic, Al Smith in 1928, had ever headed a major-party ticket, and his was a long-shot, ultimately unsuccessful candidacy on behalf of what was then clearly the country's minority party. Kennedy, however, was seen as a much more viable candidate from what had become (Eisenhower's successes notwithstanding) the majority party in America, and thus presented Catholic voters with a much more realistic prospect of their co-religionist occupying the Oval Office. Catholic voters across the nation rallied to Kennedy's cause in overwhelming numbers, so much so that the perceived liability of his religion actually became an electoral asset, helping him to carry critical states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. According to one credible scholarly study, Catholic enthusiasm for the Kennedy campaign was sufficiently great that Kennedy's religion can be credited for a net gain of at least 10 electoral votes (Pool *et al.* 1965). In any event, Kennedy's ultimate victory was seen by American Catholics as a "triumph," a "breakthrough," a vindication of Catholicism as a legitimate American religion (Byrnes 1991; Hennesey 1981; Prendergast 1999).

After Kennedy's tragic assassination in 1963, it would be 41 years before another Catholic would seek the presidency as the nominee of a major party. Despite the passage of time, however, John Forbes Kerry as a candidate in 2004 was in many ways strikingly similar to John Kennedy in 1960. Both were Democratic Senators from Massachusetts who had served with distinction in the military. Both were Irish Catholics, though neither was particularly noted for his theological interests or personal piety. Both were children of privilege, and thus were somewhat atypical reflections of the Irish Catholic experience

in America. Both faced a Protestant Republican opponent with little or no record of military service, and both chose Protestant, Anglo Southerners as running mates to balance their tickets. For the political analyst, this stunning range of similarities is a great boon, as it limits variation on some of the myriad factors than can explain voter reactions to a candidate's presidential bid.

Yet in one critical respect, the two candidacies were not at all similar: the way in which they were received by the Catholic electorate. The enthusiasm that had greeted Kennedy's bid in 1960 was nowhere to be found for Kerry in 2004. In fact, Kerry ultimately *lost* the Catholic vote to his Protestant opponent, George W. Bush. To be sure, some of the differences in Catholic responses to the two candidacies can be explained by non-religious factors: Kerry lacked Kennedy's charisma and decisiveness, Bush had the advantages of an incumbent in wartime, and the Catholic electorate had become more affluent and assimilated since 1960. Much more profoundly, however, the very nature of the relationship between religion and political choice, and even the nature of Catholic identity itself, had shifted over the intervening decades. The candidacies of Kennedy and Kerry, so similar in many superficial respects, serve to bookend and highlight this fundamental change.

In this paper, I use the radically different responses of American Catholics to two of "their own" as a vehicle to explore the changing role of religion as a force in American politics. Catholicism, once an ascriptive, sociological category with little issue-specific political content in the American context, has become much more about support for particular positions on highly salient moral controversies, at least among those who take their faith most seriously. "Is he one of us?" has been replaced with "Does he believe as

we do?” as the critical question motivating political choice for most observant Catholics. An examination of the forces driving support for (or opposition to) Kennedy and Kerry among Catholics clearly reveals the changed nature of this relationship, and tells us much about the likely contours of American Catholic electoral politics going forward.

### **Kennedy, Kerry, and the Church**

In order to understand how Catholic laity responded to John Kennedy and John Kerry, it is instructive to look first at how the two men positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* the institutional Church and its hierarchy. For Kennedy in 1960, the challenge was clear: to convince a sufficient portion of non-Catholic America that he would not be beholden to the dictates of clergy or “foreign potentates.” This task was made somewhat easier by the fact that, unlike his predecessor Al Smith, Kennedy was not a particularly pious or devout man. He was variously described during the course of the campaign as “a rather irregular Christian” (Van Allen 1974, 133), “spiritually rootless and almost disturbingly secular” (Hennesey 1981, 308), and one who “wore his religion lightly” (Fuchs 1967, 182). Kennedy actually staked out positions contrary to the preferences of the hierarchy on some questions, opposing both federal aid to church-related schools and the idea of sending a U.S. ambassador to the Vatican (Prendergast 1999). Of course, some of this apparent secularism and distance from the Church was carefully cultivated as a political necessity for someone seeking to become the first Catholic president of the United States. America’s Catholic clergy, moreover, warmly embraced Kennedy’s candidacy despite these points of disagreement<sup>1</sup>, and did so in exactly the way that Kennedy wanted—with virtually no public statements, but quiet support behind the scenes. Anecdotal evidence

suggests that students enrolled in Catholic schools in 1960 were left with little doubt as to who the priests and nuns that taught them believed Catholics should support for president.

