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Catholic Partisanship and the Presidential Vote in 2012: Testing Alternative Theories

Abstract: Catholics have long been an important force in American electoral politics. Once a vital and loyal component of the New Deal Democratic coalition, Catholics in recent decades have shifted their political loyalties away from the Democratic Party to more of a partisan equilibrium. Indeed, by 2012, the White Catholic vote had become predominantly Republican, even in a year in which a Democrat was re-elected to the White House, and on balance party identification among these voters showed a slight Republican edge. Only the growing contingent of Latino Catholics kept the national vote of the entire religious community closely balanced. Despite widespread agreement among scholars that the partisan behavior of Catholics has changed, there is much less consensus on the nature of that change, its permanence, and its causes. We review the historic patterns of Catholic partisanship and voting behavior, discuss three major perspectives on electoral change among Catholics, and test these perspectives with data drawn from the 2012 National Survey of Religion and Politics, with a rich battery of religious measures. We find that socioeconomic factors, religious perspectives, and issue preferences among Catholics all influence partisanship and vote choice, reducing any true “distinctiveness” of the “Catholic vote.”

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Introduction

Perhaps the most quoted observation about electoral politics among contemporary Catholics is E.J. Dionne, Jr.’s witticism that “there is no Catholic vote – and it’s important” (2004, p. 251). Dionne’s conundrum captures both the electoral importance of believers who constitute one-fourth of American voters and the difficulty that scholars have had in explaining partisan change among Catholics. Part of that problem stems from dramatic changes in the Catholic population since World War II. First, the community has gone from overwhelmingly White to multi-ethnic. The

ratio of White Catholics to Latinos was over 6 to 1 in the 1980s, but is now <3 to 1.¹ In addition, the “Anglo” Catholic population has moved from working class to middle class, both in education and income. Fewer than one in 20 White Catholics were college graduates in the 1950s, but over one-third are today.

Furthermore, the Anglo Catholic community is more suburban and geographically dispersed than in the 1950s heyday of “big city” Northeastern or Midwestern residence. White Catholics are aging as well. The percentage over 65 years of age has more than doubled in the past six decades, reaching almost one-quarter at present. Catholic marital patterns have also been transformed. In the 1950s, seven of eight adult Catholics were married, compared to less than one-half today. White Catholics also differ religiously from their 1950s counterparts. After Vatican II, Catholic church-going dropped significantly, from about 70% “regular” attendance in the 1960s to 44% in the 1970s, and to less than a third in the early 2000s, a level below that of White evangelical and African-American Protestants.²

Partisan Change among Catholics

Not surprisingly, given this combination of ethnic, socioeconomic, demographic, and religious transformations, Catholics’ political behavior has also undergone profound changes. Long the bulwark of the New Deal Coalition, White Catholics have recently distributed themselves more widely across the political spectrum, both in party identification and presidential vote choice. Table 1 reports the net partisanship of Catholics, that is, the percentage difference between Democratic partisans and leaners and their Republican counterparts. Anglo Catholics were strongly Democratic in the 1940s, with that partisanship reaching a peak in the Kennedy election of 1960, but receding significantly thereafter. By 2012, they were almost equally distributed on the partisan spectrum; the historic Democratic advantage had disappeared. In comparison, their Latino brethren exhibited strong Democratic attachments throughout the past three decades, and their growing numbers suggest rising political importance.

Of course, Catholic transformations must be put in the larger context of the changing partisanship of other religious groups. The partisan equilibrium among White Catholics has now been matched by mainline Protestants, as the latter have abandoned their ancient Republican preferences. At the same time – and

¹ Polls conducted prior to the 1980s included very few Latino respondents, resulting in a virtually all-White Catholic survey population.

² These demographic data are drawn from time series of the American National Election Studies and the General Social Survey.

Table 1 Net Party Identification for Religious Groups (Percent GOP minus percent Democratic).

