

**Winning the Catholic Vote:
Attitudes of Catholic Voters on
Politics and the Church**

**from
A National Opinion Survey**

**Conducted for
Catholics for a Free Choice**

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Introduction

Constituting over a quarter of the overall electorate, the Catholic vote has been a good litmus test for the outcome of the Presidential election over the past several decades. As the nation geared itself to elect a new President, Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) asked Belden Russonello and Stewart (BRS) to conduct public opinion research to reveal insights into the motivations of Catholic voters. The survey also aimed to learn issues Catholic voters cared about, and their attitudes toward the appropriate role of the Catholic Church and US Catholic Bishops in US politics.

The national survey of 1,003 Catholic likely voters was conducted from October 10 through 15, and has a margin of sampling error for the entire survey of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence.

Executive Summary

The Catholics for a Free Choice national survey of 1,003 likely Catholic voters revealed many insights into the thinking of America's most reliable and telling swing voter group in Presidential politics. Catholics represent over a quarter of the national vote and for the last three decades their overall preference has changed several times between the Democratic and Republican candidate for President. But as Catholic voters have swung, so has the nation. Candidates who win the White House usually win the Catholic vote. They are an extremely important group to watch carefully.

The BRS survey, conducted for CFFC from October 10 through 15, 2000 measured Catholic preferences for the Presidential candidates, the issues of most importance to Catholic voters, and their views on the public role of the Catholic Church in electoral politics.

Presidential Politics

- Three weeks before the Presidential election on November 7, 2000, the Presidential race was dead even among very likely Catholic voters, 42% for Vice President Al Gore, 42% for George W. Bush, 3% for Ralph Nader, 1% for Pat Buchanan, and 12% undecided. However, when undecideds were asked to which candidate they were leaning, Gore pulled ahead of Bush by 2 percentage points, 46% to 44%. Gore's two-point advantage held on election day, as the Voter News Service (VNS) national exit poll reported the Catholic vote nationwide to be 49% for Gore and 47% for Bush. Once again, the candidate who won the national vote - Al Gore - also won the Catholic vote - both by close margins.
- The BRS survey also indicated Gore was ahead among Catholic voters in a block of key swing states: Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Ohio, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Florida.

Issues of Importance

- What issues were most on the minds of Catholic voters as they approached the November election? The survey presented many secular and church-related topics to Catholic voters and the result showed that these voters were most concerned about bread and butter issues of personal economic security, and not very influenced by Church-related issues of morality.
- Social Security and Medicare, improving health care and education, and fighting crime were the top priorities that Catholic voters told us they wanted the next President to address. Less important than these issues were the protecting of American jobs, promoting moral values, and cutting taxes. Of still less salience to Catholic voters were protecting the environment, fighting drug abuse, and reducing poverty in America.
- The importance of Social Security and Medicare to Catholic voters was underscored by their three-to-one preference for using the budget surplus to preserve Social Security and Medicare rather than for a tax cut.

Abortion Politics

- 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.
- On abortion, two-thirds of Catholic voters agreed that it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion. Seven in 10 did not believe Catholics have a religious obligation to vote for candidates who oppose legal abortion even though close to half believed abortion can be the morally acceptable choice only in rare circumstances.
- The survey also found that abortion has minimal impact as an election issue among most Catholic voters. Only one in 10 of all likely Catholic voters felt strongly opposed to legal abortion and

would definitely vote against a candidate who favored legal abortion. On the other side, just over one in 10 Catholic voters felt strongly pro-choice on abortion and would definitely vote against a candidate who disagreed with them on this issue.

Influence of the Church

- Catholic voters did not take their cues from the Catholic Bishops on how to vote on November 7th. Only one in 20 said the views of the US Catholic Bishops were “very important in deciding who to vote for” in the November election. Six in 10 opposed the Catholic Bishops making statements publicly about candidates for office, and seven in 10 did not believe the Catholic Bishops should use the political arena to advance their moral causes.
- Catholic voters worried very little about anti-Catholic sentiments in this year’s campaign. Less than one in 10 worried very much about anti-Catholicism in the election, while another two in 10 worried somewhat.
- On the topic of the Vatican’s status at the United Nations, Catholic voters lean in favor of changing the Vatican’s position at the U.N. to treat it like any other religion, instead of its current status of non-member state.

Other Issues

- On other issues, majorities of Catholic voters oppose making it illegal to buy or sell handguns, and favor school vouchers to help parents pay for the cost of tuition to private or religious schools. A larger majority opposes making gay and lesbian marriages legal. On all three of these issues, Catholic voter sentiment tracks with that of the majority of Americans.

The survey’s image of Catholic voters is one that reflects the large middle of American public opinion. They want choices in their personal lives on big issues like abortion and

what happens at the end of life, and they want government to help them as they seek economic security and good health . These are their primary concerns, along with staying safe in their neighborhoods and improving the schools for their children and grandchildren.

When Catholic voters think of government and politics most do not look to the Church for guidance. As Catholics, they identify with the Catholic Church for religion, but the vast majority of Catholic voters do not look to the church or the bishops for political guidance. To understand the Catholic vote in America, do not look in the church bulletin, but in the concerns of voters at supermarket lines, PTA meetings, doctors' offices, and around the dinner table.