When John Kerry sought the presidency in 2004, he did so in a dramatically different religio-political landscape. The political focus of Catholic clergy and the institutional Church had shifted away from parochial concerns like money for Catholic schools, and toward broad social questions of moral import like abortion, nuclear weapons, poverty, and the nature of marriage (Byrnes 1991). In addition, recent decades had seen the rise of a plethora of lay Catholic organizations, many of them very conservative, that sought actively to promote a political agenda that they believed stemmed from Catholic orthodoxy. Like Kennedy, Kerry parted ways with the hierarchy on several political questions. Unlike Kennedy, he was not given a pass on those disputes because of his Catholicism.

Kerry's disagreements with Church teaching were more politically consequential not only because the issues were clearly of more moral import, but also because of the tone and fervor of his dissent. He not only supported a Constitutional right to abortion; he did so with gusto. At a 2003 National Abortion Rights Action League dinner, he declared:

I will not overturn *Roe v. Wade*; I will not appoint judges hostile to choice; I will allow poor women to have free abortions; I will never outlaw abortion; I will increase American taxpayers' dollars on population control efforts around the world. (Kralis 2004)

As a member of the Senate, Kerry had opposed a ban on "partial-birth" abortion and a proposal to criminalize transporting minors across state lines to evade abortion

restrictions, and consistently supported federal funding for abortion. This record led him to be characterized as one of “the two most ardent supporters of abortion in the Senate” (Duin 2003). In addition, Kerry not only opposed a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman, but also was one of only fourteen Senators to oppose a similar statutory protection, the Defense of Marriage Act. Finally, Kerry dissented from the positions of the Church hierarchy on a range of other issues as well, including embryonic stem cell research, school vouchers, and voluntary school prayer.

As a result, the response to Kerry from Catholic elites was much different than that which had greeted John Kennedy. Almost from the outset of his campaign, he was dogged by public repudiations from Church officials. Two Archbishops and ten Bishops stated publicly that they would deny the Eucharist to Catholic politicians who supported abortion rights (Kralis 2004), and several referenced Kerry specifically by name (Duin 2004a). Kerry was vilified in the publications and web pages of various conservative Catholic organizations, and was formally charged with heresy by a Catholic lawyer within his own Archdiocese of Boston (Duin 2004b). While not all Catholic leaders shared this level of hostility, there was clearly none of the enthusiasm from the institutional Church that had accompanied John Kennedy’s presidential bid. Kerry’s deviations from Church positions were seen not as necessary and minor political expediencies, but as unpardonable departures from basic values. As Steven Waldman, founder of the religious website Beliefnet.com, put it:

Maybe the Kerry campaign is learning the wrong lesson from the 1960 presidential campaign. They figured that if Kennedy emphasized separation of church and state, that’s the way we will do it, too.

At the time, the question was whether Kennedy was too influenced by the Church. The question now is whether Kerry is influenced too little. (Duin 2004a)

### **Catholic Voters and the Changing American Politics**

Clearly, Catholic opinion leaders, both clerical and lay, gave John Kerry a much cooler reception than they had John Kennedy. The virtually universal support among Catholic elites that Kennedy had enjoyed had given way, in Kerry's case, to responses ranging from ambivalence to hostility. Elites, however, do not determine the outcomes of elections—at least not directly. Was this dramatic shift in approach by Church leaders reflected in the Catholic mass public as well? Had the American Catholic electorate undergone a similarly profound change in its attitude toward one of its own seeking the presidency? If so, how and why? The remainder of this paper seeks to provide answers to these questions.