Religious Group	1940–1944	1956	1960	1984	2004	2008	2012	Change
Catholic								
White	-43	-32	-54	-16	-3	-6	1	44
Latino	-	-	-	-44	-47	-36	-33	11
Protestant								
Evangelical	-18	-24	-22	9	32	28	36	54
Mainline	12	13	11	20	4	-1	15	3
Latino	-	-	-	-	-4	-5	9	13
Black	-7	-29	-28	-63	-60	-71	-66	-59
Smaller Traditions								
Mormon	-	-	-	-	50	55	32	-18
Jewish	-27	-55	-63	-51	-47	-50	-62	-35
All Other	-5	-6	0	-23	-33	-40	-45	-30
Unaffiliated	-11	-23	-32	-10	-17	-27	-24	-13
National	-8	-13	-19	-7	-4	-9	-2	6

Sources: Gallup 1936–1944; ANES American Panel Study 1956–1960; ANES Cumulative File 1956 and 1984; National Surveys of Religion and Politics 2004–2012.

more noticed by analysts – evangelical Protestants have shifted from Democratic to overwhelmingly Republican attachments, while Black Protestants became almost monolithically Democratic. In addition, the unaffiliated or secular population has recently become more important because of its increased size and Democratic propensities. Smaller ethnoreligious groups exhibit varied patterns: Latter-day Saints (Mormons) are strongly Republican, Latino Protestants are notably less Democratic than Latino Catholics, while Jews and “other” religions (Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, for example) have aligned with the Democrats.

If we look at party coalitions, White Catholics constituted about one-quarter of all Democratic identifiers from 1940 to 1980, but declined to only 16% in 2012 (data not shown). At the same time, the White Catholic contribution to the GOP coalition increased, exceeding that to the Democrats in 2004, 2008, and 2012. Latino Catholics filled part of the “gap” created by the desertion of White Catholics, providing almost 10% of all Democratic identifiers by 2008, with increased proportions likely in the future. Meanwhile, the mainline Protestant contingent in each partisan coalition declined precipitously, due to shrinking numbers and (in the GOP case) movement toward the center. In contrast, evangelical Protestants became the religious core of the Republican coalition, supplying almost 40% of identifiers. On the Democratic side, Black Protestants and the unaffiliated population had replaced Anglo-Catholics as the numerical anchors of the party in the electorate.

Of course, partisan shifts were reflected in the voting choices of religious groups. Table 2 reports the GOP presidential vote for selected years from 1936 to 2012. For White Catholics, the vote has naturally been more volatile than party identification. In 1936, White Catholics gave <20% to Republican Alf Landon. Catholics gave solid majorities to both FDR and Truman in the 1940s, but defected to provide Eisenhower with “deviating” majorities in 1952 and 1956. John F. Kennedy’s 1960 candidacy, however, reduced Republican Richard Nixon’s share to a minuscule 18%. In subsequent elections the Catholic GOP vote recovered, with Ronald Reagan winning a solid 55% in 1984. (Catholics were major contributors to the “Reagan Democrats.”) In 2012, Mitt Romney won an unprecedented 60% of White Catholics. From contributing only 9% of the votes cast for the GOP in 1936 (and only 7% in 1960), White Catholics provided almost one-quarter (23%) of Romney’s total in 2012 (data not shown). In contrast, White Catholics constituted almost one-quarter of the Democratic vote in 1936, and over one-third in 1960, but only 14% of Barack Obama’s re-election total in 2012. Meanwhile, the rapidly growing Latino Catholic population has been a solid supporter of Democratic presidential candidates. Latino Protestants, a growing segment of the Latino community, are more likely to vote Republican than their Catholic compatriots, giving George W. Bush over 60% of their vote in 2004, before reverting to majorities for Obama in 2008 and 2012, perhaps in response to GOP policy on immigration.

Table 2 Republican Presidential Vote by Religious Group.

Religious Group	1936	1956	1960	1984	2004	2008	2012	Change
Catholic								
White	18	54	17	55	53	51	60	42
Latino	–	–	–	46	31	28	22	–24
Protestant								
Evangelical	36	58	60	74	78	76	74	38
Mainline	48	72	70	72	50	50	53	5
Latino	–	–	–	–	63	33	35	–28
Black	35	35	32	11	17	5	3	–32
Smaller Groups								
Mormon	–	–	–	64	97	72	90	26
Jewish	15	23	11	31	27	23	36	21
All Other	–	–	–	–	16	17	29	13
Unaffiliated	28	43	45	57	28	27	23	–5
National	36	60	51	58	51	46	47	11

Sources: Gallup 1936–1944; ANES American Panel Study 1956–1960; ANES Cumulative File 1956 and 1984; National Surveys of Religion and Politics 2004–2012.

