

RELIGION AND POLITICS: U.S.A.

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THE 2008 ELECTION SEASON was tumultuous, divisive, exhilarating, and historically unique. It yielded the first black president, Democratic candidate Barack Hussein Obama,¹ with the first Catholic vice president, Joseph Biden. Republican counterparts were John McCain, a decorated war hero; and Sarah Palin, governor of Alaska, potentially the first woman vice president.

Obama's campaign to empower his message at the "grassroots" was massively effective. It registered new African-American, Hispanic, and young voters, all of whom strongly favored Obama. Using frequent email appeals, Obama raised over \$600 million from over three million donors—a virtual plebiscite on his popularity. Obama won 53% of the vote, compared to McCain's 46%. Catholics favored him 54% to 45%. Yet (non-Hispanic) whites overall favored McCain 55% to 43%, with a narrower gap among white Catholics—52% to 47%. This means that Latinos—66% pro-Obama—gained him the Catholic vote. Still, Obama did better with white Catholics than the two previous Democrats (Gore 2000, Kerry 2004).²

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¹ Although Obama is frequently characterized as African-American, that term is typically reserved for descendents of slaves, not recent immigrants or their children. Obama's father was Kenyan, his mother white. He was raised by his mother and grandparents after his parents divorced. No perspective is context-free; I served on the Catholic Advisory Committee of Barack Obama. Thanks to Thomas J. Reese, S.J., for many constructive suggestions on this essay. All Web sites referred to in this Note were accessed November 23, 2008.

² See the Pew Forum survey, "How the Faithful Voted," <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=367>. See also Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh, "A Past without a Future? Parsing the U.S. Catholic Vote," *America* 199.14 (November 3, 2008), http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11181; and Peter Steinfels, "Catholics and Choice (In the Voting Booth)," *New York Times* (November 8, 2008), http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/08/us/politics/08beliefs.html?_r=3&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin.

Though U.S. political and legal traditions separate church and state (government cannot establish a religion, nor directly fund religious activities), America is a religious country. Only 6.3% of Americans self-identify as “secular” and “unaffiliated” with any religion.³ Religious leaders and groups are politically active and influential. The religious beliefs of candidates (all Protestant except Biden) were scrutinized. Catholics, a quarter of the electorate, were courted by both parties. Catholics are integrated into the American mainstream, yet Catholic identity is still stamped by 19th- and early-20th-century immigrant experiences.⁴ Some recall or imagine a “vibrant culture of the Catholic ghetto” existing pre-Vatican II.⁵ They resent lingering anti-Catholic sentiment that immigrant forebears evoked. Yet Catholic ethnic enclaves could be tainted by defensiveness and racism. Catholic calls for justice were not always inclusive.⁶ Prioritizing issues like economic equity, education, employment, and health care, Obama summoned all to the common good. McCain promised to win the war and identified himself as “pro-life” (yet supports embryonic stem cell research). Defense of life is central to Catholic moral tradition; it especially appeals to Catholics for whom “pro-life” serves as an identity marker amid cultural pluralism.⁷

Since 1975, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has issued political advisories. In November 2007, it overwhelmingly approved *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* to guide but not to “tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote” (nos. 7, 58). Taking innocent life is not “just one issue among many” (no. 28), yet “other serious threats” including racism, the death penalty, unjust war, hunger, health care, and immigration “are not optional concerns” (no. 29). Abortion is an “intrinsic evil,” but “racism” falls in the same category (no. 34), along with genocide, torture, and targeting noncombatants (no. 23). *Faithful Citizenship* calls for prudential discernment and “the art of the possible” (John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* no. 73). Catholics must neither advocate intrinsic evil,

³ Pew Forum, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” <http://religions.pewforum.org/>.

⁴ See James M. O’Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2008).

⁵ Michael Sean Winters, *Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats* (New York: Basic, 2008) 70. Winters rails against John F. Kennedy’s relegation of religion to the private sphere, and finds hope in the influx of Latino Catholics.

⁶ E. J. Dionne Jr., “There Is No Catholic Vote—And It’s Important,” in *American Catholics and Civic Engagement: A Distinctive Voice*, ed. Margaret O’Brien Steinfels (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 258–59.

⁷ On countercultural pro-life commitment see Jennifer Fulweiler, “A Sexual Revolution,” *America* 199.1 (July 7, 2008) 11–13, http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10904.

nor be single-issue voters (no. 34). As the election neared, some bishops reclaimed abortion to define Catholic politics, equated opposition to abortion with commitment to make it illegal, and excluded the possibility of Catholics supporting Obama.⁸ But judging the morality of abortion is logically and ethically distinct from choosing political strategies to combat it; and distinct from judging morally or religiously those who choose differently.