The first systematic, social scientific accounts of American voting behavior described the nation's electorate in the 1940s and 1950s. These studies, most prominently those of the "Columbia school" (see Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948), posited what could be called an ethno-cultural model of political choice. Based on the largely ascriptive identifications of race, ethnicity, class, region, religion, etc., voters were held to associate themselves with one or the other political party in an almost tribal way. Even the "Michigan model" (Campbell *et al.* 1960), which modified this overwhelmingly sociological approach with a greater consideration of psychological factors and issue preferences, conceded that the most common basis for voter choice was a group-centered heuristic.<sup>2</sup> In these accounts, religion (and Catholicism specifically)

was treated not as a set of belief elements that might map onto specific issue positions in the political realm, but rather as a social tie that motivates political allegiances through group identification. To use language common in the sociology of religion, it was “belonging,” not “believing,” that motivated “behaving” in the political sphere. As a result, the fundamental religious divide in American politics was between Catholics and Protestants, an ever-present cleavage that was especially salient in the 1840s, the prohibition era, and, of course, the 1960 campaign.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, the issue matrix in American society began to change in a way that would have profound consequences for the relationship between religious identifications and political choice. While partisan contestation in the New Deal era had focused almost exclusively on the size and scope of the welfare state, the 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of the feminist and gay rights movements, the end of public school prayer, and the legalization of abortion. The resulting set of new political controversies gave rise to a “post-bourgeois” or “post-material” cleavage in American society (Inglehart 1971, 1977), spurring the emergence of a “politics of cultural difference” (Leege *et al.* 2002). Importantly, these new cleavages did not break neatly along the same lines as the economic and ethno-cultural divides that had shaped partisanship in the New Deal alignment. In the realm of religion, orthodox members of nearly all Judeo-Christian traditions were troubled by these challenges to established values, and many were galvanized to political action in defense of a moral order under attack. As a result, many of the traditional sectarian divisions in American society and politics began to decline in importance (Wuthnow 1988), with more committed, observant believers from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds pitted together in

a “culture war” (Hunter 1991) against secular Americans and more nominal members of their own religious traditions (Guth *et al.* 2001; see also Green *et al.* in this volume).

In the case of evangelical Protestants, the political results were dramatic. Over the course of two decades beginning in the 1970s, they went from a politically divided group that leaned Democratic (especially in the South) to an overwhelmingly Republican bloc, perhaps the largest single element in the GOP coalition. For Catholics, however, the case is a bit more ambiguous. While they have indisputably become less Democratic over time, it is unclear how much of that is due to increasing affluence and social integration and how much to specifically moral issues. Unlike evangelicals, Catholics as a whole continued to give majority or plurality support to Democratic presidential candidates up through the 2000 election. Moreover, scholars are also divided over the partisan and ideological implications of Catholic faith, with Andrew Greeley (1977, 1989, 1990) consistently making the case for a distinctively Catholic liberalism, while others (e.g. Prendergast 1999) emphasize a significant and accelerating Republican trend. Finally, since Catholicism remains a minority religion in the United States and since most American Catholics have ancestors who came to this country after the Civil War (some long after), it is possible that elements of the old ethno-cultural alignments—which tended to favor Democrats—might linger as well.

In this regard, the campaigns of 1960 and 2004 provide very instructive points of comparison. If the same general patterns of Catholic voter support for a Catholic Democrat against a Protestant Republican opponent hold across the two elections, then the ethno-cultural and/or Catholic liberalism theses would be supported. If, conversely, the relationship between Catholic faith and support for the Catholic Democrat has

changed significantly, we may finally be seeing evidence that Catholics, like evangelicals, have become combatants in the culture wars.

### **A Look at the Data**

In comparing Catholic voter responses to the candidacies of John Kennedy and John Kerry, the challenge is to find data sources that contain the requisite questions on candidate preference, denomination, and religious observance, and at least roughly comparable sets of demographic and general political items. While survey data for 2004 are varied and abundant, the range of options for 1960 is much more limited. Thus, all things considered, the best data source for this analysis is the American National Election Study's 1960 and 2004 surveys.<sup>3</sup> The disadvantages presented by the smaller-than-ideal sample of Catholics (about 25% of the total sample in each year) are ultimately outweighed by the quality and quantity of items tapping both political and (to a lesser extent) religious attitudes, and by the fair degree of question continuity even across this relatively large span of time.