Meanwhile, other groups contribute to presidential vote results in fairly consistent ways: Evangelicals and Latter-day Saints anchor the Republican side, mainline Protestants split their votes, and Jews along with most other religious “minorities” join unaffiliated or secular citizens in overwhelming support for the Democrats. As a result, in 2012, the Republican voting coalition was over 80% White Christian (evangelical, mainline, Catholic, and Mormon), while the Democratic coalition was over half “minority” religions (Black and Latino Protestants, Latino Catholic, Jewish, or unaffiliated).

In sum, white Catholics have “realigned” politically in recent generations, however one defines the term, as have evangelical and mainline Protestants, resulting in a dramatic change in the religious landscape of electoral politics (for more details, see Kellstedt and Guth 2013). Although the shifts among White Catholics have been widely noted, there has been much less scholarly consensus on the explanations for those changes. In the following pages, we provide a brief overview of three perspectives on partisan change among Catholics and then offer a statistical test of those perspectives, using data from the 2012 National Survey of Religion and Politics.

Theories of Catholic Partisan Change

Socioeconomic and Demographic Theories

Many accounts of partisan change among Catholics have focused on the role of social mobility. Why did Catholics change their behavior? “The most obvious answer is that they occupy a more elevated position in the socioeconomic order” (Prendergast 1999, p. 222). As Catholics rose up the socioeconomic ladder, achieved higher education, and “moved to the suburbs” (Greeley 1990), they began to desert the party of their ancestors, voting more frequently for Republicans (especially for higher offices) and shifting their partisan identification away from the Democrats. Upward mobility produced more conservative attitudes on role of government and social welfare issues, leading to somewhat greater GOP identification and more frequent votes for Republican presidential candidates. For some observers, this new economic conservatism incorporated (or was even dominated by) negative attitudes toward racial minorities elicited by the civil rights battles of the 1960s and 1970s (Leege and Mueller 2004, p. 227). Those Catholics who remained encapsulated in the institutional outposts of the New Deal, such as labor unions, were less prone to such defections.

By the 1970s, other demographic traits of White Catholics also appeared to have independent influences on electoral behavior. The gender gap solidified by

the 1990s, with Catholic men substantially less Democratic in affiliation and electoral choice than Catholic women (Prendergast 1999, p. 202). Some scholars found that married Catholics were also more likely to desert the party of their ancestors and that younger Catholics were less Democratic. Some age differences may have reflected the effects of maturing during specific political eras, but the overall pattern held across most age groups (Leege and Mueller 2004). Finally, some evidence suggested regional partisan differences. The growing Catholic population of the South was more inclined toward the GOP than its counterparts in the traditional Catholic heartlands of the Northeast and Midwest (Prendergast 1999, p. 202; Dionne 2004).

Religious Sources of Partisan Change

Although most of the literature on Catholic political change has focused on socio-economic and demographic influences, the earliest social science studies of voting behavior argued for the importance of religion itself as a key determinant of vote choice. As Bernard Berelson and his colleagues argued in their classic study of voting, “Catholics vote differently from Protestants, and this difference is not simply a function of differing demographic or ideological positions...And the more closely they are bound to their religion, the more Democratic they are” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, pp. 70–71).

The “culture wars” beginning in the 1960s altered the nature of religious influence, however. As “traditionalist” positions on issues such as abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, gay rights, and same-sex marriage were correlated with “religiosity,” Republican strategists used these “wedge issues” to peel observant Catholics away from the Democratic Party, increasingly committed to pro-choice and pro-gay rights stances. By the 1990s, both casual and professional observers pointed to the “God gap” in Catholic politics. Regular Mass attenders tended to vote Republican, while less-faithful co-parishioners leaned toward the Democrats, a phenomenon not limited to – or even most pronounced – among Catholics (cf. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, pp. 65–76).³

This effect of religiosity reversed one tendency of the old ethno-religious politics, in which the most committed believers are the strongest adherents to their tradition’s “normative” party. Prior to the 1970s, regular church attendance by Catholics predicted greater support for Democratic candidates. In this

³ Some observers, however, doubt either that this phenomenon is significant, finding only minor partisan differences (D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013) or that it is permanent, discovering that in some years observant Catholics are still more Democratic, at least when other factors are controlled (Gray and Bendyna 2008; Streb and Frederick 2008).

respect, a close look at the 1960 presidential race is revealing. As Converse (1966) pointed out, church attendance and communal involvement interacted to produce a stronger-than-expected Democratic vote among Catholics in 1960. Our own multivariate analysis of 1960 ANES data confirms that Catholics who favored Catholic organizational lobbying and attempts to mobilize Catholic voters were also strong supporters of Kennedy. All these factors are now reputed to work for the GOP. Lewis-Beck and his colleagues found that in the 2000 election, Catholics who regarded religion as an important part of their lives (“high identifiers”) were more likely to vote for Bush, a tendency that was strengthened further if they also believed in the legitimacy of religious action in politics (2008, pp. 313–316).