A novel U.S. development is a bipartisan and ecumenical “progressive” coalition combining social justice and ecology with traditional “pro-life” causes. This movement connects through internet media, public events, and religious activism.⁹ A surge of Catholic publications and organizations advances a similar “common good” agenda. Leading activists encouraged voters, “There has scarcely been a better opportunity for members of our church who are passionate about the common good to embrace their identity as Catholic Americans, and to help bring the light of our faith’s message of justice and dignity to the farthest reaches of our nation and our world.”¹⁰

Though most Americans and a majority of Catholics support legal abortion,¹¹ most (81%) want abortion reduction.¹² Prudence and realism question single-minded determination to reverse the 1973 Supreme Court

⁸ For example, Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop William Murphy, “Joint Statement,” October 21, 2008, <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/Rigali-Murphy-Joint-Statement.pdf>; Michael Sean Winters, “Why They Didn’t Listen,” *Tablet* (15 November 2008), <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/1227>.

⁹ See Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); E. J. Dionne Jr., *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2008); Amy Sullivan, *The Party Faithful: How and Why the Democrats Are Closing the God Gap* (New York: Scribner, 2008); Sojourners Christians for Peace and Justice Web site (<http://www.sojo.net/>); Matthew 25 Network Web site (<http://www.matthew25.org/>); and evangelical pastor Rick Warren’s Web site (<http://www.rickwarren.com/>).

¹⁰ Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley, *A Nation for All: How the Catholic Vision of the Common Good Can Save America from the Politics of Division* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 123. Korzen and Kelley founded Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good (<http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/>) and Catholics United (<http://www.catholics-united.org/>), respectively. Another Web-based organization is Catholic Democrats (<http://www.catholicdemocrats.org/>). See also Clarke E. Cochran and David Carroll Cochran, *The Catholic Vote: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008); and Gerald J. Beyer, “Yes You Can: Why Catholics Don’t Have to Vote Republican,” *Commonweal* 135.12 (June 20, 2008) 15–18.

¹¹ See *The Faith and American Politics Survey: The Young and the Faithful*, at Faith in Public Life Web site, <http://www.faithinpubliclife.org/content/faps>.

¹² See “Religion in the 2008 Election: Post-Election Survey,” by Catholics in Alliance, Faith in Public Life, and Sojourners, <http://www.faithinpubliclife.org/content/post-electionpoll/>.

decision *Roe v. Wade*, making abortion legal. Even with pro-life appointments by a Republican president, the court would maintain its bias toward established law (*stare decisis*). Overturning *Roe v. Wade* would return the matter to the states, and most would allow abortion. Furthermore, data shows that abortion rates decline as social programs rise. Latin American countries banning abortion still have high rates due to poverty and women's low status. Northern European countries with permissive abortion law and expansive programs of health care and family support have much lower rates than the U.S.¹³ A bipartisan effort in Congress, The Pregnant Woman Support Act (H.R. 3192 and S. 2407), proposes to reduce abortions by promoting pregnancy assistance, adoption, and education and support for new mothers. The 2008 Democratic Party platform on abortion was expanded for the first time to include similar benefits.

Catholics prioritizing poverty, war, health care, immigration, or the environment; or limiting their abortion advocacy to socioeconomic measures, met swift and firm repudiation from some bishops who branded Obama unacceptable.¹⁴ Douglas Kmiec, a Catholic Republican law professor, declared support for Obama,¹⁵ was denied communion, then was denounced by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver. Chaput insists faith is relevant to politics, attacks anti-Catholicism, and warns against diluting Catholic identity.¹⁶ Garnering less media attention were bishops insisting on symmetry of issues or stressing "intrinsic evils" like racism.¹⁷

In his U.S. visit, Pope Benedict XVI called for action on war, poverty, and the environment. Days before the election, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, papal nuncio to the UN, called for protection of the global climate, food security, human rights, a moratorium on the death penalty, basic health care, education, economic development, and all other "necessary efforts . . . to create a society in which life is respected at all stages of

¹³ See Joseph Wright and Michael Bailey, *Reducing Abortion in America: The Effect of Social and Economic Supports*, sponsored by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, 2008, http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/files/CACG_Final.pdf.

¹⁴ See Steinfels, "Catholics and Choice"; and Winters, "Why They Didn't Listen."

¹⁵ Douglas W. Kmiec, *Can a Catholic Support Him? Asking the Big Question about Barack Obama* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook, 2008).

