

# CONSCIENCE

THE NEWSJOURNAL OF CATHOLIC OPINION

VOL. XXVI—NO. 3

AUTUMN 2005

## Latin America's Abortion Battles

Advocates for women's rights sense progress in the ongoing battle for better reproductive health care services

JOANNE MARINER

## A Cautionary Tale

Has progressive religion moved far enough away from patriarchy to do women and democracy much good?

FRANCES KISSLING

## Two to Tangle

Church and state clash heads in Spain

ROBERT LATONA

## The Pope's First 100 Days

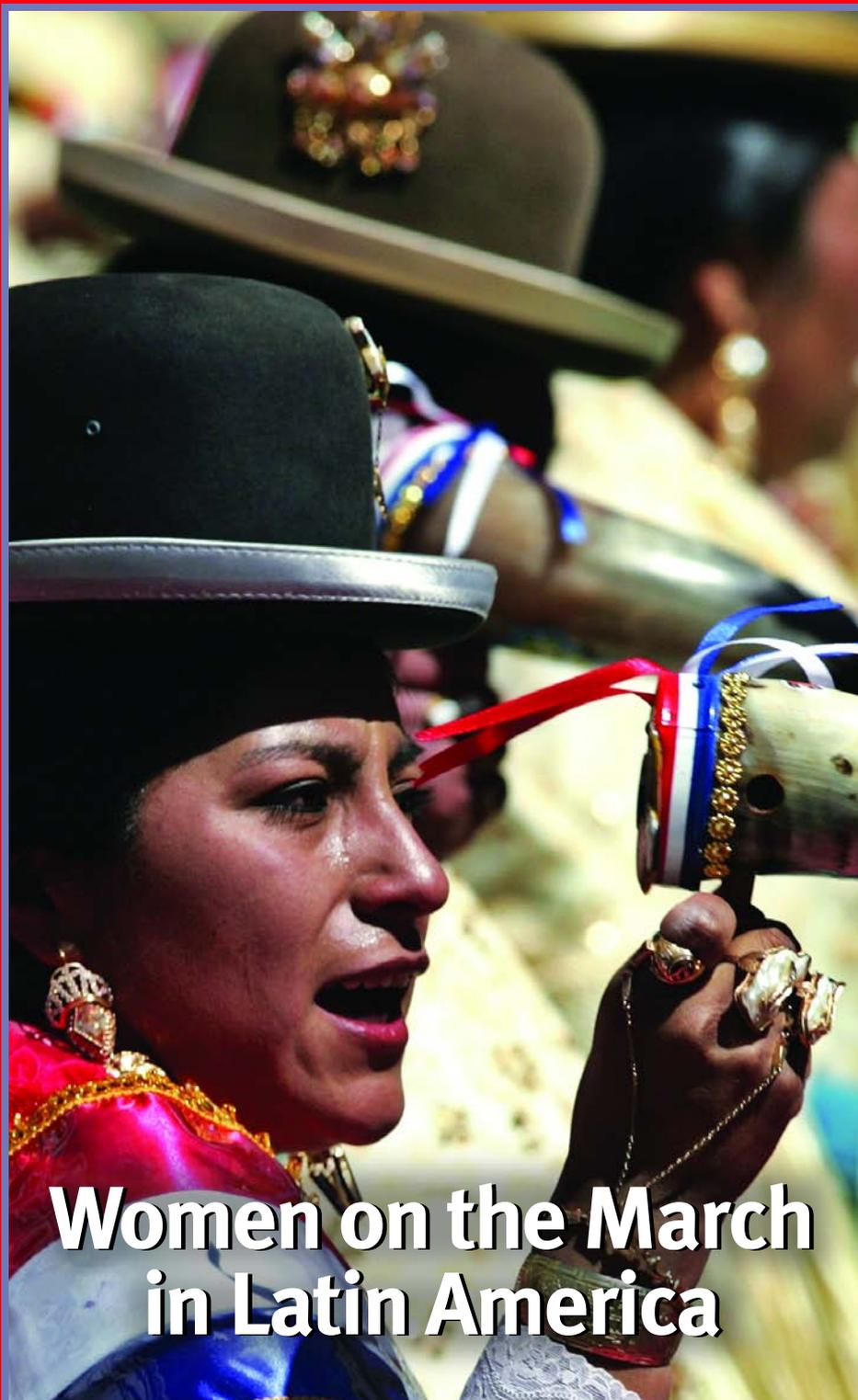
MICHELLE RINGUETTE

**ALSO:** Antichoice activists at World Youth Day, **Jennifer Baumgardner** on a new postabortion counseling service and **Eileen Moran** reviews Angela Bonavoglia's *Good Catholic Girls*

