

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

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by ruy teixeira

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ISO White Catholics

White Catholics are a true swing voter group. They perfectly fit **the crisp definition offered awhile ago by Gary Langer, ABC News polling director**, in that their support actually can swing between Democratic and Republican candidates across different elections and that their weight in the electorate is large enough to make a change in their support politically important.

Here are the margins among white Catholic voters in the past five presidential elections:

1988: +14R

1992: +5D

1996: +7D

2000: +7R

2004: +13R

So they most certainly swing. And they are most certainly a large enough group (21 percent of voters in the 2004 election) for those swings to make a real difference. Thus, not only would it be precedented for white Catholics to swing back to the Democrats in the next election, but we can be sure such a swing would have genuine electoral significance. It would also, in all likelihood, be an indicator of more general success in reaching contestable voters, since many of the Democrats' problems with white Catholics are similar to their problems with other

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contestable voters.

This is by way of introducing a treasure trove of data on white Catholics that recently has been released by Democracy Corps. In their memo, "[Reclaiming the White Catholic Vote](#)," based on [a late February survey of white Catholics](#), they provide the following useful framework for thinking about the white Catholic vote:

White Catholics have not gone Republican. They are divided evenly on almost every important policy question and political indicator, and indeed, on their basic world views. They are split 50–50 on whether the country is headed in the right or wrong direction, on their vote for Congress, on whether we need more or less regulation, whether we need more community or more self-sufficiency, whether abortion should be legal or not and on whether the Catholic church should be more modern or traditional. They are divided evenly between those who attend church every week and those who are less observant. And finally, they are evenly divided between those with a college degree and those without—closely related to the distinct worldviews that leave white Catholics so evenly divided.

Indeed, white Catholic voters are considerably more Democratic than other white voters and more moderate on a whole range of issues, including tolerance on homosexuality and openness to stem cell research. They remain more Democratic in their identification than in their voting: Bush's 13-point margin over Kerry among white Catholics was 10 points higher than the Republican advantage in partisanship—leaving a large bloc of voters available to the Democrats.

Indeed, that gap creates the main target audience for the Democrats: the Democratic defectors, the 10 percent of white Catholics who identify with the Democrats but did not vote for Kerry; and the post-Clinton defectors, the 14 percent who voted for Bill Clinton in 1996 but not for Kerry.

Some of the most interesting findings from the survey and analysis are displayed in [a very nice accompanying color chartpack](#). They include:

1. Democrats have solid advantages among white Catholics on associations such as "for the middle class" (+14 for the Democrats) and "putting the public interest first" (+13). But the Republicans have twenty-two to twenty-three-point advantages on "can be trusted to keep America safe" and "respecting religious faith." *And the GOP has a thirty-three-point advantage among this group on "know what they stand for."*
2. The top reason cited by white Catholics on why Kerry lost the 2004 election was "not clear on what he stood for" (48 percent selected this reason as one of the two top reasons Kerry lost, twice as many as selected "permissive views on issues like abortion and gay marriage" as one of the reasons).
3. The top moral concern cited by white Catholics was "people not being personally responsible."

4. White Catholics are actually much more tolerant of homosexuality as a way of life than white voters as a whole; on the other hand, they are more conservative on the abortion issue.
5. White Catholics are more convinced than white voters as a whole that “America’s security depends on building strong ties with other nations.”
6. White Catholics appear to view Democratic candidates for Congress more favorably if they are described as having traditionalist but tolerant positions on social issues—for example, not legalizing gay marriage, but supporting civil unions and against amending the constitution or trying to reduce the number of abortions, while keeping a woman’s right to choose (the old Clinton “safe, legal, and rare” position). White Catholics also view Democratic candidates favorably who are described as favoring support for stem cell research.
7. The two approaches that net the biggest advantage among white Catholics for a hypothetical Democratic congressional candidate are fighting for the middle class and building a stronger national defense by increasing funding for our military and counter-terrorism programs.

These and other findings lead to the following set of recommendations in the DCorps memo, which strike me as eminently reasonable:

Highlight the Democrats as the middle class party, focused on work and personal responsibility. That remains a strong advantage for the Democrats and a very positive element of a prospective profile. There is very strong support for a Democratic candidate who rolls back tax cuts for the wealthy and deplores excessive CEO salaries, while underscoring advocacy for the middle class. Democratic defectors, in particular, are just as skeptical of corporations and supportive on economic issues.

Democrats need to reassure broadly on values. “Personal responsibility” is the most important value overall and for many of the Democratic defectors and a very important element in the Democrats being a middle-class party. Catholic voters, when they think of moral values, are looking for honesty and integrity, the Golden rule, and a commitment to family.

Catholic voters have emerged more pro- life, which is a factor in the recent losses and one of the blockages for Democrats, at least in the Midwest. But they are very responsive to a broad initiative to reduce unwanted pregnancies and the number of abortions.

Critically, white Catholics should not be caricatured as traditional social conservatives, as among the Evangelical churches. They are fairly tolerant of America’s social diversity, including homosexuality. They are open to pro-choice Democrats who emphasize fewer abortions. And they firmly align with progressive developments and science, like stem cell research, even when opposed by the Church.

The dislodged Democrats are also distinctive on security issues and much less opposed to the Iraq war. White Catholics respond very positively to a Democrat who is strong on defense and the war on terrorism.

Easier to say than to do, of course. But an excellent place to start, nonetheless.