As a first cut, it is instructive to examine the percentage of respondents supporting the Democratic candidate in each electoral cycle, by religious tradition, religious observance, and age. Clearly, we would expect more Catholics across the board to support Kennedy in 1960 than Kerry in 2004, if for no other reason than the well-documented diversification in Catholic baseline partisanship that occurred during the intervening decades. More interesting, however, is the relationship between religious observance and vote choice. If either the ethno-cultural model or the Catholic liberalism thesis is operative, we would expect more committed Catholics to be more *Democratic*

than their less observant counterparts, as greater commitment to would presumably be associated with stronger group identity and/or more salient theological liberalism. Moreover, we would expect religious commitment to work differently among Catholics and Protestants, pushing them in opposite partisan directions. If, conversely, the culture wars thesis is operative, we would expect more committed Catholics to be more *Republican*, rejecting their ideologically wayward co-religionist. In addition, we should find that religious commitment motivates Catholics and Protestants in the same partisan direction.

Table 1 reports levels of support for John Kennedy in the 1960 pre-election study by age and frequency of church attendance<sup>4</sup> for both Catholic and non-Catholic voters (among whites only)<sup>5</sup>. Several patterns are immediately apparent. First, church attendance is a major predictor of candidate choice for both religious groups, but in opposite directions. Among non-Catholics, the religiously observant in every age cohort are significantly less likely to support Kennedy than the less religious, likely reflecting the anti-Catholic political messages emanating from many Protestant churches in the 1960 campaign. Among Catholics, conversely, religious commitment is consistently associated with much *stronger* levels of support for John Kennedy. In addition, age plays an interesting role. Of all groups identified in the table, the highest Democratic support comes from observant Catholics under 40 (what might be termed the “future of the Church”)—an overwhelming 6 out of every 7 of these individuals report a preference for John Kennedy. Moreover, the contrast between these young, committed Catholics and their religiously observant Protestant counterparts could scarcely be more stark—fewer than 1 out of every 5 religiously observant non-Catholics under 40 support Kennedy.

Clearly, these basic cross-tabular data provide strong support for the idea of an ethno-cultural and/or Catholic liberalism voting model operative in the 1960 election. White Catholics tended to support Kennedy while white Protestants opposed him, a divergence that was particularly pronounced among the more observant members of each religious tradition.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

An examination of similar data from 2004, however, reveals dramatically different patterns. Table 2 reports white Americans' pre-election candidate preference in that year by age and frequency of church attendance.<sup>6</sup> Once again, church attendance is a consistent predictor of candidate preference for both Catholic and non-Catholic voters, but, unlike in 1960, it now works in the *same direction* for both groups. In every age cohort, for both religious groups, frequent church attenders are significantly less likely to support John Kerry than are their less religious counterparts, a finding consistent with a "culture wars" model of politics. In addition, the effects of age are once again very illustrative. It makes little difference among religiously observant non-Catholics; Kerry wins the support of about one third of these voters, regardless of age. Among Catholics, however, there are clearly discernible age cohort effects. While Kerry loses among all groups of religiously observant Catholics (a major departure from Kennedy's showing in 1960), his deficit in the older cohorts is not dramatic—about 10-15% *vis-à-vis* Bush. Among younger observant Catholics, however, his support drops off precipitously. Only about 1 in 4 church-attending Catholics under 40 (again, the "future of the Church")

supported the Catholic Democratic candidate for president in 2004—the same group in the electorate that had given the Catholic Democrat over 85% of its votes in 1960. Indeed, this reflects the lowest level of support for Kerry of any cell in Table 2 (a result consistent with the findings of at least one other treatment—see Mockabee 2006). While a residuum of ethno-cultural political socialization may remain among older observant Catholics, mitigating Democratic losses, that constraint on Republican gains is clearly not operative among the youngest cohort. Conversely, Kerry did quite well among young nominal Catholics, and indeed among nominal Catholics of all ages, winning over 60% of their support. This serves to underline an overall pattern very much in line with the culture wars thesis—for every age group, but especially among the young, the effects of religious observance are much greater than those of religious tradition. The old tribal loyalties and denominational divisions are giving way to inter-denominational political coalitions based on shared values and issue positions. This change in the political landscape clearly worked to the detriment of a Catholic Democrat among religiously committed American Catholic voters.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