Ideological Sources of Partisan Change

Although most scholars recognize the socioeconomic and religious forces that shape contemporary Catholic partisanship, many emphasize ideological or policy explanations more proximate to the vote itself (Miller and Shanks 1996). Catholics, like other religious groups, are realigning in accordance with their ideological preferences, reducing their remaining partisan distinctiveness. In a broad sense, this “sorting” can often be connected to the SES and religious factors discussed above. Many analysts emphasize issues related to the role of government, focusing on social welfare and government intervention to maintain economic prosperity, arguing that the historic memory of ethnic poverty and the contributions of the New Deal in alleviating that plight have rendered Catholic voters especially sensitive to such questions. Legee and Mueller (2004), for example, focus on *party ideology* (which they unfortunately conflate with racial attitudes) as a source of partisan cleavages among Catholics. Other scholars have stressed *moral traditionalism* (what Legee and Mueller called *moral restorationism*), the desire to maintain traditional cultural values. “Traditionalist” Catholics – pro-life, skeptical of the gay rights movement, and favoring a role for religion in public life – are often portrayed as potential GOP recruits.

Finally, many historians (but few political scientists) emphasize the role that militant Catholic anti-communism played in attracting Catholics to the GOP, especially during the 1950s and 1980s. Although the Catholic hierarchy itself has largely reversed its emphasis on military power since the early 1980s, preferring to stress the peacekeeping role of international institutions and diplomacy over force (Wald 1992), such policy attitudes might still shape some Catholics’ evaluation of the two parties, especially after the experience of two GOP-initiated conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, both opposed by the bishops but supported by

prominent lay Catholics. Thus, given the increasingly ideological nature of partisanship in contemporary America, we might expect that issue orientations will mediate or channel most of the effects of religion and socioeconomic status.

Catholic Partisanship in 2012

Testing the Three Theoretical Perspectives

To test these explanations of Catholic partisan change, we use data from the 2012 National Survey of Religion and Politics, conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Akron. Administered during every presidential election since 1992, this survey has the advantage of a large national sample and an extensive battery of religious and political questions that provide the necessary variables to consider all three explanations for Catholic partisan change. Like most analyses by other scholars, our study is based on a smaller subsample than we might prefer. The pre-election wave includes 351 White Catholics and 120 Latino Catholics. As we noted above, Latino Catholics are still strongly Democratic in partisanship and voting behavior and the small subsample limits our confidence in any statistical findings, so most of our consideration will focus on White or “Anglo” Catholics, but we will comment at points in the text on interesting comparative data from the Latino subsample.

Table 3 reports the correlations of religious, socioeconomic, and ideological variables with party identification among White Catholics, as well as four OLS regression models using those variables to predict that identification. Model 1 includes religious measures derived from the extensive batteries contained in the 2012 NSRP. Model 2 considers the effects of socioeconomic and other demographic factors that play a large part in many theories about partisan change among Catholics. Model 3 incorporates four issue indices derived from questions in the NSRP, including measures of economic and social welfare policy, moral issues, and foreign policy orientations. Finally, Model 4 includes the variables from each of the preceding analyses in a comprehensive overview. Given the relatively small subsample of White Catholics, we have relaxed the usual level of statistical significance to $p < 0.10$. Nevertheless, many predictors achieve conventional levels of significance despite this size limitation.

The data provide some support for each perspective on Catholic partisan change. In Model 1 we include several measures of personal religious belief, religious behavior, church context, and group identification. The first taps the respondent’s level of religious traditionalism, presumably related to traditionalist

Table 3 White Catholic Partisanship: Religious, Demographic, and Ideological Factors (OLS).