WWW.CATHOLICSFORCHOICE.ORG



\$5.00



## Women on the March in Latin America

# Understanding Catholic Voters

By John Russonello and Kate Stewart

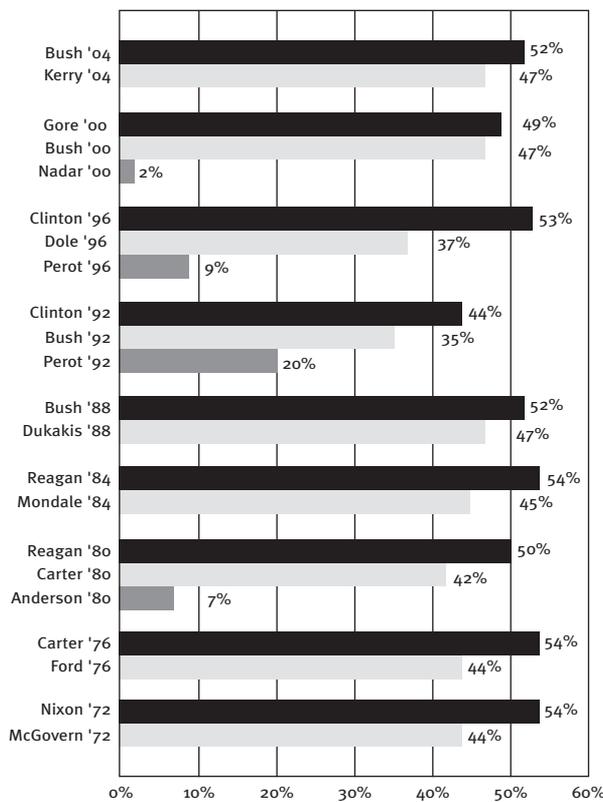
**T**HE 2004 ELECTION continued a long-standing truism of American presidential politics: the candidate who wins the most Catholic voters also wins the most votes across the nation.

The Catholic vote in the United States has been one of the most reliable blocks of swing voters in the presidential election. Catholic voters represent a quarter of the total electorate and have switched their preference from one party's candidate for president to another's as times change. In every presidential election for the last thirty years, the candidate that wins the Catholic vote has also won the popular vote. Exit polls document that Catholics voted mostly for Nixon, Carter, Reagan (twice), Bush senior and Clinton (also twice). In 2000, Democrat Al Gore, who narrowly won the popular vote, also eked out a victory among Catholics (49% to 47% for George W. Bush). In 2004, the 25% of the electorate identifying as the Catholic vote preferred Republican President Bush 52% to 47% for John Kerry.

The Catholic vote has been a near-perfect microcosm of the American vote because most Catholics do not choose a

**JOHN RUSSONELLO and KATE STEWART** are partners in Belden Russonello & Stewart, a Washington, DC-based firm that conducts survey and focus group research and provides research-based message development and communications consulting. [www.brspoll.com](http://www.brspoll.com)

**Chart 1: Catholic Vote in Presidential Elections\***



\* Data for the 1996 and 2000 elections was collected by Voter News Service (VNS) based on questionnaires completed by voters leaving polling places across the country on Election Day. Data for 1992 was based on surveys conducted by Voter Research and Surveys. Data for 1972 through 1988 was based on surveys conducted by *The New York Times* and CBS News. Data for 2000 from National Election Pool.

presidential candidate based on one or two specific social issues. Like most Americans, Catholics vote according to which candidate they believe will improve their economic security, their health coverage and their children's educational opportunities and will keep them safe from harm. They represent a suburban-urban middle class vote that reflects the voting preference

of the nation more accurately than any other segment over the last three decades.

Was there a "religious vote," in the 2004 presidential election, or did we simply witness an example of extraordinarily effective targeting and political organizing of conservative-leaning voters, many of whom can be found in Catholic churches on Sundays? Most of the evidence suggests the latter.

Other questions remain: What can we expect for future presidential elections—will the Catholic vote remain a swing vote? And, what will be the impact of the fastest growing segment of Catholics in the US—Hispanic Catholics?

## WHO ARE CATHOLIC VOTERS?

The Catholic vote is a microcosm of the nation. On key demographic characteristics such as gender and age, we find Catholic voters match voters overall in the electorate.

There are some distinctions, however. The Catholic vote compared to the electorate overall is more Hispanic, less African American and Catholic voters

have higher incomes and levels of education. The Catholic vote is more suburban and less rural, more northeastern and less southern than the vote overall. Politically, we find Catholic voters are more likely to identify as "moderates." As in the general population, more Catholics identify themselves as being conservative than as liberal.

The Catholic vote is mainly a secular or cultural block of voters. Less than half of Catholic voters (46%) say they attend mass at least once a week, and 53% report attending less often or never.