As further confirmation of the decline in ethno-cultural voting, we can look beyond religion alone to its intersection with ethnicity. John Kennedy and John Kerry were not only both Catholic, but both were more specifically *Irish* Catholic. Thus, we would expect particularly strong bonds of group solidarity between these candidates and those voters who shared both their religion *and* their ethnic heritage. Table 3 reports the

percentage of Catholic respondents in the 1960 and 2004 National Election Studies supporting Kennedy and Kerry, broken down by whether or not they report “Irish” as their primary ethnic identification (in both years, about 20% of American Catholics are of Irish heritage). In 1960, the expected pattern holds—while Catholics of all ethnic stripes clearly preferred John Kennedy, his support among his fellow Irish Catholics was virtually universal, with 61 of the 64 Irish Catholics in the sample (over 95%) professing an intention to vote for him. In 2004, however, with an Irish Catholic once again on the ballot for the Democrats, these ethnic bonds had clearly broken down. Kerry’s fellow Irish Catholics were actually slightly *less* likely to support him than were other Catholics (though the difference falls just short of statistical significance), and gave an outright majority of their votes to his Anglo Protestant opponent, George W. Bush. As with denominational loyalties, the ties of ethnicity appear to have weakened to the point of insignificance by 2004.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

From this initial look at the data, it would appear that the bonds of denominational group identity had weakened and/or changed by 2004 to the point that a respondent’s Catholicism provided no discernible boost in his likelihood of supporting the Catholic candidate for president. Indeed, quite the reverse appeared to be the case—the more seriously one took one’s Catholicism, the *less* likely one was to support the Catholic candidate against his Protestant rival. This was in stark contrast to 1960, when, as one would expect, those Catholics most committed to the Church were the ones most likely to

support the candidate who shared their religious faith. Of course, we should not be too quick to credit such a stunning reversal. Church attendance, after all, is only one rough indicator of the strength of a person's Catholic identity and religious commitment. To truly establish that the relationship between Catholic identity and vote choice has shifted in a fundamental way, we must explore the question a bit more deeply.

Because of the importance of Catholicism in the 1960 campaign, that year's National Election Study included a variety of items tapping the nature and strength of respondents' connections to the Catholic Church. Table 4 reports, for Catholic respondents, the relationship between each of these measures and the likelihood of supporting John Kennedy. First is church attendance, the same measure used in Table 1, with the various age groups here aggregated. Support for Kennedy, fairly strong (60%) even among infrequent attenders, becomes overwhelming (82%) among Catholics who attend church regularly. More importantly, this result is confirmed in all of the other indicators. Catholics who "feel pretty close to Catholics in general" are 13 percentage points more likely to support Kennedy than Catholics who do not feel this way.<sup>7</sup> Those who call themselves "strong" Catholics are 19 percentage points more likely to support him than those whose Catholicism is "not very strong." Respondents who express a "good deal" of interest in how other Catholics in America are faring are 9 percentage points more likely to support Kennedy than those who express only "some" interest, and 22 percentage points more likely than those who have "not much" interest. Finally, those Catholic respondents who actively trust the political judgments of Catholic organizations are 19 percentage points more likely to support Kennedy than those who express no opinion, and fully 37 percentage points more likely than those few who actively *distrust*

Catholic organizations. Clearly, by every available measure, the strength of Catholic voters' religious identifications in 1960 were positively associated with their likelihood of supporting the Catholic, Democratic candidate for president.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

The 2004 National Election Study, unfortunately, contains many fewer items tapping specifically Catholic religious identity. Still, it is worth examining what is there to provide some comparison with the election of 1960. Table 5 reports the likelihood that Catholic respondents in the 2004 study support Kerry, broken down by the two available measures of Catholic religious identification: church attendance (the same measure employed in Table 2, but with the age groups here aggregated) and a feeling thermometer rating of “the Catholic Church.”<sup>8</sup> Both of these measures show diametrically opposite patterns from those observed in 1960; stronger attachment to Catholicism in 2004 clearly pushes respondents *away from* the Catholic candidate for President. Those who attend church at least “once or twice a month” are 22 percentage points less likely to support Kerry than those nominal Catholics who attend seldom or never, and those Catholics who express positive affect for the institutional Church (the 70% of them who rate it above 60 on the feeling thermometer) are 14 percentage points less likely to support him than the minority who express ambivalence or hostility toward the Church. The conclusion is unmistakable—Kerry’s Catholicism, unlike Kennedy’s four decades previously, did nothing to attract committed Catholics to his cause.

[INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]

While the bivariate results presented so far are striking and illustrative, a full comparison Catholic voters' decision calculi in 1960 and 2004 requires multivariate modeling. Such models can help to answer two key questions: Is the comparative lack of Catholic enthusiasm for John Kerry merely a product of increasing Catholic affluence and resulting Republican inclination? If not, what specific issues that were not influential in 1960 seem now to be driving Catholic vote choice? To address these questions, Tables 6 and 7 present vote choice models, run among Catholics only, for the two years. For purposes of comparison, these models are as nearly identical as the data permit. Both model vote choice as a function of demographic items (gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, income, union membership, and region<sup>9</sup>), a broad range of issue positions tapping economic redistribution, foreign policy predispositions, and racial attitudes, personal economic assessments (because a national retrospective assessment is unfortunately lacking in the 1960 study), and attachment to the Church, measured in each year through mass attendance and one affective item. The only significant difference between the models is the inclusion in the 2004 model of the "culture wars" issues of abortion, gay marriage, and the role of women in society—these items, of course, are absent in the 1960 study.

An examination of Table 6 reveals exactly the patterns that the bivariate analyses would lead us to expect. Catholic support for John Kennedy is effected positively by Irish ethnicity (to a very large degree), some regional variables, attitudes toward the welfare state (captured in the "job guarantee" item), and, most significantly, attachments

to the Church. It is effected negatively by age (as older Catholics in 1960 would have been politically socialized in the strongly Republican era of the 1920s) and by positive economic assessments (not surprising given that Republicans were the incumbent party). It is worth noting that only one of the bevy of issue items has any effect on Catholic vote choice. For Catholics, the 1960 election was not about issues, but about the affirmation of group ties, a reality reflected in the fact that ethnic and religious attachments largely drive this model.

[INSERT TABLE 6 HERE]

Table 7 presents a similar vote choice model run in 2004 (though, regrettably, on a smaller total sample of Catholics). The results here confirm and extend the pattern that emerged from the bivariate data. Ethnicity has ceased to be a significant factor in vote choice among Catholics (with the exception of race for African Americans, which drops out of the model because all of the few black Catholics in the sample supported Kerry). Age now positively predicts Democratic support, not surprising given that older Catholics were socialized in an era of both greater Democratic strength and more ethno-cultural politics. The effects of religious attachments have reversed, with more frequent church attendance now driving voters away from the Catholic Democrat (as reported previously in the tabular data). Most significantly, none of the wide range of issues thought to embody the vaunted Catholic liberalism (welfare state, internationalism, racial justice) matter *at all* for Catholic vote choice in 2004. Instead, the two issues that do significantly distinguish Catholic Bush supporters from Catholic Kerry supporters are

unambiguously “culture wars” questions—gay marriage and women’s social roles.<sup>10</sup>

That the ethnic and welfare state variables have become insignificant, while moral issues have emerged and the effects of attachment to the Church have reversed, speaks very strongly to the emergence of culture wars politics within the Catholic electorate.

[INSERT TABLE 7 HERE]

### **Conclusion**

From the preceding analyses, it is clear that the factors shaping Catholic vote choice in America have changed dramatically over the last several decades. These changes, moreover, have had dramatic consequences for the way that Catholics, especially religiously committed ones, evaluate one of their own seeking the presidency. In an era of ethno-cultural politics, simply “belonging” was enough for a Catholic candidate. That he simply was Catholic and not Protestant, that he was on this rather than the other side of that great tribal divide in white American society, was sufficient to motivate strong support from his co-religionists, in both the Church hierarchy and the mass public. John Kerry, in an attempt to tap into those reflexive group loyalties, often mentioned to Catholic audiences that he had been an altar boy, even bringing it up during the second presidential debate (Bottum 2004). “Vote for me,” he seemed to say, “because we share this sociological bond, because we have familiarity with the same religious rituals of childhood.” It was an appeal in the old style of group identity politics.