	<i>r</i>	Model 1 Religious Factors	Model 2 SES and Demography	Model 3 Ideological Factors	Model 4 Combined Analysis
Religious					
Religious	0.17***	0.13**			0.06
Traditionalism					
Political Religion	0.21***	0.17***			0.05
Orthodox Belief	0.06	-0.13**			-0.13**
Church Attendance	0.16***	0.10*			0.02
“Moral Church” Context	0.07	0.10			0.05
“Social Justice” Context	-0.02	-0.13**			-0.03
Christian Right Member	0.17***	0.12**			0.01
SES and Demography					
Income	0.24***		0.26***		0.20***
Graduate/Professional School	-0.08		-0.11**		-0.03
Male	0.14***		0.14***		0.03
Single	0.06		0.04		0.06
Age	-0.17***		-0.11*		-0.15***
Union Member	-0.09*		-0.11**		-0.07*
Northeast	-0.09*		-0.07		-0.02
South	0.11**		0.07		0.06
Issue Scales					
Economic Conservatism	0.46***			0.27***	0.24***
Moral Traditionalism	0.37***			0.19***	0.25***
Militant Internationalism	0.11***			0.11**	0.07
Cooperative Internationalism	-0.35***			-0.16***	-0.10*
Adjusted R ² =		0.08	0.12	0.27	0.34

Source: 2012 National Survey of Religion and Politics, University of Akron Survey Research Center. $N=351$. Positive standardized regression coefficients indicate the variable moves voters in a GOP direction; negative, Democratic.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

positions on “moral issues.” Here we rely on a direct query about a Catholic’s preference for maintaining the Church’s “traditional beliefs and practices” or replacing them with more “modern beliefs and practices.” A second belief measure taps “political religion,” that is, support for the presence of religious groups and values in the political process (see Appendix for the items).⁴ We have experimented with

⁴ This measure has considerable affinities both to the 1960 ANES items ascertaining Catholics’ propensity to favor church involvement in politics (used by Converse 1966) and to Lewis-Beck et al.’s concept of political “legitimacy” among religious groups (2008, pp. 314–317). The impact of our measure is similar to those, but more pronounced at the bivariate level.

many ways to measure traditional religious beliefs, including specifically Catholic items about papal infallibility and the nature of the Eucharist, as well as more general indicators of Christian orthodoxy. Here we include a score for traditional Christian orthodoxy, drawn from five specific belief questions (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009).

Three additional measures tap other aspects of religious behavior. Church attendance, of course, is often relied on by “God-gap” theorists to explain Catholic partisan change, with the faithful trending Republican and the less observant Democratic. We also include respondents’ parish political context. Following Smith (2008), we characterize a “personal morality” context as a parish in which the priest speaks about abortion, homosexuality and “religious liberty” (a major issue in 2012 for bishops concerned about contraception in the Affordable Care Act). Respondents in “social justice” parishes, on the other hand, hear homily statements on poverty, women’s rights, and economic conditions. Finally, we include a dummy variable for respondents who report being part of the “Christian conservative or pro-life movements.”⁵

As Model 1 shows, several religious measures have solid influence over partisanship among White Catholics. At the bivariate level, religious traditionalism, political religion, church attendance, and Christian Right/Pro-life membership have significant correlations with GOP identification. In the OLS analysis, traditionalism produces a Republican tendency and “modernism” a Democratic one. Those who want religious groups and values to prevail in politics are also more Republican, but those holding orthodox beliefs are more *Democratic*, once other religious measures are in the equation, reversing the mild pro-Republican bivariate effect. Regularly attending Catholics are more Republican, as some scholars have claimed, and religious context now has an effect, as those in “social justice” parishes are significantly more Democratic. And although Catholics in “personal morality” parishes are more Republican, the coefficient just misses statistical significance.⁶ Of course, given our cross-sectional data, we cannot be sure whether the findings for religious context reflect pastoral influence over

⁵ We also have a measure of the importance of religion to the respondent, used by Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) as a primary measure of group identification. As we have other stronger measures that are also correlated with importance of religion, we have not included it in the analysis. White Catholics who say religion is important favor the GOP by 41–36%, while those who do not prefer the Democrats by a larger 43–32% margin. This variable drops out, however, in the multivariate analyses of religious factors and in the full model (cf. Mockabee 2007).