Bush Hits New Lows in *Time*/SRBI poll

The recent *Time*/SRBI poll, coming out on the heels of **very negative Gallup and Pew polls**, has more bad news for President Bush.

Bush's approval rating in the poll has declined to 48 percent, five points down from a week ago. *Time*/SRBI tends to run high on Bush approval relative to other public polls and that 48 percent rating is the lowest for Bush that they have ever recorded.

His rating on the economy is down to 42 percent, also his lowest ever in this poll. His rating on the Iraq situation is now 44 percent, and even his rating on handling the war on terrorism is down to 52 percent, another low for this poll.

But his worst rating by far is on Social Security, which has sunk to 31 percent, with 58 percent disapproval—a **rating even worse than in other recent public polls**.

Turning to the Terri Schiavo case, the public says, by 59 percent to 35 percent, that they agree with a Florida judge's decision to uphold the removal of Schiavo's feeding tube. **As in previous polls**, support for removing Schiavo's tube extends across the spectrum, including even the highly religiously observant.

The public judges the political intervention into the Schiavo case quite harshly. By 75 percent to 20 percent, they say it wasn't right for Congress to intervene in the case and, by 70 percent to 24 percent, that it wasn't right for Bush to intervene in the case. Moreover, by 65 percent to 25 percent, the public believes Bush's intervention in the case had more to do with politics than values.

The public's probably right about that—and, based on these and other data, it would now appear Bush made a very substantial mistake in doing so.

Three Strikes and You're Out?

It's early days in Bush's second term but it is amazing how poorly things are going for him in several important areas.

Social Security. The more Bush has pushed his privatization proposal, the less the public seems to like the proposal and the more it seems to dislike Bush's whole approach to the Social Security issue. Indeed, subgroups of the public that actually support Bush's plan are now few and far between. According to **a recent memo** by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica

Prosser, based on a [March “Battleground” poll](#):

[W]hile voters believe that some level of change needs to be made to protect Social Security, a majority opposes private accounts—no matter how they are described. When asked about the privatization of Social Security 60 percent of voters say they oppose the plan with less than one-third saying they support the plan (32 percent support and 9 percent are unsure). Even when the administration’s preferred terminology is used (“Personal Retirement Accounts”), a majority of voters (53 percent) still opposes the plan. Just 37 percent support it and 10 percent are unsure.

Consensus is broad. Voters across the country are opposed to privatizing Social Security. Regionally, this includes majorities of voters in the Northeast (72 percent), Midwest (70 percent), Central Plains (52 percent), the West (67 percent), and even in the Republican stronghold of the South (52 percent). In states that Kerry won in 2004 by over 55 percent an overwhelming majority oppose privatization (77 percent). This is also true in the battleground states (62 percent). In fact, even in the states that Bush won by 55 percent or more a plurality of voters opposes privatization (46 percent to 41 percent).

Opposition to privatization is stronger among women (64 percent oppose), however a majority of men (54 percent) opposes it as well. Contrary to conventional wisdom, majorities of all age groups also oppose the plan, including notably younger voters. Seniors are the most strongly opposed (61 percent of those 65 and older), followed by pre-retirement voters (59 percent of those 45-64), those 35 to 44 (56 percent oppose), and the youngest voters (57 percent of those 18 to 34 oppose the plan). A majority of voters across races is also opposed to the plan, with minority voters being the most opposed. Fully 79 percent of African Americans and 71 percent of Hispanics oppose privatization, compared to 56 percent of white voters. Also a whopping 73 percent of unmarried women oppose privatization. There is a noticeable marriage gap, both a majority of married (54 percent) and unmarried (72 percent) voters oppose privatization.

Not surprisingly, Republicans are one of the few groups of voters that support the President’s plan (63 percent support, 23 percent oppose). But the plan is a clear loser among independents (66 percent oppose) and Democrats (92 percent oppose). . . .

Majority opposition to privatization also holds constant across education levels, religion, and community type (urban, suburban, and rural voters). This issue may have the ability to create a wedge in the Republicans coalition. Born-again evangelicals oppose privatization 55 percent to 37 percent in favor and split on the Presidents’ plan (42 percent oppose, 47 percent in favor). Among white evangelical Christians 39 percent oppose the President’s plan and 49 percent oppose privatization. In other work we have done, we have found born-again Christians disproportionately dependent on Social Security for their retirement.

No wonder so many Congressional Republicans are getting so nervous about Bush’s plan—or should we call it “Bush’s folly”?

Terri Schiavo case. Bush intervened in the case in a high-profile way to try to prevent Terri Schiavo's feeding tube from being removed. The public strongly rejected what he was trying to do (prevent the tube from being removed) and how he was trying to do it (using the power of the federal government to change the disposition of the case). See the item above on the *Time*/SRBI for some recent data reflecting this public verdict. And for a clear summary of the unambiguous public opinion record on this issue, see this Gallup report, "[The Terri Schiavo Case in Review](#)."

The economy. [The most recent jobs report](#) is anemic (110,000 jobs created in March, the weakest report in eight months), concern about gas prices is spiking, and consumers are more pessimistic about the direction of the economy than at any time since just prior to the beginning of the Iraq war. And, as [this report from the Economic Policy Institute shows](#), declining real wages are now the norm for the economy.

So far, not so good. [A recent Gallup report](#) pointed out that Bush's 45 percent approval rating in their last poll was by far the worst recorded March approval rating for a president after his reelection year. If Bush keeps striking out like this, there's every reason to believe it could sink still lower.

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Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers—and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about—you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject. This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site: www.tcf.org.