When we look at the Catholic vote by the 2004 presidential vote, we find Bush's strongest support among Catholic voters came from those in the South (67%) and upper income Catholics (59%).

Kerry's support came from Catholic voters in the West (60%), Hispanics (58%), lower income Catholics (55%) and younger Catholic voters (18-29 years old—55%).

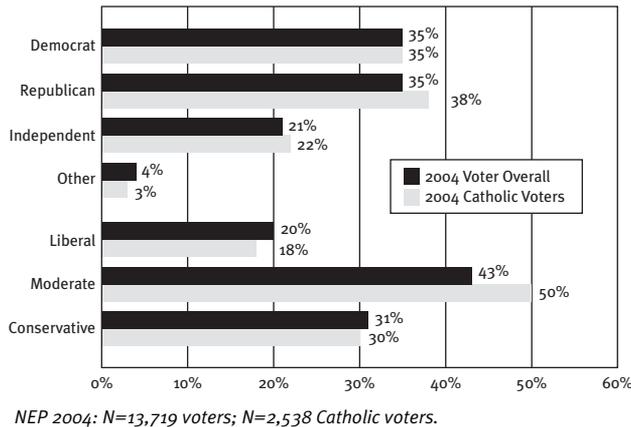
President Bush also did well among those Catholics who attend mass weekly, beating Kerry by 56% to 43% among this segment of Catholic voters. Those who go to services less frequently split their votes, with 50% voting for Kerry and 48% for Bush.

Not surprisingly, political ideology played a large role in vote choice among Catholics. Liberal and conservative Catholics demonstrated equal levels of loyalty to the candidate on their side of the spectrum. Eight in 10 liberals voted for Senator Kerry (83% to 15%) and eight in 10 conservatives voted for President Bush (82% to 17%). Moderate Catholics split their votes: 51% voted for Kerry and 48% for Bush.

When we combine ideology and church attendance, we find a similar ideological split that we found among Catholic voters overall.

- Nearly two in 10 Catholic voters (16%) say they attend church at least once a week and self-identify as "conservative;"
- 22% are frequent church-goers and politically "moderate;" and
- Seven percent are frequent church-goers and identify as "liberal."

**Chart 2: Political Demographics of Catholic Voters**



Among those who attend mass weekly, eight in 10 liberals reported voting for Kerry and eight in 10 conservatives reported voting for Bush. And moderate Catholics who frequently go to church, like moderate Catholics overall, split their votes between the two candidates.

- Conservative frequent church-goers: 83% Bush and 15% Kerry.
- Moderate frequent church-goers: 49% Bush and 49% Kerry.
- Liberal frequent church-goers: 14% Bush and 84% Kerry.

As with the rest of the electorate, when we include political ideology in the mix we find that ideology trumps church attendance for Catholic voters as the driver of the presidential vote. The Republicans understood this early in the presidential campaign. Therefore, they did not

go to the churches to increase the "religious" vote among Catholics but rather to increase the vote among conservative Catholics whom they could easily target at the churches each week. President Bush and the Republicans went to the Catholic churches with the goal of finding conservatives—not to look for religious Americans.

**REPUBLICAN SUCCESS IN 2004**

So, if Republicans went to the Catholic churches not to convert those in the pews nor to

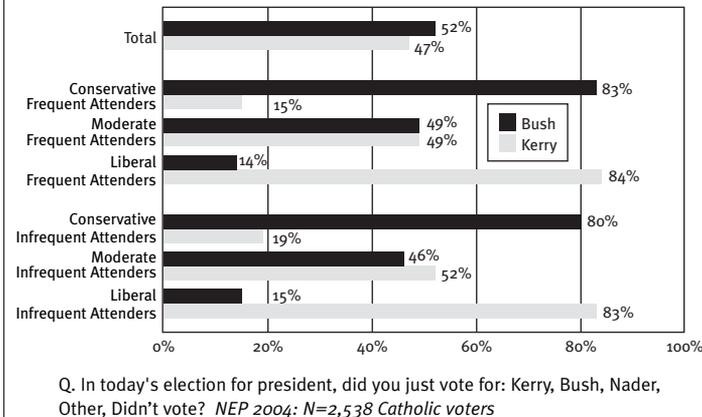
look for "religious" voters but to find and turnout conservatives, the question remains: did the Republican strategy of targeting Catholic churches pay off?

The answer is yes, in a small way, and that is all they needed this past election.