⁶ Ironically, the index for personal morality would be much more powerful with the omission of the abortion item, as respondents whose priests speak about abortion are disproportionately *Democratic*. An index including just homosexuality and religious liberty pronouncements easily achieves statistical significance.

parishioners' political leanings or whether Catholics seek out parishes that share (and reinforce) their own political leanings (cf. Putnam and Campbell 2010, pp. 419–442). Finally, as much of the “abortion did it” literature would predict, Catholics who are Christian conservatives or pro-lifers are significantly more Republican. All in all, religious variables explain 8% of the variance in partisanship.

Model 2 shows that socioeconomic and other demographic variables also differentiate Catholic partisans. Not surprisingly, income exhibits relatively powerful effects, with GOP identification rising with family economic resources. Length of education does not show any consistent direct relationship to partisan affiliation, but Catholics with graduate and professional training are more Democratic than those with less schooling. This comports with much recent speculation about the rise of the “new professional classes” in American life and their preference for the Democrats (Judis and Teixeira 2002, pp. 42–49). And while Catholic partisanship responds to the “gender gap,” with men more Republican, there is no “marriage gap,” once all the variables are in the equation. At the bivariate level, married and single White Catholic women do not differ significantly in partisanship, while single males are actually *more* Republican than their married counterparts. The latter difference is largely accounted for by age differences between single and married Catholic men: as the table shows, older White Catholics are more Democratic than younger ones. Not surprisingly, union members are also more Democratic. Northeastern Catholics are more Democratic and Southern ones more Republican, but both coefficients miss significance in the regression. All together, these variables explain 12% of the variance.

We should note here that these religious and demographic influences are largely independent of each other. Combining the Model 1 and Model 2 variables in a single analysis does little to change the coefficients in either model. In fact, the only major effect is to increase very slightly the coefficients for religious traditionalism and political religion, as well as those for income and age (analysis not shown). And the variance explained approaches 20%, suggesting the strong independent effects of the variables in both religious and demographic models.

Model 3 tests the impact of issue ideology on partisanship. We expect that White Catholics will exhibit the same ideological polarization of partisanship that we see among other Americans, although some scholars have suggested that Catholics have long been especially sensitive to economic and social welfare issues. We find that this is the case in Model 3, where economic conservatism strongly predicts GOP partisanship. Moral traditionalism also has a solid influence, as do the two foreign policy orientations, with “cooperative internationalism” moving Catholics somewhat more strongly in a Democratic direction and “militant internationalism” toward the GOP (cf. Guth 2013). Together, the four

ideological scores explain a solid 27% of the variance. A more detailed analysis of individual issue items shows that health care, the rights of gays and women, and attitudes toward the UN and Israel differentiated most strongly between Democrats and Republicans (data not shown). This is perhaps not surprising, given the role of these and related issues in the 2012 presidential campaign.

We might expect that issue ideology would mediate the effects of both religious and demographic factors in predicting party identification. As Model 4 shows, economic policy views and moral traditionalism hold their power (or in the latter case, increase it) in the full analysis. All the religious variables do drop out, except for the residual Democratic effects of orthodoxy (again reversing the bivariate effect), but the net effects of income and union membership are only slightly reduced and that of age actually increases. Combined, the three sets of variables explain more than one-third of the variance.⁷

A Note on Latino Catholic Partisanship

Because Latino Catholics exhibit a strong Democratic partisanship, they provide less variation to explain. The modest size of our Latino subsample also makes us cautious about drawing conclusions, but an analysis parallel to that in Table 3 reveals some interesting patterns. Among Latinos, only a few factors influence partisanship. Regular church attendance attenuates Democratic identification, while a liberal religious context moves Latino parishioners toward the Democrats, with the coefficient just missing statistical significance even in the small sample. Among the demographics, only gender and region have an impact. Men are much less Democratic, while Latinos in the West are much more so. And of the issue indices, the economic policy variable has a significant impact, but a preference for cooperative internationalism in foreign policy is even stronger (Guth 2013). A combined model explains a respectable 30% of the limited variance in Latino Catholic partisanship (data not shown).

The Catholic Vote in 2012

Naturally, we expect that the preference of White Catholics for the Republican presidential candidate in 2012 will reflect the growing segment of that community

⁷ Inclusion of self-identified ideology raises the variance explained to over 46% and eliminates the direct effects of all variables other than income, age, and the economic and moral issue factors, the coefficients of which are greatly reduced.

that identifies with the GOP. But we might find that the very same factors that contribute to growing Republican partisanship provide additional short-term support for the party's standard bearer. In Table 4, we report the results of five

Table 4 White Catholic Republican Presidential Vote, 2012: Logistic Regression Models.