And, as has been documented here and elsewhere, it fell flat. Or, at least, it fell flat among the only group of Catholics who might really have cared—those who are

religiously committed and remain meaningfully connected to the Church. Bearing the trappings of Catholicism was, for most committed Catholic voters, simply no substitute for the “right” positions on abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, etc. They were willing to embrace an evangelical Protestant who shared their positions on these issues before a fellow Catholic who did not. That they did so, and did so decisively, provides powerful support for the culture wars thesis. The political divide between the faithful and the nominal, present now for some time among American Protestants but heretofore muted among Catholics, emerged strongly in the 2004 election. Ironically, it did so at a time when one might have expected the greatest solidarity among Catholic voters—with a Catholic candidate on the ballot. The comparison of responses to John Kennedy and John Kerry makes it abundantly clear that for American Catholics, “believing” has replaced “belonging” as the key political variable.

**TABLE 1**  
**Democratic Vote among Whites by Age and Church Attendance, 1960**

**Non-Catholics**

	<u>Infrequent Attendance</u>	<u>Frequent Attendance</u>
21-39	50% (n=255)	19% (n=144)
40-59	40% (n=277)	29% (n=179)
60+	37% (n=178)	18% (n=73)

**Catholics**

	<u>Infrequent Attendance</u>	<u>Frequent Attendance</u>
21-39	48% (n=27)	86% (n=102)
40-59	74% (n=38)	81% (n=99)
60+	36% (n=11)	72% (n=36)

**TABLE 2**  
**Democratic Vote among Whites by Age and Church Attendance, 2004**

**Non-Catholics**

	<u>Infrequent Attendance</u>	<u>Frequent Attendance</u>
18-39	57% (n=143)	31% (n=95)
40-59	46% (n=140)	33% (n=114)
60+	46% (n=83)	34% (n=92)

**Catholics**

	<u>Infrequent Attendance</u>	<u>Frequent Attendance</u>
18-39	62% (n=47)	26% (n=35)
40-59	59% (n=51)	45% (n=56)
60+	79% (n=14)	43% (n=53)

**TABLE 3**  
**The Ethnic Factor: Irish Catholic Support for Kennedy and Kerry**

<b>1960</b>	
% Supporting Kennedy	
Catholic, non-Irish	72% (n=268)
Irish Catholic	95% (n=64)

<b>2004</b>	
% Supporting Kerry	
Catholic, non-Irish	52% (n=209)
Irish Catholic	47% (n=53)

**TABLE 4**  
**Catholic Identity and Support for Kennedy, 1960**

**Church Attendance**

Infrequent	60% (n=91)
Frequent	82% (n=240)

**“Closeness” to Catholics**

Not Close	70% (n=182)
Close	83% (n=149)

**“Strength” of Catholicism**

Not Very Strong	61% (n=72)
Strong	80% (n=259)

**Concern for Interests of Other Catholics**

Not Much	61% (n=49)
Some	74% (n=137)
Great Deal	83% (n=145)

**Trust in Catholic Organizations**

Low	56% (n=9)
Medium	74% (n=269)
High	93% (n=54)

**TABLE 5**  
**Catholic Identity and Support for Kerry, 2004**

**Church Attendance**

Infrequent	63% (n=113)
Frequent	41% (n=148)

**Feeling Thermometer Rating of Catholic Church**

60 or lower	60% (n=79)
61 or higher	46% (n=183)

**TABLE 6**  
**Probit Model of Vote Choice Among Catholics, 1960**

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Coefficient (S.E.)</u>
Constant	-1.28 (0.76)
Female	0.09 (0.22)
Black	-0.47 (0.75)
Irish	1.63 (0.37) **
Age	-0.02 (0.01) *
Education	-0.10 (0.10)
Income	0.05 (0.06)
Union Membership	-0.01 (0.22)
South	0.62 (0.43)
Midwest	0.56 (0.25) *
West	0.95 (0.37) *
Public Housing	0.09 (0.07)
Job Guarantee	0.15 (0.08) *
Education Spending	0.12 (0.09)
National Healthcare	0.15 (0.09)
Isolationism	0.09 (0.09)
Foreign Aid	0.12 (0.09)
Anti-Communism	0.09 (0.08)
Civil Rights	0.08 (0.09)
Integration	0.08 (0.07)
Pocketbook Evaluation	-0.37 (0.16) *
Church Attendance	0.47 (0.23) *
Trust in Catholic Organizations	0.73 (0.31) *

N = 306  
LR  $\chi^2 = 95.8$  ( $p < 0.01$ )

\*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed test  
\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

