

# Catching the Catholic Vote: Look to Family Needs Rather than Bishops' Concerns

## Summary Analysis of Findings from a National Survey of Catholic Voters in the 2000 Presidential Election

### Conducted for Catholics for a Free Choice

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#### Overview

Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) conducted a survey of 1,003 Catholic likely voters nationwide from October 10–15, 2000, for Catholics for a Free Choice. The results reveal insights into the motivations of Catholic voters as they consider the choices in the presidential campaign. The survey analysis offers the following main points to emerge from the views of Catholic voters:

- Catholic voters are most concerned about bread-and-butter issues of personal economic security. They are influenced more by what the candidates will do about preserving Social Security and Medicare, improving health care and education, and fighting crime, than by church-related issues of morality.
- Catholic voters part company with the position of the Catholic church on a number of issues. Majorities of Catholic voters hold pro-choice views on abortion, support the death penalty, and believe we should allow physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill patients.
- These voters are not taking their cues from the Catholic bishops on how to vote on November 7.

- They worry very little about anti-Catholic sentiments in this year's campaign.
- In the presidential horserace, Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush are running neck and neck. Gore is slightly ahead of Bush among Catholics in a block of key swing states: Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Ohio, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Florida.

## **Presidential Horserace**

Traditionally, Catholic voters have represented just under a third of the total presidential vote, and have not been consistent supporters of one party's candidate. They are a large, identifiable group that switches allegiances as times change—truly a swing group. Exit polls have shown that Catholics voted for Richard Nixon in 1972, Jimmy Carter in '76, Ronald Reagan in '80 and '84, George Bush in '88, and Bill Clinton in '92 and '96. In 1996, exit polls indicated that Catholics made up 29% of the presidential vote.

In mid-October 2000, the Catholic vote is evenly divided between the Democrat and the Republican candidates. Among those Catholics who say they will definitely vote in the presidential election, 42% support Gore, 42% are for Bush, 3% for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, 1% for Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan, and 11% undecided. When those who are undecided but leaning for a candidate are included in the vote, the race is 46% for Gore, 44% for Bush, 3% for Nader, 1% Buchanan, and 4% undecided.

In the key swing states of Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Missouri, Gore enjoys a slight lead of 3 percentage points overall among Catholic voters—44% for Gore to 41% for Bush.

At this point, Gore is winning among Catholic women (48% Gore-36% Bush), seniors (age 55+: 48%-38%), single people (46%-38%), and those Catholics who attend church infrequently (45%-39%) or hardly at all (53%-31%). Gore's strongest vote among Catholics comes from older Catholic women (55% support among women age 55+).

Bush is winning among Catholic men (47% Bush-37% Gore), white Catholics (44%-40%), baby boomers (age 36-54: 43%-38%), and frequent churchgoers (52%-33%), who represent Bush's strongest voting block among Catholics.

The younger generation of Catholic voters (age 18-35) remains split between the two candidates (43% Bush-41% Gore).

Another group to watch is baby boomer women (ages 36-54). Although they favor Gore today (43%-37%), they have the highest percentage of undecideds—17%—of any group.

## Issues of Importance

The national survey reports that Catholic voters are most likely to want the next president to give top priority to protecting Social Security and Medicare, and improving the health care system—46% and 45% respectively rate these issues top priorities for the next president. As Catholic voters rate the importance of 16 specific issues, the next most widely considered priorities are improving public education (39%) and fighting crime (35%), followed by protecting American jobs (31%) and promoting moral values in the country (31%).

The importance of economic security issues is underscored by the survey finding that 73% of Catholic voters agree that the country should use “more of the budget surplus to preserve Social Security and Medicare rather than for a tax cut,” while 26% disagree with this statement. About four in 10 (39%) of those who feel strongly about preserving Social Security and Medicare say they will “definitely vote against” a candidate who disagrees with their position.