¹⁶ Charles J. Chaput, *Render unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

¹⁷ See Archbishop John C. Favalora (Miami), "Why We Don't Take Sides on Candidates," pastoral letter of September 12, 2008, <http://www.miamiarchdiocese.org/Statement.asp?op=Column080912&lg=E>; and Bishop Blase Cupich (Rapid City, S.D.), "Racism and the Election," *America* 119.13 (October 27, 2008) 5, http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11161.

development.”¹⁸ Yet Americans subordinated global concerns to domestic ones, especially the economy, the war in Iraq, universal health care, and energy policy.¹⁹

What are ramifications for Catholic ethics? First, *social ethics*. Does the election of Obama signal a new politics of social justice? Catholics by 71% support policies that “protect the interests of all and promote the common good,” compared to 13% who focus on abortion and same-sex marriage.²⁰ Yet Catholic voters did not obviously favor “solidarity” and the preferential option for the poor over their families’ welfare, especially economic security and health care. Political participation is crucial to healthy democracy and justice; the election enfranchised oppressed and disillusioned populations. Yet the gospel mandate to love one’s neighbor as oneself remains a challenge in view of competition for economic resources, overt racism, negative stereotyping of Muslims, and constricted interest in foreign policy obligations.

Second, *moral theology’s tools and methods*. Moral theology cannot set high stakes on individual decisions alone. The relation between acts and contexts has been a vexed topic since the proportionalist debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Faithful Citizenship’s paired condemnations of abortion and social sins remind us that all agency is socially embedded, that individuals are responsible for social evil, and that acts are not more “directly” or “intrinsically” evil than practices and institutions. Cathleen Kaveny shows that “intrinsic evils” are not all equally grave.²¹ Amelia Uelmen shows why they require prudential political analysis. She sees “intrinsic evil” as a “guardrail”; one could infer that “intrinsic evil” now functions more as a “prophetic” than a “casuistic” category,²² especially as redeployed against social practices.

Third, *ecclesiology, ethics, and politics*. In the run-up to the election, some bishops disparaged Democrats, warned Catholics away from Obama, and advised dissenters to refrain from communion. A few demurred, and many were silent. But bishops were not the sole shapers of Catholic

¹⁸ Catholic News Service, “Nuncio Talks to UN on Global Climate, Human Rights,” October 29, 2008, <http://www.uscatholic.org/news/2008/10/nuncios-talks-un-global-climate-human-rights>.

¹⁹ Jackie Calmes and Megan Thee, “Voter Polls Show Obama Built a Broad Coalition,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2008. On Catholics, see Patricia Zapor, “Catholic voters mirror general electorate in support for Obama,” Catholic News Service, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0805649.htm>.

²⁰ “Religion in the 2008 Election.”

²¹ M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Political Responsibility: Is the Concept of Intrinsic Evil Helpful to the Catholic Voter?” *America* 119.13 (October 27, 2008) 15–19.

²² Amelia J. Uelmen, “‘It’s Hard Work’: Reflections on Conscience and Citizenship in the Catholic Tradition,” *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 47 (2008) 338–39.

politics. Catholics of every stripe were remarkably active, going beyond academic publications, mainstream media, and Catholic magazines, to produce parish and campus panels, local action committees, and Web sites and blogs reaching a huge new audience. This too is a healthy development, despite frequently divisive rhetoric.

Benedict XVI sent Obama a congratulatory message, identifying “peace, solidarity and justice” as the “special issues” on which his administration should make progress.²³ The laity has shown that it is ready and able to join political discourse and action on “Catholic” terms. Targets include health care, economic recovery, poverty, energy, trade policy, immigration, Iraq and Afghanistan, nuclear reduction, and abortion reduction via programs that empower women and support families. Much can be accomplished through synergy among lay spokespersons and agencies, Catholics in public office, offices of the USCCB, local dioceses and parishes, Catholic-sponsored education, Catholic political groups, and fellow citizens of every tradition and faith.

Obama promises a bipartisan administration. U.S. Catholics deserve a bipartisan Church—for Democrats and Republicans, traditionalists and progressives, and older and younger Catholics uninterested in reliving or reinventing the liberal-conservative hostilities of an earlier era. Obama’s campaign speech on race was hailed for its honesty, its empathy with fears and grievances of blacks *and* whites, and its call for forgiveness.²⁴ Catholic ethics and politics too should resist the “culture wars,” forging a dynamic vision from constructive debate, respectful criticism, practical commitment, and a hermeneutic of generosity toward others’ value priorities.

²³ Cindy Wooden, “Pope Sends Congratulatory Message to Obama,” Catholic News Service, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0805616.htm>.

²⁴ Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” Philadelphia, March 18, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>.