**TABLE 7**  
**Probit Model of Vote Choice Among Catholics, 2004**

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Coefficient (S.E.)</u>
Constant	-3.80 (1.12)
Female	-0.29 (0.29)
Hispanic	0.33 (0.46)
Irish	0.12 (0.34)
Age	0.02 (0.01) *
Education	0.04 (0.12)
Income	-0.02 (0.03)
Union Membership	0.51 (0.31)
South	0.14 (0.53)
Midwest	1.11 (0.34) **
West	0.82 (0.39) *
Job Guarantee	0.09 (0.09)
National Healthcare	0.14 (0.09)
Isolationism	-0.37 (0.35)
Foreign Aid	0.03 (0.19)
Civil Rights	0.15 (0.11)
Aid to Blacks	0.02 (0.10)
Abortion	0.11 (0.15)
Women's Role	0.29 (0.14) *
Gay Marriage	0.70 (0.30) *
Pocketbook Evaluation	-0.08 (0.13)
Church Attendance	-1.04 (0.31) **
FT Catholic Church	0.01 (0.01)

N = 156  
 LR  $\chi^2 = 75.5$  ( $p < 0.01$ )

\*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed test  
 \*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The only notable instance of anyone in the Catholic hierarchy challenging Kennedy was New York's Francis Cardinal Spellman, who expressed consternation that Kennedy had bucked the Church's position on federal aid to parochial schools (see Marlin 2004). This criticism was not politically consequential, however, in part because Nixon's position on the issue was similar.

<sup>2</sup> In Campbell *et al.*'s discussion of the "levels of conceptualization," the "group benefits" voters greatly outnumber any other category in the study.

<sup>3</sup> The American National Election Studies are administered by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation. Information on the studies may be found at [www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/nesguide.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/nesguide.htm). Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the funding agencies.

<sup>4</sup> In 1960, frequent church attenders are defined as those who report attending services "regularly" (about 70% of Catholics and 40% of non-Catholics); infrequent attenders are all others.

<sup>5</sup> Among Catholics, the limitation to whites only is a trivial one, as very few Catholics in the NES sample are black. It is an important qualifier among non-Catholics, however, as the inclusion of African Americans would significantly inflate levels of Protestant support for Democratic candidates.

<sup>6</sup> In 2004, frequent church attenders are defined as those who report attending services at least "once or twice a month" (about 55% of Catholics and 45% of non-Catholics); infrequent attenders are all others.

<sup>7</sup> All differences reported here are significant at a 95% or higher confidence level. The exact wordings for this and subsequently referenced questions are: "Some Catholics feel that they have a lot in common with other Catholics, but others we talk to don't feel this way so much. How about you—would you say that you feel pretty close to Catholics in general, or that you don't feel much closer to them than you do to other people?" (NES Var 600259). "Would you call yourself a strong Catholic or a not very strong Catholic?" (NES Var 600258). "How much interest would you say you have in how Catholics as a whole are getting along in this country? Would you say you have a good deal of interest in it, some interest, or not much interest at all?" (NES Var 600260). "In election campaigns, different groups work for one candidate or another. Are there any groups on this list that you particularly trust—that is, would you be more likely to vote for candidates they recommend? Which ones? Are there any groups on the list that you don't trust—that is, would you be more likely to vote against candidates that they recommend? Which ones?" ["Catholic groups" offered as item on presented list] (NES Var 600169).

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<sup>8</sup> This feeling thermometer item is less than ideal, both because of individual variation in use of the feeling thermometer scales (Wilcox, Sigelman, and Cook 1989) and because of the necessarily arbitrary task of creating a dividing line for purposes of comparing groups. Still, it does provide at least a general indicator of respondents' affective attachment to the institutional Church.

<sup>9</sup> Readers will note that party identification is absent from these models. The problem with including it is that, because it is so causally proximate to vote choice, it wipes out the effects of virtually every other variable. In 1960, for example, 98% of Catholic self-identified Democrats voted for Kennedy. Moreover, it is not especially interesting or insightful to say that Catholics supported John Kerry less than John Kennedy because they had become more Republican over time. This is no doubt true, but it obscures the underlying issue basis of that shift.

<sup>10</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, abortion attitudes, though properly signed, are not significant in this model. This is likely due in large part to the strong association between church attendance and abortion attitudes among Catholics. They are correlated in the NES at about 0.6.

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