On a range of issues, Catholic voters are more likely to stand with other Americans than with the US Catholic bishops and the Vatican. Majorities of Catholic voters support the death penalty (80%), legal abortion (66%), and the practice of allowing doctors to assist in the suicide of terminally ill patients (56%).

Catholic voters’ support for school vouchers to help parents pay for tuition costs in private or religious schools (57%) is the same or only slightly higher than the nation as a whole, depending on how the question is worded.

## Abortion politics

Like the rest of the nation, Catholic voters are more likely to call themselves pro-choice (58%) than pro-life (41%) on abortion, and a strong majority of Catholic voters believes abortion should be legal (66%). A third of Catholic voters (34%) disagree with legal abortion.

Seven in 10 (70%) do not believe that Catholics have a religious obligation to vote for candidates who oppose legal abortion. Three in 10 (29%) believe this obligation exists.

The data suggest that among Catholic voters, abortion as a political issue does not provide much of an advantage to either side of the debate. Catholic voters support legal abortion, 66% to 34%, and there are twice as many Catholic voters who feel strongly in favor of legal abortion (38%) as opposed (19%). When those who feel strongly on either side are asked how they would react if a candidate for president took a position on abortion “different from yours,” half (49%) of the anti-choice Catholics and one-third (32%) of the pro-choice Catholics say they would “definitely” vote against the candidate. This leaves the political potential about even. The one-third of the 38% who feel strongly about keeping abortion legal represent almost 13% of Catholic voters that find anti-choice candidates unacceptable. On the other side, the one-half of the 19% who are

strongly opposed to legal abortion represent almost 10% of Catholics who will not vote for a pro-choice candidate.

### **Influence of the Church**

The Catholic church has very little influence on the voting behavior of the vast majority of Catholic voters. The survey reveals:

- Only 5% of Catholic voters say the views of US Catholic bishops are “very important for you in deciding who to vote for” in the coming election. Another 20% said somewhat important, and 75% said the views of the bishops were unimportant.
- Six in 10 (59%) oppose the Catholic bishops making public statements regarding candidates for office, while four in 10 (41%) favor this activity by the bishops.
- Seven in 10 (70%) do not believe that the Catholic bishops should use the political arena to advance their moral opinions.

These findings suggest that while a number of Catholic voters (but not a majority) approve of Catholic bishops speaking out about candidates, overwhelmingly they do not want bishops passing moral judgment on candidates and they are not being influenced by such statements.

In a related question on the influence of the Catholic church, the survey asked Catholic voters whether they approved of the United Nations recognizing the Vatican as a Non-member State Permanent Observer, like Switzerland, or whether the Vatican should be treated as a non-governmental organization like all other religions which participate in the UN. American Catholic voters reveal a slight preference for treating the Vatican like other religions (51%), as opposed to treating it as a non-member state with permanent observer status (45%).

### **Anti-Catholicism**

Although anti-Catholicism had been raised early in the presidential campaign, it is not on the minds of Catholic voters today. Only 9% of these voters worry “very much” that “candidates for office this year are anti-Catholic,” and another 19% worry somewhat. Seventy-two percent do not worry about anti-Catholic candidates.

## Methods

The Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) national survey of Catholics, conducted for Catholics for a Free Choice, interviewed 1,003 self-described Catholics who are likely to vote in the presidential election. The interviews took place from October 10 to 15, 2000, using the Knowledge Networks Web-enabled panel. This sample is derived from a random digit dial (RDD) telephone methodology that represents all US households with telephones.

Knowledge Networks employs a complex sample stratification design that incorporates the known probabilities of selection associated with geographical location, the number of phone lines, and whether or not the phone number is listed. Once a Knowledge Networks household is selected, members are contacted first by an express delivery mailing and then by telephone for enrollment in the panel. Every participating Knowledge Networks household receives free hardware, free Internet access, free email accounts, and ongoing technical support. Participants receive a short multimedia survey about once a week. Surveys are delivered by email on the same standardized hardware, through their television sets.

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence for the entire sample, and 3.4 percentage points for those who say they “definitely” plan to vote in the November election.