Comparing the exit polls from 2000 and 2004, we find:

- Bush increased his percentage of the conservative Catholic vote by seven percentage points (from 75% to 82%); while Kerry did only slightly better than Gore among liberal Catholics—79% in 2000 to 83% in 2004.
- We also find the turnout among conservative Catholics increased. The conservative Catholic vote increased four percentage points from 2000 to 2004 (26% to 30%), while the liberal and moderate Catholic vote dropped two percentage points each.
- Looking at church attendance, President Bush increased his vote among frequent church attenders by four percentage points from 2000 to 2004. In 2000, Bush received 52% of the frequent church-attender vote, and in 2004, he received 56%.
- Bush made some gains among conservative frequent church-attenders, but he did not make in-roads with moderates or liberals in the pews—never his intention. In 2000, Bush won 78% of the

**Chart 3: Catholics' Presidential Choice: Ideology by Church Attendance**



conservative frequent church attenders and in 2004 he increased his vote by five percentage points among this group to 83%. Among moderates and liberals he remained steady (50% moderate church-attenders; 13% in 2000 and 14% in 2004 for liberal church-attenders).

Therefore, the Republican strategy of finding likely Bush supporters in the churches and getting them to vote was successful. Given the closeness of this election, a four- or five-point swing in the Catholic vote—especially in crucial battleground states such as Ohio which have high percentages of Catholic voters—can mean the difference in winning or losing the White House.

This incremental increase in votes for Bush makes it likely that Republicans will continue the strategy of targeting those in the pews to increase Republican votes.

But what this also suggests is the possibility that the Catholic vote may, sometime in the next few elections, transform from a reliable swing voting group into a group that consistently leans to one side. The electorate as a whole is becoming more divided by ideology than party, and religious affiliation may also go in the same direction. In 1980, we heard a great deal about Reagan Democrats, many of whom were Catholic. In 2005, we are hard-pressed to find any Bush Democrats.

**THE IMPACT OF HISPANIC CATHOLICS**

A key factor in the future of the Catholic vote is the role of Hispanic Catholics. Hispanics, as a segment of the Catholic vote, have grown from 13% in 2000 to 17% in 2004, and their impact is likely to grow even more in the future.

In many ways, these voters are quite similar to other Catholic voters in their thinking, but in many other ways they have their own characteristics.

As a group, Hispanic Catholic voters are younger, likely to have fewer years of formal

schooling and have lower annual incomes than Catholic voters overall. Politically, Hispanic Catholics identify more with the Democratic Party.

While Kerry, as expected, won among Hispanic Catholics (58% to 38%), he did not win by as much of a margin as Gore did in 2000 (64% to 33%).

In a survey that Belden Russonello & Stewart conducted for Catholics for a Free Choice in July 2004, we found that Hispanic Catholic voters share the same concerns as other Catholics, but they elevate two issues—improving health care and public education—above other issues. (CFFC, “The View from Mainstream America: The Catholic Voter in Summer 2004,” July 2004.)

Hispanic voters reflect overall Catholic voter sentiment on a number of social issues. They are just as supportive of legal abortion (62% agree), in favor of stem cell research (71%), opposed to legal marriage for same sex couples (63%) and supportive of prayer in public schools (73%).

Just like other Catholics, healthy majorities of Hispanic Catholic voters reject the idea of the Catholic bishops influencing the positions of political candidates or their own decisions on issues such as abortion or denying communion to those Catholics who disagree with church teachings.

When it comes to church attendance and ideology, we also find that Hispanic

Catholics are not much different than Catholics overall, though slightly more liberal. In the national exit polls, 48% of Hispanic Catholics report that they attend church frequently and 51% do not. Three in 10 (28%) are conservative, 45% moderate, 25% liberal. When we combine these, we find that among Hispanic Catholics, 16% are conservative and attend church frequently; 20% are moderate and frequent attenders; and 11% are liberal and frequent attenders.

As with Catholics overall, the Republicans were successful in increasing turnout among conservative Hispanic Catholic voters (by four percentage points from 24% to 28%), while liberal turnout dropped two points and moderates three points.

If the Republicans continue to successfully target conservative voters in the pews each week—and there is no reason to suggest they will give up on this strategy—it is likely that Democrats will see larger losses among Hispanic Catholics. This could have significant impact in key battleground states such as New Mexico, Nevada and Florida, which have large Hispanic populations. If support for Democratic candidates by Hispanic Catholics continues to erode, the Catholic vote may shift more firmly in the Republican camp.

But such a shift is in no way inevitable. If history is a guide, there will be ample opportunity for Democrats to help Catholics retain their status of swing group.

Democrats should keep in mind that even among those sitting in the pews each week, liberal and moderate Catholic voters outnumber conservatives. The mistake is too easily made believing the Catholic vote and the Hispanic Catholic vote are firmly conservative—antiabortion, anti-gay, etc. This is not the case. It is precisely the avoidance of extreme, single issue voting that has made the Catholics the most reliable swing voters.

How goes the Catholic vote, so goes the country. ■