	Model 1 Religious Factors B	Model 2 SES and Demography B	Model 3 Ideological Factors B	Model 4 Party Identification B	Model 5 Combined Analysis B
Religious					
Religious	0.649***				1.033**
Traditionalism					
Political Religion	0.605**				0.152
Orthodox Belief	-0.283				0.071
Church Attendance	-0.720				-1.967*
“Moral” Church Context	0.141				0.083
“Social Justice” Context	-0.292				0.741
Christian Right Member	1.132**				-1.369
SES and Demography					
Income		0.446			0.531
Graduate/Professional School		-1.752***			-2.815*
Male		1.172***			0.411
Single		0.135			1.162
Age		-0.010			-0.004
Union		-0.395			0.253
Northeast		0.042			-1.722
South		0.036			-1.037
Issue Scales					
Economic Conservatism			1.943***		2.133**
Moral Traditionalism			0.975***		1.833**
Militant			-0.436		0.074
Internationalism Cooperative			-0.713**		-0.379
Internationalism					
Party Identification					
Constant	2.150***	-0.368	0.117	1.285*** -4.516	1.271*** -1.322
Model Chi Square					
Nagelkerke Pseudo R Square	36.839***	25.498***	118.474***	109.035***	163.019***
Percent Correctly Predicted	71.6	67.8	86.9	88.0	93.7

Source: 2012 National Survey of Religion and Politics, University of Akron Survey Research Center. $N=172$. Positive coefficients indicate the variable moves voters in a GOP direction; negative, Democratic. * $p<0.10$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$.

logistic regression models paralleling those for party identification, looking at each of the three previous models, plus one based solely on party identification, and a final one combining all the variables.

Model 1 shows that religious characteristics of White Catholic voters provide some purchase on their electoral choices in 2012. Religious traditionalists, those who prefer an important role for religion in public life, along with those who claim to be members of the Christian Right or pro-life movements, were significantly more likely to vote for Mitt Romney. The pseudo R-squared is over 27%, and the model predicts 72% of the cases correctly. Interestingly, the SES and demographic variables do not do as well. Although women and the graduate-school educated are significantly more likely to vote for President Obama, income narrowly misses significance ($p=0.11$), while none of the other variables come close. Both the variance explained and correct predictions lag those of the religious variables.⁸

Issue ideology does much better. Economic conservatism and moral traditionalism both predict a vote for Romney, while cooperative internationalist attitudes move voters toward the President. The model explains 70% of the variation and predicts 87% of the voters' choices correctly. The performance of party identification is essentially identical, although the variance explained is a little less, and the accuracy in prediction a little higher at 88%, confirming once again the importance of partisanship in electoral choice. Model 5 shows, however, that partisanship is significantly augmented as a predictor by both economic conservatism and moral traditionalism.

The effects of virtually all the religious and SES variables are mediated by ideology and partisanship. Only graduate education adds to the Democratic vote, while religious traditionalism bolsters the Republican ticket. Note that when all the variables are in the equation, church attendance provides a boost for the *Democratic* candidate, significantly reversing the bivariate tendency for regular Mass attenders to vote Republican. Thus, like other scholars (Gray and Bendyna 2008; Streb and Frederick 2008), we find a residual affinity for the Democratic Party and its candidates once other issues and orientations moving Catholic citizens have been taken into account. This may be a kind of "historic memory" that appears in statistical analyses, but may be of little interest or relevance to political strategists and practitioners.

⁸ Although the number of voters in the Latino Catholic subsample is too small to draw firm conclusions, at the bivariate level Romney voters are concentrated among traditionalists, regular church-goers and those taking strong positions favoring civil religion. Indeed, a logistic regression incorporating these variables and gender predicts the presidential vote perfectly.

Conclusions and Implications

Several years ago, Michael Lewis-Beck and his colleagues argued that “Catholics may be undergoing a change in their group voting norm,” concluding that “the Catholic vote as a distinctive Democratic bloc is vanishing, if not already vanished” (2008, p. 327). Our analysis certainly confirms that assessment, finding that White Catholics have “realigned.” They no longer identify primarily as Democrats, but are evenly divided in partisan attachments and have been a true “swing” group in many elections. We have shown that most of the theories about Catholic partisan change had a good bit of validity in 2012. Both religious and social-demographic variables are associated with Catholic partisanship and voting decisions. Not surprisingly, most of these influences are channeled through Catholics’ perspectives on a range of issues, including economic conservatism, moral traditionalism, and attitudes toward foreign and military policy. Catholic party identification captures some, but not all of these effects, and has a powerful impact on vote choice.

Although this article has focused on Catholics, we suspect that the same sort of analysis would produce quite comparable results among mainline, and perhaps even among evangelical, Protestants. If that is the case, Catholic distinctiveness has truly disappeared, with the main reminder of historic attachments found in the strong affinity of Latino Catholics for the Democratic Party, perhaps based on the same socioeconomic factors that once tied White Catholics to that party. Although we have seen that some religious variables behave rather idiosyncratically among Catholics, most often in multivariate analysis, on the whole the “culture war” divisions among American religious groups are evident among White Catholics and show some signs of penetrating the Latino Catholic community as well.

Our analysis also suggests some future research possibilities. Omnibus surveys such as the General Social Survey and the American National Election Study include social-demographic, issue, and partisan measures like those used in this study but seldom incorporate a wide range of religious measures. This is a major limitation for anyone attempting to assess the impact of religious factors on political alignments. Over the years, we have experimented with a variety of belief measures that attempt to tap religious traditionalism, but have sometimes been frustrated in the effort to find items appropriate even for all the major Christian traditions (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009).

The single-item traditionalism measure that we use here shows such strong results for Catholics that it may well be useful for studying other religious groups as well. Indeed, in every group we have studied, it distinguishes traditionalists (who tend to be Republicans) from modernists (who tend to be Democrats). This question usually works better than the single religious belief items used in many surveys, such as the ANES’s Bible question, which are normative for only some traditions.

Whatever methodological innovations are employed to study Catholic partisanship, scholars will continue to focus on the political behavior of a religious community that accounts for a quarter of the electorate. The internal ethnic, religious, and ideological divisions within that community will be the continued subject of analysis. And we can be sure that political strategists will maintain their own efforts to understand and exploit “the Catholic vote,” or more properly, “the Catholic votes.”

Appendix on Variable Construction

Religious Traditionalism. “My denomination or church should: 1) strive to preserve its traditional beliefs and practices; 2) be willing to adjust traditions in light of new ideas; or 3) strive to adopt modern beliefs and practices.” Traditionalists prefer the first option.

Political Religion. A factor score from the following items: whether religious groups should stand up for their beliefs in politics, whether religious groups of all kinds should stay out of politics, whether it was important that the president have strong religious beliefs, and the importance of religion to the respondent’s political thinking. *Theta* reliability=0.71.

Orthodox Belief. A factor score from the following five items: belief in God, in life after death, in Biblical authority, that the Devil really exists, and disbelief in evolution as the best explanation for the origins of life. *Alpha* reliability =0.75.

“Moral Church” Context. Additive index of whether the clergy or other leaders “at your place of worship” have spoken out about (1) same sex marriage, (2) abortion, or (3) issues of religious liberty.

“Social Justice” Context. Additive index of whether the clergy or other leaders “at your place of worship” have spoken out about (1) poverty or hunger issues, (2) women’s rights, or the (3) economy.

Economic Conservatism. First principal component of a principal components analysis of six items tapping opposition to (1) a national health care program, (2) more environmental regulation, (3) higher taxes to fight hunger and poverty, (4) higher taxes to provide more governmental services, (5) greater assistance to minorities, and (6) government responsibility for jobs. *Theta* reliability=0.71.

Moral Traditionalism. First principal component of a principal components analysis of four items tapping opposition to (1) gay rights, (2) abortion rights, and (3) gay marriage, as well as support for the proposition that (4) religious rights are being endangered in the US. *Theta* reliability=0.70.

Militant Internationalism. First principal component of a principal components analysis of five items tapping support for (1) maintaining superior military power worldwide, (2) military pre-emption of foreign threats, (3) putting high priority in fighting international terrorism, (4) support for Israel over the Palestinians, and (5) putting high priority in stopping illegal immigration. *Theta* reliability=0.62.

Cooperative Internationalism. First principal component of a principal components analysis of three items tapping support for (1) strengthening the United Nations, (2) putting a high priority on fighting world hunger and poverty, and (3) putting a high priority on fighting global environmental threats. *Theta* reliability=0.65.

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